

BOOK REVIEWS

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The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature

Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 398pp. Illus. Map. Notes. Sources. Ind. Cloth, \$60.00.

In *The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature*, Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola analyzes twenty-four captivity narratives—both published and unpublished—from the Dakota War of 1862. She uses these narratives to address issues of “ethnicity, identity, war, memory, and narrative” (p. 2). The 1862 war lasted only six weeks and is generally overshadowed by the country’s Civil War. Despite its short duration, the war was, and still is, highly controversial, with both Dakotas and European Americans telling radically different stories about the conflict. Derounian-Stodola uses captivity narratives to explore this divisive war from multiple perspectives. The resulting text offers an invaluable contribution to those interested in Dakota, American Indian, and Minnesota history, as well as information about captivity narratives in general.

The first several chapters of the book provide a brief introduction to Dakota captivity narratives and the events of the Dakota War of 1862. After the introduction, the book is divided into two main parts; the first focuses on European American captivity narratives, and the second on Dakota narratives. According to the author, this organization allows her to underscore “the discrepancies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous versions of history” (p. 5). Each section has an introduction summarizing the historiography of

captivity narratives. After the introductions, individual chapters discuss all twenty-four narratives in detail. This discussion includes extensive biographical information about the text’s author, an in-depth summary of the narrative, and an analysis of the text.

Overall, *The War in Words* is an extremely worthwhile volume. The author offers something for everyone; she speaks to historians interested in Minnesota, American Indian, and Dakota history. She also addresses issues of interest to literary scholars. In all cases, Derounian-Stodola provides information for both the novice and the expert in jargon-free language. For example, for those not familiar with captivity narratives, the author provides a comprehensive historiography. For experts, she speaks to recent advances in the field that expand the “definition of captivity narratives.” Generally, scholars focus on tales of whites captured by Indians. The author shows, however, that the Dakotas also experienced captivity in profound ways.

The author also references heretofore unpublished sources, including a letter written by Lillian Everett Keeney, a survivor of the attack on Lake Shetek, and a seven-page handwritten manuscript about Maggie Bass (Dakota). In addition, the author includes several Dakota oral histories. Her analysis of two novels adds to her extensive source list.

Derounian-Stodola makes the invaluable point that the reality of the war was much more complicated than just “whites versus Dakotas,” with “individuals making their own moral judgments and aligning themselves with groups to which they did not, at first glance, seem to belong” (p. 27). There

were pro-Dakota whites; African Americans intermarried with Dakotas; assimilated, pro-government Dakotas; and constantly shifting alliances.

Although there is much to commend about the text, a few areas are open to improvement. At times, the author's main ideas become lost among the detailed analysis of the twenty-four narratives; further references to her thesis and main ideas would have helped to link the disparate stories together. In addition, further references to the Dakotas' cultural and religious background would have provided necessary context for the narratives. Despite these minor points, *The War in Words* will be an invaluable source for scholars in many different fields.

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African Americans on the Great Plains: An Anthology

Edited and with an Introduction by Bruce A. Glasrud and Charles A. Braithwaite. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 404pp. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Paper, \$35.00.

This anthology is an eclectic collection of peer-reviewed articles on the African American experience in the American heartland, selected from the archives of the respected *Great Plains Quarterly*, the journal of the Center for Great Plains Studies. It is a welcome addition to the growing collection of scholarly literature of the African American experience on the Great Plains.

The idea that blacks were present from the outset in a land erroneously understood as homogeneously white and American Indian is relatively new and gains importance with the increasing diversity of the twenty-first-century United States. These fourteen articles follow in the pioneering footsteps of Kenneth Wiggins Porter and W. Sherman Savage who, writing in the 1970s, opened the topic for general discussion and further study.

The black experience in the South and

East is well understood, both with respect to slavery and in the years after slavery, and Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier* adds the West to that understanding. With regard to the Great Plains states, editors Glasrud and Braithwaite correctly point out that a number of new state-specific studies exist. They argue, however, that it is now time to examine the entire scope of the Great Plains, from Canada to Texas, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi River. The result is a potpourri of highly readable, thought-provoking, chronologically arranged articles on topics that include "organizations, employment, cultural contributions, family and gender issues, the military, prejudice, discrimination, violence, and urban and rural life" (pp. 2-3). Some stories, such as those of the Buffalo Soldiers, have been part of larger studies, but the specificity of the pieces about Fort Hays and Fort Niobrara add color, detail, and breadth to the growing literature of the Buffalo-Soldier narratives.

