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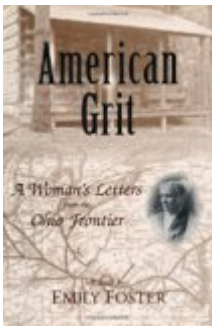

Emily Foster, ed.. *American Grit: A Woman's Letters from the Ohio Frontier.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. x + 344 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2265-6.

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Rural Ohio Woman's Letters Valuable Beyond Ohio History

Emily Foster begins her introduction to the edited volume of Anna Briggs Bentley's letters, running from the 1820s through the 1850s, "In the panorama of human events, the story of Anna Briggs Bentley occupies a quiet corner." Foster suggests this is because Anna and Joseph Bentley focused on establishing their farm on the Ohio frontier and raising their large family; in doing so, she claims, "their lives were simple and unremarkable" (p. 1). Foster's own research into the Bentleys' extended family, their connections with reform movements of the antebellum period, their efforts to overcome financial difficulties, and Anna's letters challenge this statement. Anna Bentley was not a prominent religious leader or abolitionist in antebellum Ohio, although disputes in her Quaker community and anti-slavery activism crept into her correspondence and Foster devotes considerable time to explaining how these ideas shaped early Ohio's history.

Probably more remarkable and noteworthy than her distant connections to reformers and their causes was Anna's attention to the details and routines of rural farm life. Her letters describe the nearly ubiquitous experiences of rural women through much of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the hard work required to build a farm, the efforts to minister to family and neighbors' physical needs, the yearning for communication from distant family members, and the importance of limits and opportunities experienced at different stages in women's life cycles. In this way, Anna Briggs Bentley's letters and Foster's book take what might be considered "simple and unremarkable" and, instead, shed light on the complex components that characterized rural nineteenth-century women's lives.

Anna Briggs, born in 1796, grew up in Montgomery County, Maryland, in a Quaker family that faced financial setbacks repeatedly through the early nineteenth century. In 1812, sixteen-year-old Anna married twenty-three-year-old Joseph Bentley and gave birth to the first of thirteen children just over a year later. As early as 1817, Joseph Bentley considered moving to Ohio, where he hoped to obtain better land for a farm. According

to Foster, Anna was reluctant to leave her mother, sisters, and extended family in Maryland. By 1826, however, Joseph began preparations for the Bentleys to move to Columbiana County in eastern Ohio where a Quaker community had been established and some of his extended family had already relocated. Determined to stay connected with her Maryland relatives, Anna Briggs Bentley began writing letters on the Bentleys' journey west and continued to write regularly through the late 1850s. These letters are part of the Maryland Historical Society's collection and have been difficult to read due to deterioration and nineteenth-century habits of penmanship. Through Emily Foster's able editing, the letters are now more accessible and readable in published form.

Throughout the main introduction and the remarks in each of the seven chapters, Foster attempts to weave together the specifics of the Bentleys' family history and experiences with events of local, regional, and national scope. In chapter 2, Foster provides context about the schisms developing among Quakers, following up with Anna's letters, which touch briefly on how these religious disputes played out in her own neighborhood. In chapter 3, Foster explains the economic and transportation problems in frontier areas in the 1820s and 1830s; again Anna's letters address these issues but in a way that emphasizes how her family was affected by them. By the end of 1834, Anna communicated the excitement attendant on canal construction beginning nearby, as real estate prices increased and building construction boomed. Relating both the positives and negatives in change, Anna hoped that her brother might join them in Ohio to "find employment for a while. They are rushing on with this canal tearing up the trees by the roots, &c.... Money is as scarce as ever with us, though our comforts seem to be encreasing" (p. 161).

Despite the promise of the canal, financial difficulties were a constant for the Bentleys into the 1840s. Clothing was difficult to procure, although Anna reused every scrap of fabric for various items for her many children; sugar and other commodities were expensive; harvests were unpredictable in the amount they produced and the prices given for the crops; and debts lingered from year to year. Nearly twenty years after the Bentleys established their farm, Joseph forestalled several lawsuits that demanded his property in lieu of payment on his debts. Anna explained to those in Maryland, "By hard scraping and selling produce we needed to supply us with clothing, he has just paid them off. He has one other debt ... besides the Dr's bills (p. 208).

