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Kenneth L. Holmes, ed. *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries & Letters from the Western Trails, 1850.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. xi + 302 pp. $13.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-7274-3.

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In the early 1980s, Kenneth L. Holmes began the valuable task of editing and publishing a massive collection of diaries and letters written by women who made the overland journey to the American West between 1840 and 1903. Holmes' eleven-volume series, published by A. H. Clark of Glendale, California, 1983-1993, is one of the very few available compilations of primary source material documenting the experiences of women pioneers en route to the American West.[1] This volume–a 1995 reprint of volume two of Holmes' eleven-volume set with a new introduction by historian Lillian Schlissel, author of the ground-breaking volume, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982)–contains the records of six women who trekked across the plains in 1850 to California, Oregon, New Mexico, and Utah. The women differed in economic status (from the middle ranks to the very well-to-do), in age (from 24 to 44), in marital status (from an unmarried daughter traveling with her large family of origin to women traveling with husbands and children), in their husbands' occupations (military officer, craftsman, farmers, merchants, and would-be gold miners), and in their educational attainments, but they all shared a desire to capture their experiences, in words, on paper, as a record for the loved ones they left behind and for those who would come after them.

Through these women's words, we learn of the struggle to gain a few miles of ground, through prairies and deserts, across rivers and mountains, past the graves of earlier travelers, caring for the needs of the flesh and the spirit, carried forward by sheer persistence in the hope of the journey's end in a better life. These are the stories of daily survival and accomplishment in the midst of known and unknown dangers, the quotidian details that make up the vast story of America's western migration. In her introduction, Schlissel underscores the importance of these women's stories of the westward migration of the mid-nineteenth century: "[W]e have learned over time, and first from the diaries of women, that our 'capacity for wonder' is a prism compounded of the vision of many different eyes, the lives of many different people, the natural history of different sections of this vast land" (p. xi).

The documents reprinted in *Covered Wagon Women* provide information about an important era in American history through the eyes of participants; that the perspective is that of women, who are still often left out of the narrative of the American West makes these diaries all the more important as a resource. These diaries and letters contribute greatly to our understanding of life on the overland trails, and they deserve our full and careful attention.

The University of Nebraska Press should be commended for making this volume (and others from Holmes' larger set) available in paperback, as this collection will be a valuable text for teaching purposes. Holmes has limited his editorial interventions (orthography and punctuation have not been regularized, for instance), and this will give students an opportunity to engage these historical documents without the clutter of extensive (and all too often overbearing) critical apparatus.

However, all things have the defects of their qualities, and this volume does raise some questions.

First: Why does Holmes reprint *these* six texts? Are they the best he found from the year 1850? Or, are they representative of the diaries he has located? Or, are they the only ones he as found? It would be helpful, particularly for those who wish to use these volume as a textbook, to get more insight into Holmes' principles of selection and inclusion. His rationale may be made explicit elsewhere in the original eleven-volume set, but anyone who encounters this book as I did, as a "singleton," will wonder.

Second: Holmes is a deliberately unobtrusive editor, and his aim seems to be to present these texts as transparently as possible. In practice, this means that he presents the highly polished journal of Margaret A. Frink (published in 1897 as *Journal of the Adventures of a Party*

of California Gold-Seekers), evidently heavily edited for publication, in exactly the same way that he presents his transcription of a typewritten copy of Lucena Parsons' vivid, but barely literate, diary of her journey to California, and as he presents his transcription (apparently from the original manuscripts) of the unpunctuated letters of Mary M. Colby, written as purely private communications between separated brothers and sisters. These three documents have very different histories as texts: these differences, which have some bearing on their status as evidence, would bear some analysis by the editor.

Third: Where Holmes does intervene, he can be inconsistent. For Sophia Lois Goodridge's narrative of her trip to Salt Lake City with a caravan of Latter-Day Saints, Holmes provides a bibliography, including references to standard works of Mormon history and biography, as well as standard historical dictionaries. Why? Or, why not provide bibliographies for the other documents he publishes or for the volume as a whole? Holmes does not explain.

But, be these questions as they may, this volume is, and will remain, a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in the history of the American West and the vital role that women played in the vast migration across the plains.

Note

[1]. Other available compilations include *Ho for California!: Women's Overland Diaries from the Huntington Library*, edited by Sandra Myres (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1980), *American Women's Diaries: Western Women* [microfilm] (New Canaan, Connecticut: Readex, 1991-1992), and *Western Americana: Women of the West* [microfilm] (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975). Each volume of *Covered Wagon Women* covers a different chronological period: v. 1, 1840-1849; v. 2, 1850; v. 3, 1851; v. 4, 1852: The California Trail; v. 5, 1852: The Oregon Trail; v. 6, 1853-1854; v. 7, 1854-1860; v. 8, 1862-1865; v. 9, 1864-1868; v. 10, 1875-1883; v. 11, 1879-1903.

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