Era Bell Thompson's experience of childhood in North Dakota as a member of the only black family for miles is typical of the surprising number of African American free spirits who chose to make their home in exclusively white rural communities of the Northern Great Plains and West. The researcher stumbling upon these generally successful individuals and families living quiet lives in small towns or on farms is often intrigued by their choices. The fact that they existed and apparently thrived suggests a valuable topic for further scholarly investigation.

Some of the articles break new research ground. For example, Bruce Shepherd's account of the Canadian government's active attempts to curtail black homesteading in the prairie provinces might explain why black families like the Speeces, who had fled to Canada to escape slavery, chose to return to homestead in Nebraska and, later, in South Dakota. Also valuable and outside the mainstream of scholarship are the collected accounts of black cultural activities and values. These include articles on the Prince Hall

Masons, the Omaha Gospel Complex, and the arts and letters movement among Midwestern African American students.

For those of us who continue to study the African American experience in the heartland, especially the northern heartland, this anthology is an important addition to the literature and, one may hope, the first of many.

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Feminist Frontiers: Women Who Shaped the Midwest

Edited by Yvonne J. Johnson. Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2010. 232pp. Illus. Notes. Sources. Ind. Paper, \$29.95.

This brief collection of biographical essays covers women's experiences within feminism throughout the course of American women's history since the early 1800s. It highlights most of the important themes in that chronology, including the fight for prohibition as well as activism in the antislavery, suffrage, and civil rights movements. The protagonists in these stories include not only leaders in those movements, but also women whose feminism was "quiet" and centered within a setting best described as "domestic feminism" (p. 136). Twin themes of the work are explorations of American feminism and the meaning and history of the Midwestern identity. These individuals are not just women from the Midwest who merely fit into a larger narrative of American feminism, however. Rather, they are Midwestern women whose stories positively complicate and enrich that larger narrative.

All of the women in this volume are approachable; there is no hagiography here. Instead, the reader is invited to discover each woman as a complicated individual with multifaceted motivations. Marietta Bones, for example, was an early leader of South Da-

kota's suffrage movement who was also active in her community as a philanthropist and as an advocate for the separation of church and state, especially within her local school system. As an organizer of the fight for South Dakota women's suffrage during the push for statehood, she soon drew notice from national suffragists, including Susan B. Anthony, who appeared to become a friend as well as a colleague. The collaboration between the two women disintegrated, however, as Bones discovered that Anthony and other national activists seemed to believe that they knew better than the locals regarding what was best for South Dakota. Bones's objections to the subjugation of South Dakota's interests concluded with her summary dismissal from the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The episode led Bones to conclude that women's suffrage should be opposed because of the "incapacity of woman to fairly let a majority rule" (p. 77).

Was Bones correct in her subsequent fight against women's suffrage? It would be easy to set aside her story in the traditional narrative of American feminism as the result of a conflict of personalities, a power struggle between two powerful women. In the context of this volume, however, one sees that the issues that Bones raised with Anthony are essentially Midwestern issues: a recognition of the obligation to show respect for hard work and for the hard worker; an acknowledgement that the Midwest is a region with its own concerns that may be contrary to those of the East, South, or West; and an understanding that Midwestern feminists had the fortitude and independence that allowed them to stand up to interloping Easterners.

This well-researched and nicely referenced scholarly work is exceptionally readable, making it appropriate for both lay and academic readers. In particular, its chronological organization makes it an entirely appropriate companion for undergraduate survey classes focusing on the history either of American women or of the Midwest. Its content would certainly spark lively in-class discussions

and provoke a critical reevaluation of the accepted narrative of American feminism.

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Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West

Mark Wyman. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. 352pp. Illus. Maps. Notes. Ind. Paper, \$28.00.

Any state that celebrates “Hobo Days” should have a vested interest in Mark Wyman’s new study of migrant workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century West. Indeed, Dakota farms—and their dependence on the labor of “hoboes”—preoccupy the first portion of Wyman’s book. Beyond the northern plains, Wyman explores a variety of western spaces, stretching from the apple orchards of the Pacific Northwest to the cotton fields of Arizona. Uniting all these locales, Wyman claims, was a fundamental economic dependence on migrant labor.

Wyman’s book is nicely organized around a basic problem in late nineteenth-century capitalist development. While modern technologies and investments (led by the railroad) had created the possibilities of agricultural abundance in the West, such advances would be for naught without workers to harvest goods for market. The economic need for workers led to a consequent social problem: while laborers might be prized during harvest seasons, western farmers and police were hardly thrilled at the prospect of idle workers lounging about, draining local resources, and possibly raising trouble during down times. Out of this predicament emerged the hobo, a permanent resident of neither here nor there, following the lure of wages to the next harvest down the road.