As her older children began craft apprenticeships or went to live with other families to pursue additional education, Anna Briggs Bentley enjoyed watching her offspring acquire skills beyond those she and her husband could impart and looked forward to an end to her childbearing years. One of the most poignant moments in the letters is when she confided to her sister in 1836, more than twenty-three years since the birth of her first child, that she was pregnant again. She wrote, "I had encouraged a ***belief***, with such confidence, that I never should have that trial to undergo again, that the conviction to the contrary has been a trial almost too hard for me to bear with any degree of resignation" (p. 173). Anna would give birth to three more children, although her last two died while very young. Anna's children clearly vexed and delighted her, as she grumbled about broken dishes, loud noise, and lack of sleep but also eagerly described each of the new babies for her absent mother and sisters along with the accomplishments and physical features of their older siblings (pp. 127-128, 157-158, 185-188, for example).

Nearly twenty-one years after she first left Maryland, in 1847, Anna was able to return for a visit to her aging mother and siblings nearby. This is the climax in Anna's life story because she had yearned so longingly for her family. It also gives a sense of the importance of life cycle in women's

lives. While Anna had young children she could not make the journey from Ohio to Maryland, but now she traveled with one of her adult children and his wife. The correspondence reflects this shift in generations as the adult Bentley children began to care for their aging parents while attending to the needs of their own young families. There is a sense of the larger national cycle of continued westward settlement when some of Anna and Joseph's children moved to Louisiana, Illinois, and even farther west, while others resembled Anna's Maryland relatives by remaining near the old family homestead in Ohio or relocating to larger eastern cities. Anna stayed on the farm in Ohio in her later years, and Foster points out, "After writing 'home' [to Maryland] for almost fifty years, she seemed to find her relatives there less real than the children and grandchildren immediately around her" (p. 301). Anna Briggs Bentley died in 1890 at the age of ninety-four.

This overarching narrative of Anna Briggs Bentley's life may seem superficially "simple and unremarkable"; however, it represents the experiences of many women who did not leave a written record of their lives. Most common in Anna's letters are the constant, repetitive, cyclical elements of rural women's lives that John Mack Faragher elucidated in his study of a rural Illinois community and his work on farm families moving west--laundry, baking, cleaning, clothes making and mending, caring for the sick, tending gardens, and childcare.[1] These occupied Anna's time and attention from day to day; only occasionally did changes like the canal, abolition, or religious contentiousness appear in her letters or interrupt her routines. Readers will benefit most from Foster's useful information about the commercial, political, and religious changes in Ohio and Maryland that form a backdrop in Anna's life and letters. In addition, Foster has done an excellent job in supplying the family and neighborhood history necessary to decode Anna's references to people and understand her community.

American Grit is a welcome contribution to scholarly work on women in early America, and more specifically on rural women in the nineteenth century, but it does not self-consciously engage that literature, and this is perhaps the book's greatest lost opportunity. Like later women who moved to the Far West, Anna Briggs Bentley identified herself with her eastern roots and compared her new circumstances with those she had been accustomed to previously (p. 149).[2] In the midst of her childbearing years, she found she must rise to the challenge of an increased workload in a new environment, without a ready network of female kin upon which to rely. Drawing upon the standard body of literature on women's experiences of westward settlement would have aided the editor in contextualizing Bentley's comments about the competing demands on her time and her physical health on the Ohio farm.

In other words, Foster needed to situate Anna Briggs Bentley not only in early-nineteenth-century Ohio and reform and religious histories, but also in early-nineteenth-century women's history. For example, although Foster ably explained new changes in nineteenth-century medicine and medical treatments, she might have benefited from drawing on Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's rich analysis of women's remedies and culture of healing to round out her discussion of Bentley's efforts to minister to her family and neighbors' illnesses.[3] Admittedly, Foster edited the letters as part of the Ohio River Valley series; however, Bentley's letters are so rich in material valuable to early American women's history that it is regrettable that Foster did not tap into this literature in her editorial comments.

Anna Briggs Bentley wrote letters that would "inform and amuse" her family so they would not forget her across geographic distance (p. 2); Emily Foster's editorial work has made sure that Anna Briggs Bentley will continue to inform and amuse, and that her experiences will not be forgotten over the distance of time.

Notes

[1]. John Mack Faragher, ***Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and ***Women and Men on the Overland Trail*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[2]. Julie Roy Jeffrey, ***Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880*** (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979; revised edition 1998).

[3]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, ***A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*** (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).