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## Review of The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains.* By Glenda Riley. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. Appendices, photographs, notes, index. x + 299 pp. \$25.

You've seen her in a hundred books, movies, and television programs: the "madonna of the prairie." But how much of the image of the frontier woman is accurate, and how much is the product of a curious alliance between Victorian ideals of womanhood and the public relations rhetoric of booster-minded Midwestern hamlets? In *The Female Frontier*, Glenda Riley seeks to unveil the true frontier woman of the prairies and the Great Plains; and although her book is not consistently satisfying, it does much to correct the most persistent myths of the frontier woman while pointing to areas for further research.

Riley has based her study on letters, diaries, sermons, novels, municipal records, and family, local, and county histories for the period 1815-1915, a wide variety of sources that enables *The Female Frontier* to be both authoritative and moving, its statistics countered with women's first-hand accounts of their experiences. The happy melding of public records and personal accounts lends credence to Riley's findings. Far from being insistently Anglo-Saxon "madonnas," these frontier women were Slavic, Scandinavian, Black, Mexican, and Jewish, the latter often in despair over their inability to preserve traditional beliefs in their isolated homes. Further, these were not necessarily young wives.

Many Eastern widows and middle-aged spinsters established new lives for themselves on the frontier, while younger women simply chose not to marry. Moreover, be they married or single, many frontier women were gainfully employed, either producing and selling butter and eggs or pursuing careers as domestics, milliners, music teachers, farm laborers, college professors, nuns, dressmakers, newspaper editors, dentists, ordained preachers, and even soldiers (when properly disguised). Prostitution likewise was an important career option. Finally, Riley has determined that, all those reports of distaff insanity notwithstanding, most women quickly came to love life on the frontier, responding creatively to the challenges and limitations of their often harsh environment, luxuriating in the relative freedom offered them in the frontier setting, and taking pride in their families and homes.

But even as Riley challenges canards and puts "the history of women's westering" into clearer perspective, her methodology effectively undercuts her impact. For one thing, the time span of her study (1815-1915) is so great that it is difficult for her to make convincing generalizations. There may have been "few trained doctors and no pharmacies" on the prairies in the 1820s, but it was hardly the case in the years immediately preceding World War I. By the same token, living on the frontier was a radically different experience for women in isolated Dakota shacks, in small towns like Red Cloud, or in cities like St. Paul; and though Riley tries valiantly to acknowledge this, the

bivalent arrangement of her materials into "prairies" and "Plains" tends seriously to obscure matters. Though this book ostensibly offers "a comparative view," the fact is that the differences between the two regions—more rainfall on the prairies; more mining and ranching on the Plains—are simply not great enough to justify Riley's use of counterpoint. Once we have been told about women on the prairies we do not need to be told precisely the same things, in precisely the same order, in the subsequent chapter on women on the Plains.

And the frustration engendered by the relentless repetition is only intensified when one considers other, more revealing, approaches that Riley might have taken to her material. She observes, for example, that whereas the earliest frontier women insisted on sunbonnets, their daughters rejected them. Would not a book tracing changes in frontier women's attitudes and values over time have been more valuable? Or how about a book that probes more systematically the disparate experiences of women of different backgrounds on the frontier? Much would be revealed through separate chapters on the personal experiences of, say, an unmarried Iowa farm woman in 1840, a transplanted Southern belle in Missouri in 1870, and a black barber's wife in St. Paul in 1890.

All this is not to say that Riley's book lacks value. As noted, it does challenge popular misconceptions regarding the frontier woman. Further, it points to areas where further research is needed, such as the status of Mexican and Jewish women in frontier areas and the interactions of white women with Indians. The 850 footnotes are chockablock with information that is of incalculable value to anyone doing research on women on the American frontier. If *The Female Frontier* is not the last word on its subject, it is still worthy of consideration by serious students of women on the prairies and the Great Plains.

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