

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1994

Review of Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939

Karen Morin

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, karen.morin@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Morin, Karen, "Review of Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939" (1994). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 878.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/878>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939. By Peggy Pascoe. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Introduction, notes, bibliography, index. xxiii + 301 pp. \$29.95.

If plenary speeches at the Coalition for Western Women's History conference in the summer of 1992 in Lincoln, Nebraska, are any indication, the 1990s have begun with an apparent methodological consensus by women's historians: that race and class conflict and cooperation, as well as gender differences, must serve as organizing themes for a genuine history of western women. In *Relations of Rescue*, Peggy Pascoe, professor of history at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, delivers an excellent model for framing such multicultural research. Her starting point for the history of Protestant missionary women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is not with the reformers themselves but "in the negotiation of conflicts between matrons' ideology and residents' needs." Mission home residents are not portrayed as victims or "putty" in the hands of social reformers, but as full-fledged actors in the story with their own motivations and concerns.

Pascoe opens with a discussion of the nineteenth-century roots of cultural feminism and how reformers used Victorian ideals of womanhood to challenge male power. True wom-

en were pure and pious wives and mothers and it was through their morality that they drew their "female moral authority." (Not incidentally, many of the home matrons themselves remained unmarried.) Then as now, however, prescriptive definitions of women's nature limited rather than strengthened their social roles. Ultimately, the reformers' mission efforts failed because they had difficulty understanding the cultural differences among the women they were trying to rescue, and men tended to ignore them.

Pascoe weaves her narrative around four mission projects in the American West: a Presbyterian rescue home for Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco; a Women's Christian Temperance Union home for unmarried mothers in Denver; a home established by Protestant reformer Angie Newman in Salt Lake City for polygamous Mormon wives; and a mission project involving the Omaha Indians and the Connecticut Branch of the Women's National Indian Association. Students of Great Plains history will be most interested in the latter case, which focuses on the story of Susan LaFlesche, whose financing to become the first Native woman physician came from the eastern philanthropic organization. Pascoe characterizes LaFlesche as a "native helper," one of the handful of ethnic minority women who were converts to the Victorian ideal of Christian morality. LaFlesche's enthusiasm for the NIA would cause them to build out of her "a typically Victorian legend . . . as an inspiring example of the transformation from primitive life to highest civilization." Pascoe gives the reformers credit for challenging racial biological determinism by "proving" to society that non-white women such as LaFlesche (indeed all women) could become exemplars of Victorian female values. But the bonds they formed with them were eventually limited: the native helpers remained just that—assistants rather colleagues.

The non-linear format of the book seems well thought out and effective. Rather than dealing with the case studies chapter by chapter, the text is organized thematically around

such topics as why Chinese prostitutes, Omaha Indian women, Mormon wives, and unmarried mothers would be motivated to take advantage of mission projects. Almost a third of the book is dedicated to comprehensive notes, sources, and index. The text is dotted with only a few photographs and one certainly wishes for more, but presumably the small number reflects the need to protect identities of mission home residents. A broad audience of scholars will find *Relations of Rescue* an important contribution to the study of the Victorian period, especially as it provides an adaptable theoretical framework for analyzing the dialectic between Victorian society's gender ideology and non-white or non-Protestant cultural hierarchies.

KAREN MORIN
Department of Geography
University of Nebraska-Lincoln