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Review of Lizzie: The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893,

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Lizzie: The Letters of Elizabeth Chester Fisk, 1864-1893. Edited by Rex C. Myers. Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1989. Illustrations, introduction, epilogue, bibliography, index. 170 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

Unlike many of the collections of letters or journals written by women chronicling the nineteenth-century western experience that center on rural women's lives or the overland trip, Elizabeth Chester Fisk's letters describe a western woman in an urban environment. From Lizzie's riverboat trip up the Missouri River to Helena, Montana, in 1867 to the death of her mother and correspondent in 1893, the editor has chosen the best from a large collection. Through her letters, the reader glimpses the public and private politics that marked Lizzie's life and the tension between a woman's affiliations with family and the community and her aspirations to contribute to life beyond her home. Not only do Lizzie's letters convey the events punctuating life in a community growing from mining camp to transshipment and bureaucratic center, but they also allude to the particular problems involved in women's roles in the West. Lizzie, for example, was ever mindful of the problems of childrearing in a "fast" and worldly community. There was very little that escaped Lizzie's watchful and critical eye. When "a young man who used to sing and dance in a hurdy house and was an especial favorite with Daisy Dean (a low, bad woman who keeps a saloon) read sort of a sermon," Lizzie had had enough and disappeared from the church congregation for a time. But Lizzie was compassionate, too, and took time to teach her household help the three R's. A complex woman, Lizzie was an apt raconteur and subtle observer of her world.

The editor's contribution to the book is inestimable. Myers has assisted the reader by providing overviews of each chapter; supplying interesting and applicable detail; and furnishing a general context for the correspondence. His notation of the obscure references to people and

places in her letters and elucidation of some of the family crises—the Pinney fracas, for example—that take up many of Lizzie’s early letters also enrich the book. Carefully chosen pictures also add to the text, for what is more vexing than not having an idea of the letters’ subjects? And the epilogue, too often left out of edited texts, favors the reader with the “rest of the story.”

Lizzie redresses an imbalance between rural and urban narratives that has prevailed for some time in western history. Its length and subject matter both recommend it as solid undergraduate text or a good book for the general reader. Researchers should, however, be forewarned. Much of the detail and commentary that is of particular interest to women’s historians is missing from the edited letters. Researchers would be far better off reading the originals, but *Lizzie* will certainly give them an idea of the riches to be found in the larger collection.

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