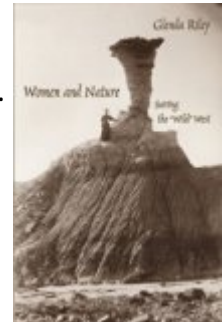


**Glenda Riley.** *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xviii + 279 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-3932-6.



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"From the Bottom Up: Glenda Riley's *Women and Nature*"

Recent research on Western women's history has revealed that Euro-American white women were present in all phases of American expansion in the West. True, it was men who claimed the land as explorers and pathfinders, and men who more often made the initial decisions that their wives were expected to follow. But, as Glenda Riley demonstrates in *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West*, literate women wrote copiously in letters and diaries, travel and settlement narratives, reminiscences and autobiographies, stories and novels all sources that show women's presence in the Conservation Movement in the West.

In this study, Riley focuses on the trans-Mississippi West. An area defined as West of the 98th meridian, it was settled at different times by people of various ethnic heritages. That diversity is demonstrated by Riley's attention to women's experiences in this book. But her focus is mostly on middle and upper class women during the years between the early 1870s and early 1940s, which Riley claims was crucial in the development of the

conservation movement but also the period in which women's contributions are the most neglected. Central to Riley's work, despite her concentration largely on Euro-American women, is awareness that the variety of Western experiences requires recognition of the different circumstances of individuals before making large generalizations about what the West has meant for women in general.

Recently conservation and women's historians of the West have begun to address the omissions of the older Western environmental history. *Women and Nature* adds to these efforts to reexamine the West through women's eyes. Specifically, Riley's work contributes to that body of literature which analyzes women's roles in the Western conservation movement and adds the experience of Western women to national scholarship in women's history. As she notes, the large number of environmentally conscious women stands in stark contrast to the marginal role that they have been relegated to traditionally in Western history. This omission, according to Riley, has seriously distorted our understanding of the settlement and

development of the American West. Therefore, she argues not only that western women's history is valuable in its own right; it also provides a starting point from which to rethink Western history as a whole.

Of primary interest in Riley's work are the expectations women brought with them on their journey West and how these beliefs affected their response to the landscape. Refuting the pervasive notion that women were wary of the "wild," Riley starts with the obvious assertion that there were women in the conservation movement and that women's participation in that crusade offers important insights into our national past. From birders and botanists to nature illustrators and writers, Riley argues, women "conquered" [nature] in their own way by feminizing it" (190). She looks at how idealized gender roles in the East were transformed in the West. In other words, Riley provides information on how definitions of ideal womanhood were accepted, rejected, or changed by women in the West. In this way, Riley demonstrates that various definitions of gender roles were held by different Westerners, and she begins to examine how these changed over time.

Despite these differences, Riley finds one continuous gender-related thread running throughout the included texts, that of women's counter visions to male fantasies of conquest and possession. Moreover, this ideal of domesticity, she concludes, encouraged women to project domestic and familial fantasies upon the Western landscape.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the American West attracted botanizers, birders, collectors, geologists and other women whose significant presence dispels the notion that women were not attracted to nature and/or concerned with its preservation. *Women and Nature* opens with accounts of these women scientists who were naturally drawn to preservation work. In addition, Riley argues that female nature writers might have shaped environmental

thought more than well-known male politicians. Highlighting the Southwestern writer Mary Austin, Riley uses Austin's personal life and her writings as a paradigm illustrating how female authors influenced public attitudes, which in turn shaped federal policy for managing Western lands. In particular, Riley claims that Austin contributed a holistic ethic for living lightly on the arid land that she hoped would influence future generations. Visual artists, too, are included in this section, specifically those who, between 1870-1940, worked as advocates for conservation of the west.

In addition to women artists and photographers, gardeners and landscape architects fit into Riley's category of women whose efforts molded the environment to satisfy their clients' needs. As Riley shows, their belief that modification of the landscape should reflect an environmental ethic influenced the larger movement. Riley then focuses on women's reform and charitable crusades as she covers efforts to preserve trees, birds, parks and other facets of the public's interest. From professional women, political activists, and later club women, Riley shows the efforts of these crusaders to sway public views on the environment and expand their own roles as shapers of public opinion.

