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## Review of *The Cowboy Girl: The Life of Caroline Lockhart* By John Clayton

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*The Cowboy Girl: The Life of Caroline Lockhart.* By John Clayton. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. ix + 321 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$21.95 paper.

The back cover of *Cowboy Girl* promises the story of Caroline Lockhart, “a woman whose work and life teetered between realism and romanticism, who wrote novels ‘like a man’ yet ran her businesses and love affairs like a liberated feminist.” What John Clayton delivers is the life story of a racist and elitist who spent much of her free time trying to “get” her enemies.

Lockhart’s second novel, *The Lady Doc* (1912), is a book about revenge, literally. Lockhart wrote the novel to attack the character of one of her enemies, Dr. Frances Lane. Its main character, Dr. Emma Harpe, is blatantly based on Lane and so completely unsympathetic and unrecognizable as a human being that many contemporary critics found the book offensive. As Clayton observes,

She did her job well—too well. This was precisely the critics’ problem: Emma Harpe was such a horrible character that you didn’t want to read about her. At least the villain Smith had been a cowboy, with those courageous frontier virtues and an attraction to the schoolmarm. Dr. Harpe was just brutal and sordid. She had no redeeming qualities, and readers especially wanted redeeming qualities in a *female* character.

Lockhart and Lane were both members of the upper class of Cody, Montana. They crossed swords when Lockhart learned of the appalling medical treatment given to an injured dam worker at the hospital Lane ran with her partner. Failing at instigating a criminal investigation into the incident and at helping the victim to sue Dr. Lane for malpractice, Lockhart sought literary revenge. *The Lady Doc* features an amoral and incompetent protagonist. While Lockhart intended to ruin Frances Lane’s standing in the community and professional reputation, she only succeeded in

damaging her own literary status. *The Lady Doc* was a critical and commercial flop. Clayton might have learned from Lockhart's miscalculation. The passage used to describe Dr. Emma Harpe could easily be applied to Clayton's portrayal of Caroline Lockhart.

Clayton's book is divided into five sections, the first two detailing Lockhart's childhood, her young adulthood, and her first foray into journalism. Yet it's the last three sections that leave a dominating impression of Lockhart, and not a flattering one. Clayton paints her as an elitist: "Like Teddy Roosevelt and other social Darwinists, Lockhart believed that only upper-class people would succeed in the West. You had to have the right breeding, the sort she knew about from her relatives in Pennsylvania." Also Lockhart's many feuds are recounted in minute detail: "Between the drought and the economic conditions, the Dryhead feud was heating up. Her enemies, Lockhart saw, intended to beat her out of her homestead land in order to drive her under completely. If her land went back into open range, they could better survive."

After reaching the halfway point in *Cowboy Girl*, one might well ask why readers would want to remain immersed in Lockhart's life. Because Clayton offers no insights or possible motives for Lockhart's nature, we are left with a portrait of a spiteful racist and a failed newspaper woman and rancher. We are also left with the nagging question, "Why should we care about the life of Caroline Lockhart?"

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