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## Review of Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90 By Anne M. Butler

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*Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865–90.* By Anne M. Butler. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xx + 179 pp. \$16.95.

Anne M. Butler's *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery* is a broad history of prostitution throughout the American West, based on extensive primary research and illustrated with some wonderful photographs. Like many women's historians, Butler begins with two assumptions: that she will rescue a particular group of women from "historical obscurity" and that she will test and ultimately undermine the stereotypical and often one-dimensional portrayal of their lives. Her major thesis, however, gives her book added scope: while her discussion of the lives of prostitutes reveals that they were often powerless and victimized, she demonstrates convincingly that as a group they "made unmistakable contributions to the development of social institutions" in the West.

Butler presents the lives of prostitutes as almost overwhelmingly negative. They were women with few real choices, and there was nothing glamorous or romantic about their efforts to survive. Her key argument is economic: women were forced into prostitution because they were unable to support themselves in other ways, yet prostitution almost never provided them with a reliable or ad-

equate income. Poor young women became prostitutes, and their lives often ended in violence. Few, despite the myths, escaped into "respectability." Butler's chapter on "companions" explodes other myths. She asserts that there was little real "sisterhood" among prostitutes, that relations among the women were more often hostile than supportive. While prostitutes continued to believe in the myth of romantic love, those who married or set up housekeeping with men often found themselves in violent and exploitative unions. Some women tried to save their children from the horror of their lives, but many encouraged or forced their daughters to follow their lead. After discussing working conditions, economic marginality, and violence, Butler concludes that prostitutes led "dreary and taxing . . . lives without comfort."

She does not alter this assessment when she turns to discussing the relations between prostitutes and the West's fledgling institutions. "Officers of the Law," the press, the legal system, and the "Military Game" all exploited prostitutes to their own ends, ridiculing and handicapping them. (Few groups offered any real aid; of those Butler discusses only the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in St. Paul, Minnesota, were genuinely helpful.) Yet in her discussion of these institutions, Butler finds a way to grant prostitutes some real power and historical affect: she shows how society's efforts to define the role of prostitution within the West were reflected in these institutions and in turn shaped the institutions. "Prostitutes made contributions to the emergence of that western society," she concludes; "that their contributions appear less 'good' or 'noble' does not make them less important."

Butler's theses are well supported by a wealth of concrete evidence drawn almost exclusively from public sources such as newspapers and court records. She grants that it is tempting to speculate about the "inner lives" of prostitutes but resists doing so because they left few private documents. Yet Butler analyzes how the attitudes and tones of newspaper writers reflect deeply-held attitudes about the

nature of women, and the sources she uses can provide only a partial story. Because this story necessarily avoids the prostitutes' own feelings about themselves and their relations to others, it cannot convey their full humanity. Butler tells her story well, and perhaps she is right that almost all prostitutes were so corrupted by their life style that there is little positive to say about their lives. Still, I was often disturbed by the tone she adopts and by some apparently unquestioned assumptions. Words like "vile," "coarse," "tawdry," and "sordid" occasionally seem to describe not just the prostitutes' lives but their behaviors and characters. While Butler is certainly sympathetic to the women she discusses and sees them as acting within oppressive social structures and assumptions, she sometimes seems to hold them responsible for more of the "squalor" in their lives than I was willing to accept. I finished *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery* with a fuller understanding of the relationship between the West's social structures and prostitution, and with a respect for Butler's research and insights about that relationship, but with a desire for a more complete understanding of the prostitute's point of view.

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