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Review of *Writing the Trail: Five Women's Frontier Narratives* By Deborah Lawrence

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Writing the Trail: Five Women's Frontier Narratives. By Deborah Lawrence. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006. 158 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

This slim volume offers literary analysis of five nineteenth-century women's narratives of their travels to and experiences in the American West. The central themes of the book are that women's narratives differed from men's, and, that in the course of their western experiences, these women shed traditional roles dictated by a patriarchal society and realized new possibilities for self-identity. Western historians, particularly those who have studied women's history, will find little new here. But if this book brings such material to the attention of other students and scholars, then it is clearly worthwhile.

Deborah Lawrence focuses her attention on Susan Magoffin's *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*, Sarah Royce's *A Frontier Lady*, Louise Clappe's *The Shirley Letters*, Eliza Farnham's *California, In-doors and Out*, and Lydia Spencer Lane's *I Married a Soldier*. Several of these women's works have been much studied, including Magoffin's (most recently in Virginia Scharff's *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*) and Lydia Spencer Lane's in various books on the army. Less well known, and thus fresher, is Eliza Farnham's work. Farnham moved to California in 1849 to start a two hundred-acre rancho in Santa Cruz County. Recently widowed, Farnham established herself, two sons, and a female companion in a beautiful corner of California where the breathtaking landscape captured her attention and became the inspiration for the 1856 book celebrating

nature. Farnham associates the stunning landscape with freedom, for women as well as men. The narrative, according to Lawrence, presents "Farnham's liminal position on the threshold of two dominant ideologies: an interior, home-centered domesticity and an exterior, frontier individualism." The latter allows Farnham to construct her home, literally, while dressed in men's clothing, thus escaping "from repressive patriarchal confines into the liberated space of her own authority." Farnham contrasts the idealized countryside with the chaos of California's mining activities and San Francisco's lawlessness. Alas, her farming venture eventually failed, and Farnham did not, in the end, realize the promise she associated with the landscape.

Lawrence relies quite heavily on the historiography of western women's history. A familiarity with more recent scholarship regarding gender and the environment would have provided additional intellectual ballast. Still, her intention is not to write history but to analyze five women's journeys and track their writers' growth as revealed in their narratives. This modest goal is certainly accomplished.

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