Following public activists, Riley moves to women travelers and tourists, whose impact on the conservation movement, she claims, was less clear-cut and thus not as widely known. Arriving by wagon, stagecoach, and eventually by railroad, steamship and automobile, women put their thoughts into travel books and articles, talks and lectures all of which helped raise public consciousness about the need to save the West. In addition, as Riley notes, women transformed their socially accepted role as conservators of hearth and home to include the outdoors as a proper domain of female influence and as a sphere that sometimes included preservation of native peoples.

*Women and Nature* concludes with the years since 1940. It enlarges the picture to include the struggle against environmental racism and awareness that because toxic waste plants are concentrated in minority and poor neighborhoods. Due to this circumstance, women of color have a special incentive to fight toxic pollution. In this section Riley also focuses on other recent trends such as ecofeminism, a theory that draws on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism in order to analyze connections between the domination of women by men and the domination of nature. Evolving from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism, as Riley notes, ecological feminists call for an end to all oppression, asserting that no attempt to liberate women will succeed without an equal attempt to liberate nature.

Riley's study of Western women in the conservation movement highlights the same issues that scholars trained in Western history pursue. From that perspective she asks whether or not the West was a liberating environment for women. Assuming the importance of a solitary innocent male hero who disclaims responsibility for both civilization and conquest, Annette Kolodny suggests that women may have "avoided male anguish at lost Edens and male guilt in the face of raping of the continent by confining themselves, instead, to innocent...amusement of a garden's narrow space" (10). Riley's review of Western women writings modifies this image of Western women. Because of their socially approved role of conservators and social reformers of society, she observes, women found that the West offered them "freedom and abundance" (xvi) in the form of reformist causes.

>From women's history Riley draws on research based in prescriptive literature which informed Victorian women what the dominant culture considered their appropriate roles. In addition, she adds to historiography regarding whether these roles and values were challenged

in the West. Julie Roy Jeffrey argues, for example, that "frontier women gave many indications of their desire to hold on to the conventions of female culture no matter how unfavorable the circumstances seemed." Noting that "women planted flowers and trees from seeds they had brought with them." She concludes that they "generally tried to maintain the standards of domesticity...with which they had been familiar before" (74). In "Crazy-Quilt Lives: Frontier Sources for Frontier Women's Literature," Vera Norwood cites Jeffrey and others who argue that women carried their domestic baggage with them and thus valued the Western landscape only in so far as it could be transformed into a garden. While Norwood affirms the presence of this ideology in a variety of sources, she also finds that women valued the environment for its resistance, a stance that mirrored their own refusal to remain within domestic spheres prescribed for them. Riley's findings fall within this range of contradictions. Noting that the domestic sphere might have offered "safety and security" (16) for some women, she acknowledges that female pioneers most likely brought such ideas West with them. But domesticity gradually lost its appeal, she concludes, and perhaps was not even a possibility for women of color, poor women, and wage-earning female workers.

Riley also draws attention to the ways gender and sexuality leads women to a different interpretation of nature than most men. While she acknowledges that some women supported male agendas, her study focuses more on their opposition to patriarchal values. Modifying this discussion, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay argues that the "quintessential American plot cannot be explained solely in terms of the sex-gender system" (14). Riley does recognize that most of the women who worked to save the West were white, literate and middle to upper class. But she fails to draw conclusions, as Georgi-Findlay does, that these women asserted their own kind of cultural authority over the land and indigenous people. As Georgi-

Findlay rightly claims, race and class as well as gender are important factors in determining how women negotiated their place within a male myth of the frontier. Riley does explore how women's involvement with "preservation" (155) of native peoples sometimes led to their support of assimilationist policies that often had detrimental consequences. She also enlarges the idea of politics to celebrate how women, unable to vote until 1920 and excluded from high political office in most states and territories, served as shapers of public policy. Giving due to male politicians, whose visibility assured their place in conservation history, she replaces that long-held story with a rendition from the bottom up. As do revisions of the civil rights struggles, that give credit to various movements of the masses, Riley correctly envisions efforts to preserve the West as a grassroots movement fueled by previously neglected women.

Much more than the history of women is at issue in Riley's text. Women's history offers her a venue for rethinking and reconceptualizing conservation history. As she showcases the lives of individual Western women, Riley provides new images to counter long-held stereotypes of the lady, the helpmate and the bad woman as well as male myths of adventure, individualization and violence. As Riley notes, once these distortions are destroyed, scholars can then proceed to the revising of Western conservation history. Using a variety of sources, she writes a new history of the West, one that opens the way for a more inclusive story.

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