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2006

Book Review: True Women and Westward Expansion

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Bryan, Jr., Jimmy L., "Book Review: True Women and Westward Expansion" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 89.

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True Women and Westward Expansion. By Adrienne Caughfield. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. xii + 178 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95.

With *True Women and Westward Expansion*, Adrienne Caughfield examines the contributions that Texas women made to the meanings and achievement of U.S. expansion between 1820 and 1860. She argues that they did so in two ways. First, they embraced nineteenth-century ideas of feminine domesticity with which they sought to civilize the wilderness. Second, a select few like Jane McManus Storm Cazeneau, Mary Austin Holley, and Lucy Holcombe Pickens supported expansion with their public writings. "At its heart," Caughfield explains, "expansionist philosophy closely paralleled domesticity so that adherents to the latter tended to accept the former. The true woman, then, would tend to agree with the rationale behind territorial aggrandizement and, within her separate sphere, work toward it." Indeed, Caughfield finds that these Texas women espoused the same goals as their male counterparts and contributed to the rationalization of expansion through language of domesticity. They were not passive participants, dragged onto the frontier by their husbands and fathers. Instead, many willingly risked their own lives, provided crucial support systems, transformed the wilderness into the garden of civilization, and often endured abject isolation.

In building her case, Caughfield employs a variety of published and manuscript sources as well as a number of obscure yet informative works of fiction and poetry, and at times she offers some interesting insights. For example, she grapples with the unresolved ambiguity wrapped up in women's acceptance of violence as a necessity to the expansion and domestication of the frontier. Caughfield also examines the tradition of local women making and presenting flags for the soldiers of expansion. She observes that the practice represented an implicit, yet visible expression of their concord with "expansionist sentiment through domesticity, sewing banners rather than carrying them into battle."

True Women, however, suffers from a serious historiographic deficiency. Albert K. Weinberg, Henry Nash Smith, Barbara Welter, and others provide a necessary foundation, but more recent studies on U.S. expansion and women's history have moved well beyond their venerable works. A more thorough examination of this current scholarship would have prevented Caughfield from making the erroneous claim that no one else has examined the role of women in expansion. Susana Castellanos, Amy Kaplan, and Lynnea Magnuson have created a discourse on this subject that would have greatly informed *True Women*. Caughfield too often digresses from her topic with long sections dedicated to general issues like temperance, slavery, and filibustering in which women largely disappear. She uses the words and experiences of German immigrants, African American slaves, and *mexicanas* without adequately explaining how they fit into the largely Anglo-American ideas of domesticity and expansion.

Although her approach might not be as unique as she claims, Caughfield offers a refreshing perspective and makes an important contribution to the study of a staid topic like U.S. expansion.

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