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Review of *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* By Sandra L. Myres

John Mack Faragher
Mount Holyoke College

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Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915. By Sandra L. Myres. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. \$9.95 paper.

When Professor Myres began the research for this survey of women in the American West, many historians believed that there were few manuscript collections documenting the experiences of nineteenth-century women, "Such is

not the case," Myres concludes. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*, the first volume of the Histories of the American Frontier Series devoted to the history of women, treats us to what the late Ray Allen Billington called "one of the most remarkable bibliographies to materials in this new area." Myres summarizes her extensive reading in these documents in topical chapters: western women's views of the land; women's views of Indians, Afro-Americans, and Mexicans; their views of classes and religions; homemaking on the frontier; women in western communities; the feminist and woman's movement in the West; and occupations of western women.

It is arguable that the primary job of a survey is to broadly introduce topics and materials, and this Myres does well, but these intentions make extended and precise historical argument more difficult to sustain. Myres does, however, have an argument to make, laid out in an opening chapter reviewing images and stereotypes of frontier women. The frontier experience, she believes, provided women with opportunities for economic importance as well as legal and political power. "Western migration and frontier conditions seriously threatened to undermine [the] carefully constructed separation of the sexes" of Victorian convention, because women had to undertake *new* tasks and assume *new* roles.

There are serious difficulties with this argument. These tasks and roles, in fact, turn out to be extensions into the late nineteenth century of the gender division of labor and the household economy that prevailed in the colonial period. According to Myres, "many women" considered their marriages a cooperative economic enterprise, "and they certainly did not view their position as 'second class.'" Perhaps not, but many certainly considered themselves the "second sex." Myres dismisses the considerable body of material in which rural women complained bitterly about their working roles and their marriages. She sees western women violating and overturning the eastern norm of not participating in public life, but she fails to provide any sustained evidence on this impor-

tant point and admits that the western woman's movement was extremely weak. Myres is able to point to provocative studies that suggest a greater concentration of western women in certain occupations, but her own work here does not offer much more than some interesting individual cases.

Differences of interpretation aside, however, Myres taps a rich store of more than four hundred collections of women's documents—letters, diaries, reminiscences, even interviews conducted by the Federal Writers' Project—and demonstrates that frontier women left an ample archive that will provide historians with the materials for many future controversies.

JOHN MACK FARAGHER
Department of History
Mount Holyoke College