
Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks, eds. *Women and Gender in the American West*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. 437p.

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Over the last twenty-five to thirty years, historians have made great strides in re-configuring the American West. Emphasizing, in particular, its multi-layered social and economic dynamics, they also explore the significance of gender and culture in the region. Editors Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks participate in this recent historiographic shift in their collection of essays, *Women and Gender in the American West*. This revisionist history critically investigates women's roles in a place that, based on traditional histories, has been dominated by men—a place that offered itself to mythologizing maleness and masculinity. In focusing on women's experiences of the West and, furthermore, women of various racial backgrounds, the collection targets two crucial objectives: to introduce readers to “the agency, the variety, the vitality of the women we now see peopling the West” and to participate in an “ongoing discussion about how to write the history of western women” (2).

What makes this book conceptually attractive for readers is the way it stimulates a scholarly discussion and discursively enacts it at once by drawing on the latest theories and criticism in the field. Heading the collection is Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller's seminal 1980 essay, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited,” which provides an anchor for ensuing studies that respond to, critique, and amend it. In this essay, Jensen and Miller review notions of women's roles in the American West against a backdrop of Euro-American, male-centered history and survey possible new areas of study until then unexplored. The essays that follow employ post-structuralist, race, culture, border, and gender theories to analyze the historical West in fresh ways. As a result, *Women and Gender in the American West* fills two scholarly gaps: arranged chronologically (based on year of publication), it traces a critical trajectory in Western historiography, and it provides up-to-date revisionist history to explode mainstream assumptions of a “male” West by focusing on previously silent, or silenced, voices. The fourteen chapters thus both analyze moments of subversion and enact that subversion itself. At the same time, however, the study eschews simple “counter-views” of the West that would reinforce binaries. Instead, the editors stress the intricate connections between gender, race, sex, and class and the institutions and systems of power that enable them.

The breadth of scholarship and methodology is intriguing, ranging from “collective” history writing to individual case studies; from historical treatises, legal accounts and trials to personal experiences. The authors draw on historic and notable

recent scholarship in the field (e.g., Henry Nash Smith, Richard Slotkin, Annette Kolody, Patricia Nelson Limerick) to make the book's overall claim of an evolution in Western historiography. In the period between initial European settlement and the early twentieth century that Irwin and Brooks cover, individual contributors explore legal concerns such as property rights—of women but also the conundrum of women *as* property—interracial marriage, and polygamy, and social aspects like racial and gender double standards. Ultimately, the collection triggers questions about colonialism and its legacy and what it means to be “wild” or “civilized,” particularly on the stage of capitalist conquest.

Individual chapters stand out for their exceptional insights and fascinating details. Antonia Castañeda, Peggy Pascoe, Amy Kaminsky, and Susan Lee Johnson take post-structuralist positions. They self-consciously make the reader aware of the traps of scholarship when historians become entangled in a discourse of power. Castañeda writes:

Historians, including feminist historians and other feminist scholars, must examine their assumptions as well as their racial, class, and gender positions as they redefine historical and other categories of analysis.... If western history is to be decolonized, historians must be conscious of their power and ideology within the structures of colonialism, and conscious as well of the ways in which historical scholarship has helped to sustain and reproduce those structures. (88)

In her comparative study of colonial history, Kaminsky argues from a constructivist position when emphasizing the tenuousness of gender and racial binaries. She cites La Malinche, simultaneously an iconic traitress and a figurative mother to Mexicans, as an example of “mistreated, misunderstood womanhood” (123). Irene Ledesma, James Brooks, and Mary Ann Irwin interrogate the limited possibilities of female agency when gender is doubly entrapped with racial stereotypes. Catharine A. Cavanaugh and Jean Barman provide a Canadian perspective as they trace the complicated connections between a mythic “male” Canadian West and the reality that white and native women experienced. Lynn Hudson, Laura Jane Moore, and Margaret Jacobs, in turn, explore the dynamics between modern-day capitalism, legislatures, and possibilities of racial assimilation, when discussing such diverse topics as the Fred Harvey Company, the spectacular trials of *Sharon v. Sharon* and *Sharon v. Hill*, and the prospects of and motivations behind inter-racial marriages.

Although this *mélange* of critical and theoretical angles adds to the book's intellectual appeal, it also constitutes its weakness by risking the overall unity: in seeking to do justice to its evolutionary thesis, *Women and Gender* could easily be seen as “fragmentary and disconnected,” as Jensen and Miller concede about “The Gentle Tamers Revisited” (2). Madsen's article on polygamy is thus wedged in between

Jensen and Miller's and Pascoe's highly conceptual essays. Jacobs' chapter on interracial marriage, in turn, would fit in nicely with Pascoe's. Alternatively, the collection could be geographically structured, moving from the Southwestern United States to the Canadian West. The introduction to the book is thorough and clear but could benefit from the editors' own words, rather than Jensen and Miller's. The essays could increase their effectiveness by relying more on primary sources. The authors' biographies at the beginning of the book are useful, and so are the 110 pages of endnotes with detailed bibliographic information; nevertheless, I miss an index to facilitate research.

Despite this, *Women and Gender in the American West* is a comprehensive, persuasive revisionist history of the American West that effectively scrutinizes multifaceted gender and racial relationships and thus brings to light "other" histories. Exemplary in this respect, though it cannot complete the work to be done it inspires further research—for example, on such topics as gay-and-lesbian and ethnic experiences of the West explored from within minority groups. In establishing new paradigms in historical studies, the book fills a scholarly gap; it clearly sets itself off from previous work and successfully and sophisticatedly illustrates the research in a developing field. The range of authors, topics, and styles makes for an engaging reading for a variety of readers, in history and other fields of study, within and outside of academia. Thus, the book lives up to its ambitious goals of evaluating the past "from new viewpoints" and "illuminat[ing] the present as well" (3). *