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Review of Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman

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Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman. By Emily French. Edited by Janet Lecompte. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Notes, index. viii + 166 pp. \$18.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.

Diaries are among the most unpredictable of literary genres: they can be fascinating, vivid renderings of what life was truly like during key periods in history, or they can be oddly flat, even tedious affairs—especially when they deal with the daily routines of obscure lives. Some diaries, such as *Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman*, manage somehow to be both. Emily Louisa Rood, born in Michigan in 1843, was raised in middle-class surroundings and thus accustomed to some of the finer things in western life, including her own home and her own horse and buggy. But after bearing a number of children to the alcoholic Marsena French, a clothing store clerk turned doctor, Emily suddenly found herself divorced after thirty-one years of marriage and stranded in her adoptive state of Colorado with no alimony, no child support, and no marketable skills beyond housewifery and a little practical nursing.

The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman records her life in 1890, the first year after her divorce, when she desperately tried to survive by “working out” (cooking, cleaning, sewing) for neighbors on Colorado’s eastern prairies or in Denver, a booming city which, lacking factories and swollen with unemployed immigrants, ironically had little more to offer her than did such tiny frontier settlements as Elbert and

Dake. Emily's is truly a tale of woe: virtually every daily entry speaks of her exhaustion, illness (especially headaches), and anguish over money matters. She meticulously records her meager meals, what garments she sewed, what neighbor child had which disease, how much she had earned for the day. But just when the pitiful entries begin to grow monotonous and blur together, a personal touch reminds us that this numbing existence was endured by a sensitive, educated woman: her self-reproach for selling her beloved horse, Ric; her resentment over the presence of her mildly handicapped sister Annis; her distress over the apparent poisoning of her puppy Dash by a Jewish neighbor in Denver; and her pleasant surprise at the realization that the shy Mr. Lawson wanted to marry her. By temperament and upbringing, Emily was not the kind of woman to fare well doing housework for her fellow impoverished homesteaders or for impossibly demanding Denver dowagers, and the relentless details of those entries register the pride, despair, and even anger engendered by her day-to-day struggle to survive. Emily truly deserved better, as she herself was painfully aware.

Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman is of interest to scholars of nineteenth-century American life, the westward movement, and women's studies, but it is of special interest to Coloradans. Emily moved four times in 1890, and her diary records three distinct aspects of Colorado life during that year: on the eastern prairie, in the now-gone mountain village of Dake, and in Denver. The blizzards and droughts of Elbert stand in startling contrast to the knee-deep mud and Fourth of July parade of Denver.

This diary for 1890 shows Emily in a painful transitional period, and even though her story was destined to have a happy ending with her remarriage, sometime between 1892 and 1894, no doubt most western women were not so fortunate. Emily French's diary thus provides a poignant personal glimpse into the life of a divorcée in the West of the 1890s. It is

not a pleasant sight, and one can only wonder at the courage and faith of those women.

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