Peripatetic Western Women

In *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*, historian Virginia Scharff uses six mini-biographies, a chapter on woman suffrage in Wyoming, and a personal closing chapter to prove that women have always moved across barriers in the West. Her thesis is that the experiences of these six women prove that any woman had the ability to control her own life and to create her own version of the West. She uses primary sources extensively, with enough secondary cites to place her work in context. Her writing style is lyrical, imaginative, and complex, sometimes following paths as circuitous as the lives of her subjects.

The book is divided into three sections: "Before the West," "In the West," and "Beyond the West." These divisions are arbitrary and unenlightening. In the first chapter, in the section "Before the West," Scharff describes her search for Sacagawea. This essay is interesting, especially as she delineates her methodology. Scharff gives the various names, living places, and occupations of this famous Native American woman. There are several versions of her life, and Scharff tracks them all down before giving her opinion as to which ones are correct. The only downside to this chapter is that the author seems constantly surprised that a Plains Indian would be able to travel widely, live off the land, and survive without modern equipment. Is this really so surprising?

The second chapter focuses on the diary of Susan Magoffin, who traveled the Santa Fe Trail in 1846-47, encountering rough terrain and weather; people both strange and inhospitable or gentle and friendly; and new foods and customs. Scharff sees Magoffin as transcending barriers because of her travels. Other readers may not see anything so remarkable in a woman traveling with her husband over long distances in the 1840s. After all, Magoffin's trek was not nearly as long as the Oregon Trail traveled by thousands of women at that time. The diary does expose Magoffin's beliefs and prejudices, which were very common to a Southern woman of the mid-1800s. It is an interesting story but not an uncommon one.

The second part of the book begins with a chapter on woman suffrage in Wyoming, which
emphasizes the role of women themselves in acquiring the vote. However, Scharff makes clear, though perhaps unintentionally, that it was the men of the territory who made all the final decisions based on their own political outlook. Scharff wants the reader to believe that woman suffrage was a major part of the character of the West, which made it so very different from the East, and that it was women who caused this difference to occur. However, she does not support this conclusion, nor even describe just how suffrage made a difference in women's lives.

The next chapter in the middle section describes the experiences of Grace Raymond Hebard. Hebard was born in Iowa in 1861 but lived most of her life in Wyoming. Hebard was an ambitious opportunist who gave herself an education and several careers, apparently by the force of her will. She began as an engineer, earned advanced degrees by correspondence, and became very influential at the University of Wyoming. She was a secretary, a member of the Board of Trustees, a librarian, an educator, an historian, and a lobbyist. Perhaps more than any other of the people in this book, Hebard did transcend barriers of gender, class, and place.

The third chapter of "In the West" tells the life story of Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, an upper-class New Mexican woman who devoted her life to helping the less fortunate. Scharff's intention in this chapter is to show that women are the ones who keep tradition alive and who create the racial identities of the West. As a genealogist and writer, Cabeza de Baca both created and kept alive the Hispanic identity of New Mexicans even as the state modernized in the twentieth century. Her movement was through time, not place, and she preserved the old ways by adapting them for the new generation.

Jo Anne Robinson, a civil rights activist in Montgomery, is the focus of the next chapter. Scharff points to her as a woman who transcended racial barriers by getting an education and a career in the Jim Crow South. While her story is interesting and adds to the knowledge about the "other" people of the civil rights movement, it has little to do with the West. The chapter describes Robinson's life before and during the Montgomery bus boycott, and ends with her move to Los Angeles. Robinson deserves to be incorporated into historical works, but her inclusion in a book about women in the West is questionable.

The last biography is about Pamela Des Barres, a rock 'n' roll groupie and party girl from California. Scharff admits that Des Barres is important mainly because she wrote about her experiences, which were not much different from those of thousands of others in the counterculture of the 1960s. Scharff justifies Des Barres' inclusion by saying she was a pathbreaker like Sacagawea, and a diarist like Magoffin, but in reality, Des Barres was not a mover and shaker like Hebard, a tradition-keeper like Cabeza de Baca, or an activist/organizer like Robinson.

The last part of the book is a reminiscence of living in the changing West. The author lived for a short time in a planned community in a near-wilderness area of Colorado. She laments the changes that have since turned the area into strip-mall America. She depicts the stay-at-home moms as being not very stay-at-home at all. Instead they are constantly in motion, going shopping, delivering children to school and soccer practice, and being transferred to other parts of the country. Once again, the rationale for including this chapter is difficult to fathom. The car-driving yet restricted lives of these women have little in common with women who traveled the Oregon Trail in covered wagons, or even with those who moved to the West on railroads. These women could live anywhere in America. Why are they included in a book about the West? This chapter seems to argue that the West is just like everywhere else, which goes against the author's stated thesis.

This book says that it is about women, movement, and the West. It does discuss a few rather
ordinary women and their movements in and across the West, but the author fails to make a significant contribution to the literature. The book reads like the author had access to these women's documents and decided to write a series of essays, force them into a book, and publish them. There is good archival research here and impressive writing. There is, however, no unifying thread, no thesis, no real conclusion. Yes, there were women in the West. Yes, they traveled. Yes, they sometimes made their own life decisions and were governed by men at others. How is any of this new?

The author also fails to give a demonstrable definition of the West. Is Alabama the West? Most people consider Alabama to be in the South. Is New Mexico, either when it was part of Mexico or during the twentieth century, the West? Again, most people think of New Mexico as Southwestern, not Western. Is the rock culture of 1960s California the West? Not according to most Western historians. Just what point is the author trying to make about women in the West?

If Sharff’s purpose is to be all-inclusive, that the West is whatever one wants it to be, then she succeeds. Scharff also succeeds in proving that there were people other than white men in the West, but that has already been shown by the New West research and writing of the last few decades. The topic that she seeks to complicate has already been complexified, mapped and remapped, interpreted and reinterpreted by other historians in other works that are much better organized than this one.

Graduate students could benefit from reading the chapter on Sacagawea for the methodology of the research; undergraduates in a civil rights class would gain from reading about Jo Anne Robinson; students in a Mexican-American class could learn from the chapter on Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, and so on. Each chapter stands alone rather well; it is when the author tries to tie them all together that they fall apart. As a text on women's history, it is not recommended. Scharff seems partial to the Great Woman theory, and continually forces her subjects into that mold. She states in the introduction that one purpose of the book is to make readers take women seriously (p. 4). The field of women’s history produced that effect long ago.
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