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WOMEN ON THE PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

The four essays brought together here are a testimony to the surge of interest in women's history in general and in the lives of women on the Great Plains in particular that has welled up in the last decade. Unlike previous special issues of the *Quarterly*, which were the results of symposia planned around specific topics, this issue was generated by the articles themselves, which arrived independently on the editor's desk within a relatively short period of time. Two are overviews and two are case studies of particular groups of women. Together, the four articles suggest the richness of the field they represent.

In the opening article, Glenda Riley surveys "Recent Developments in Research," proposing not only a historiography but also some suggestions for formulating the best questions and methodologies for future research. Riley shows that the West was, for pioneering plainswomen, both an extension of home and a kind of freedom; the writings of historic women indicate that it was considerably more varied and interesting than one might have thought from history books and articles written before the 1970s. Riley focuses attention on several areas where researchers must exercise special caution. The idea of the exploitation of women by men is one of these. "Should historians and other scholars impute modern notions of oppression

to previous generations of women and men?" asks Riley. She indicates that the study of oppression must not simply become a restatement of the "woman as victim" theme, nor must it neglect the facets of woman's role that were rewarding and that excluded men, such as the WCTU and the women's clubs that June Underwood discusses in the article that follows Riley's. Riley also cautions us against rejecting myths and stereotypes before we have milked them for their affective content, another point that Underwood underscores. Riley stresses the need for comparative studies of plainswomen that deal not just with white, Protestant women on the frontier, but also with women of other races and creeds in other countries and in other times, including the present.

June C. Underwood's "Western Women and True Womanhood: Culture and Symbol in History and Literature" is an example of one of the things Riley calls for: an examination of plainswomen in literature. Underwood demonstrates that the "feminine" virtues of domesticity and piety, shown as destructive and emasculating in the zero-sum game of male-patterned literature, were productive and empowering in the positive-sum world of historical women. Women consciously used nineteenth-century beliefs about the sanctity of the home and the innate purity of women to move

out of the home and into the political sphere, supposedly dominated by men. Yet as Underwood points out, it is not this public, political sphere that American plains literature portrays. One would never guess from Owen Wister's perennially popular novel *The Virginian* that Wyoming was the first state or territory to grant full suffrage to women, nor, with the novel's emphasis on vigilantism, that women served effectively at that time on grand and trial juries in Wyoming. Instead, Underwood shows, the book presents a woman whose essential role is to submit to the hero, a hero who is the final arbiter in questions of both justice and culture.

Courtney Ann Vaughn-Roberson, like Underwood, shows how historical women used the conventional ideas of piety and domesticity to move out of the home and into the public sphere. Her subjects are 547 professional women who had spent from twenty to fifty-five years as teachers in the West during the twentieth century. In choosing to focus on professional women of this century, Vaughn-Roberson responds to Riley's call to move beyond the image of the pioneer mother. Vaughn-Roberson's research also, albeit by default, shows the continuing problem facing scholars who wish to concentrate on nonwhite plainswomen. Vaughn-Roberson's subjects are all white or white-identified because, as she writes, "many professional groups (my major source of contacts) initially excluded minority members, [thus] my sample size . . . was so small that I omitted any separate analysis of those teachers." However, despite such gaps in archival material, Vaughn-Roberson's study shows the determination and ingenuity of a large number of plainswomen who managed to forge lives that allowed them to work as professionals outside the home but to use the ideology of domesticity to defend themselves from the stigma of an unsanctioned independence. Vaughn-Roberson concludes that, despite the limitations of a professionalism paradoxically justified by domesticity, the women in her study felt fulfilled in their choices.

Susan C. Peterson studies another group of

professional women in "A Widening Horizon: Catholic Sisterhoods on the Northern Plains, 1874-1910." Catholics, recent immigrants, not married, and living in communities rather than on isolated homesteads, the nuns that Peterson singles out for study present characteristics very different from those of the stereotypical plainswoman; yet the Grey Nuns from Montreal, the Sisters of the Presentation from Ireland, the Benedictine Sisters from Switzerland, and the Franciscan Sisters from Germany all succeeded in establishing themselves on the northern Great Plains. All four groups came to Dakota Territory as teachers for Indian reservations, but, responding to demand, became teachers among white settlers as well. In addition, all but the Franciscans established hospitals in response to the need for such health care on the frontier. Like other settlers, the Sisters underwent the rigors of blizzard weather and the hardships of economic bad times. Like other immigrants, the Sisters learned English, and both the Grey Nuns at Fort Totten and the Benedictines at Standing Rock became government employees when the Bureau of Indian Affairs took over the operation of their mission schools. Like all Dakotans, Indians and settlers alike, the Sisters adapted themselves to the environmental and sociopolitical demands of the northern plains at the turn of the century, but their independence and initiative and their reliance on an ideal of community quite different from that of secular settlers clearly set them apart from any of the stereotypes of women on the plains that have heretofore appeared in our histories.

Taken as a unit, these four articles show where we have been in the historiography of plainswomen, demonstrate how literary and other images of plainswomen are both true and not true, and offer detailed examinations of two groups of women—professional teachers in the southern plains and Catholic Sisters in the northern plains—who have both utilized and transcended their own and society's expectations of how their lives could be lived.

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Editor