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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls: Prostitution in Colorado, 1860-1930*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. 320 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-3343-8.

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Prostitution in Colorado

In *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls*, preservationist and historian Jan MacKell, director of the Cripple Creek District Museum, explores a range of primary and secondary sources that illuminate the history of female prostitutes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Colorado. Focusing on Denver and the Colorado Springs and Cripple Creek areas, MacKell uses probate records, legal decisions, newspaper clippings, and previously collected accounts and interviews to reconstruct the stories of sex workers, dance hall girls, and madams. She cites many individual cases and, significantly, acknowledges the unknown women who either passed through or settled in Colorado to ply their trade. While MacKell's effort reveals a respect for her subjects and their descendants, as well as a dedication to uncovering their stories, the book's shortcomings complicate its usefulness for an academic audience.

The realities of drug and alcohol addiction, suicide, broken marriages, and violence that marked prostitutes' lives are ably recounted in *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls*. As a counterpart to the grim circumstances of the sex trade, MacKell takes pains to point out the relationships (friendships and rivalries) that grew up among her subjects, noting that these connections may have ameliorated some of the harshness of their circumstances. Many of the author's accounts come from previously published works, but they are well deployed to demonstrate local conditions. The stories of Laura Bell McDaniel, Isabelle Martin (Pearl DeVere), and Mamie

Majors—somewhat familiar to Colorado historians—are combined with snippets from local newspapers that help pull the stories of anonymous working girls into her narrative.

Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls will surely appeal to local history enthusiasts in Colorado: its lack of jargon and MacKell's obvious affection for the region make the well-written, engaging volume a very accessible read. Beyond recalling the lives of the unheralded women who helped shape Colorado, the author does a nice job portraying how integrated red-light districts were in the development of many of the towns she examines—giving local readers new perspectives on familiar settings. Accounts of the reactions of “respectable” society to the lives and deaths of prostitutes, as well as discussions of local efforts to expel sex workers or enact blue laws, add other interesting and useful layers to MacKell's local histories.

For audiences beyond the local or regional, however, MacKell's work is somewhat problematic. Broad statements and generalizations about Victorian life fail to effectively contextualize gender issues and sex work and reveal little concern with scholarship about the period. In one instance, her assertion that “many marriages ended in divorce” because of “the harshness of the times” addresses rising divorce rates in a superficial manner that may mislead nonacademics and be jarring to academic readers (p. 20). Similar broad and generally unsourced or

unsupported statements, among them “every prostitute strived to look and be at her best at all times” and “most girls aspired to marry their favorite customer,” further undermine the authority of *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls* (pp. 29, 35). There are many spots in the book where a reader anticipates a citation or note and finds neither. Other problems arise from MacKell’s lack of attention to issues of race and prostitution; while she acknowledges that women of color were present in Colorado’s sex trade, she rarely addresses the lives of such women or the ways racial attitudes may have affected their lives. Perhaps analyses of race and gender are beyond the scope of MacKell’s local history, but the absence of such analyses compromises the utility of her work for other historians and fails to provide local enthusiasts with a true picture of Cripple Creek, or Denver, or any of the other towns on which she focuses.

Where MacKell’s work will likely be most useful for historians and for students of local history is in her use of primary sources, including legal records, marriage records, and Sanborn maps. Although she relies heavily on secondary sources for many of her anecdotes, her work in some cases reiterates the fact that tracing the trajectories of otherwise opaque lives is possible through

the use of sometimes underused resources. In one notable instance, MacKell is able to reconstitute the story of Mexican Jennie, a Cripple Creek prostitute who fled to Mexico after killing an abusive lover; because Jennie was arrested in Mexico and brought back to prison in Colorado, her story survived in state prison and marriage records. MacKell’s work may also provide some historians with useful examples of investigative strategies and the importance of deep local research; the extensive lists of prostitutes she includes in the text and appendix may point others to fruitful fields for research and analysis. Her endnotes and suggestions for further reading will be more helpful to Colorado history enthusiasts than scholars, focusing as she does on small press books of folklore and local histories—further demonstrating the intended audience for this volume. MacKell’s forthcoming University of New Mexico Press book, *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*, moves her study of prostitution into other Rocky Mountain states. One hopes that she offers more substantive analyses for a scholarly audience and more nuanced context of women’s lives for her audiences generally, as doing so will enhance the quality of the final product and surely move it into the hands of more readers.

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