Wyman does an admirable job depicting the world of hobo workers. He captures the complex folklore that hoboes invented and inhabited without unnecessarily romanticizing their experiences. Indeed, the lives of

hoboes were “heavily salted with violence” (p. 47). The experiences of hoboes in the Upper Midwest may particularly interest readers of *South Dakota History*. Wyman notes that the relationship between hoboes and Dakota farmers was deeply ambiguous. While farmers pleaded for workers to come when the harvest approached, they sometimes aggressively urged hoboes to move along when the work was finished; in fact, Wyman opens his book with an account of the Aberdeen police chief marching two hundred migrant workers out of town and ordering them to hop the next train.

Wyman’s study is perhaps most noteworthy for highlighting the multiethnic composition of the western work force. Hoboes, according to Wyman, “were the advance party of . . . a heterogeneous conglomeration” of workers—not merely from the eastern United States or from Europe, but also American Indians and migrants from Central America and Asia (p. 45). Of course, Dakota wheat farms were the great exception to Wyman’s otherwise well-stated rule. On the Great Plains, hoboes were almost always white and native born. Moreover, because Dakota wheat farms first created the “hobo” as a social entity, one might question Wyman’s terminology. Dakota hoboes, as the author establishes, tended to understand themselves as a self-conscious group—but did that self-consciousness extend to nonwhites? For their part, did Mexican cotton pickers or Filipino field workers think of themselves as “hoboes” in the same way that white migrants did? Wyman is surely right to emphasize both the diversity and the mobility of western workers. Proclaiming them all to be “hoboes,” however, is a rather more radical step, and it is questionable whether the workers themselves would have accepted the description.

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High Plains Horticulture: A History

John F. Freeman. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. 296pp. Illus. Maps. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Cloth, \$34.95.

This book is a hymn to human ingenuity and persistence. Anyone who has tried to farm or garden on the Great Plains, or who has studied the history of the plains, knows the difficulties the environment poses for plant life introduced from elsewhere. John F. Freeman tells the story of those who tried to grow fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants in an inhospitable place, the “high plains” of western Nebraska and Kansas, the eastern portion of Colorado, southeastern Wyoming, and southwestern South Dakota.

Freeman loves this region; from an early age he hoped to live on the plains, and he did so, spending much of his career in public service in Wyoming. He also respects the “civilizing influence of horticulture” (p. ix) as a means of creating and beautifying community and maintaining ties to nature and the soil. The story he tells begins with American Indian plantings of corn, pumpkins, and beans and ends with the modern emphasis on xeriscaping, gardening that utilizes water-conserving native plants, and the organized, systematic, modern approach to “green,” urban gardening now popular in the Denver area.

High Plains Horticulture provides many kinds of information. In highly readable prose, Freeman tells a detailed, interesting story of the many people who worked to bring plants of all kinds to the plains. For example, Niels Hansen, South Dakota State College’s well-known alfalfa man, traveled the world looking for crops that farmers could grow successfully in South Dakota. Less well known is his work with fruits and ornamental plants. Hansen called himself a “plant inventor” and spent years grafting fruits, breeding hardy strawberries (never terribly successfully), and importing foreign plants

that might serve well in the plains environment. A plant whose seeds he imported from Russia, the Siberian Pea Shrub, makes up the outer ring of many farm windbreaks today.

Aven Nelson, originally an English professor who became the Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station botanist in 1890, had the most difficult struggle of all, because he promoted “community horticulture” in a state owned by the cattle ranchers. His story was one of struggle against inertia and the “powers that be,” as well as the climate. Charles Bessey, the noted Nebraska botanist, oversaw the identification of native flora in Nebraska and promoted tree planting, in addition to other horticultural endeavors. He also directed experiments in tree-planting in the unique environment of the Sandhills. A local landowner agreed to plant twenty-thousand conifers on his land, some in cultivated soil, others in untouched grass. The experiments demonstrated that trees could grow on uncultivated lands—fifty percent survived. Ten years later, those conifers, with no human care, were nearly twenty feet tall. On cultivated land, ninety-five percent of the trees died.

Freeman details the backgrounds, intellectual foundations, and botanical labors for each of the scientists who appear in this volume. He also tells the broader history of water law, dry-farming, the local seed industry, community beautification, especially in Denver, and many other topics related to horticulture and efforts to civilize the plains through plants. The author warns the reader at the start that “this study purports to be a cultural, not scientific or technical, treatment of horticulture” (p. viii). It is wonderfully that—a wide-ranging book that nonscientists can read and enjoy, and one that lovers of the Great Plains can savor.

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