

TALE-TELLING WOMEN AND TELLING TALES OF WOMEN:

A Review Essay

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*Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures:
The Diaries of Alice Barrett Parke, 1891-1900*

Edited by Jo Fraser Jones

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001. 384 pp. Illus., map. \$85.00 cloth.

The Judge's Wife: Memoirs of a British Columbia Pioneer

Eunice M.L. Harrison

Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2002. 295 pp. Illus. \$19.95 paper.

Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History

Edited by Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000. 359 pp. Illus. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Wild West Women: Travellers, Adventurers and Rebels

Rosemary Neering

Vancouver: Whitecap, 2000. 255 pp. Illus. \$18.95 paper.

ONCE DORMANT, even absent, the stories of women's lives in the Canadian West are today being recovered and related with much energy and interest. Especially during the last thirty years, those interested in women's narratives have worked hard both to place women at the centre of historical narratives and to locate neglected and silenced women's stories. This recovery effort uses many approaches and takes many forms: some researchers seek out untapped sources such as letters, memoirs, and diaries located in public archives and

private homes; others record oral histories; and some revisit traditional materials but raise fresh and non-traditional questions of those materials.

Of the four books reviewed here, *The Judge's Wife: Memoirs of a British Columbia Pioneer* and *Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures: The Diaries of Alice Barrett Parke, 1891-1900* offer us first-person accounts of newcomer women's lives. Alice Barrett arrived in the Spallumcheen Valley in 1891. Born in 1861 in Port Dover, Ontario, she was twenty-nine years old when she agreed to undertake one year

of domestic work for her younger brother and her cantankerous uncle, who owned 320 acres at Mountain Meadow Ranch. Within one month of her arrival, Harold Parke, teamster and widower, began to court her, and their marriage in 1893 forestalled her plans to return to Port Dover. The Parkes did not return to Ontario until more than a decade had passed.

It was while Alice Barrett was living at Mountain Meadow Ranch that she began writing. Urged by her brother Harry to “keep a diary” to post to their family in the East, an entreaty that freed him of the task while bestowing it upon Alice, she began writing in scribblers despite her doubts “that I’ll have anything to say worth remembering” (4). Altogether Alice Barrett Parke filled thirty-one scribblers between 1891 and 1900, which she regularly mailed to her family in Port Dover. After family members read each scribbler, they stored it away, and for 100 years these scribblers remained in the attic until Harry Bemister Barrett donated them to the Greater Vernon Museum and Archives. Less than one-quarter of Alice Barrett Parke’s writings appear in *Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures*, edited by Jo Fraser Jones. In the introduction Jones explains her solution to the challenge of reducing Alice Barrett Parke’s voluminous writings to a size suitable for publication: “My solution has been to step outside convention and offer a combined chronological/thematic framework” (xxx). The result is a series of chapters organized into topics such as “Life in the Spallumcheen Valley,” “Health and Social Issues in the 1890s,” “Religion in the West,” and “Attitudes towards Other Races.” Within each chapter, Jones provides brief commentaries that help to

contextualize the passages selected. The results are snippets of information that not only introduce us to the commonplace activities of Alice Barrett Parke’s domestic life but also settle us into the public sphere of the North Okanagan. Herein rests the richness of Jones’s edition: we are introduced to the domestic and social sphere of a well-educated White woman, and we watch her adapt, and sometimes refuse to adapt, to what we now recognize as a decade of change.

During her early days at Mountain Meadow Ranch, Alice was given a dog by the courting Harold Parke. Alice comments as follows: “It seems queer for me to have a pet dog. I always professed a dislike for pets of all kinds – and dogs in particular. I have changed a good many of my lines of action out here” (31). This acknowledgment sums up what is most compelling about Alice Barrett Parke’s pages: we watch “lines of action” change. For instance, she modifies her racist ideas about Charlie, a “nice little Chinaman” who “talks very good English – not the broken, babyish kind that most of them jabber. I think it half the fault of the white people, nearly every one talks to a Chinaman as if he were a baby, or half foolish” (191). Central to Alice Barrett Parke’s change in attitude is the time she spent at the BX Ranch, north of Vernon, where she worked closely with the Chinese cook, GooEe, for whom she developed great respect. Only one month after working with him she begins to think “that perhaps Chinamen are not as bad as they are painted and probably the reason they act so little like other citizens is because they are treated unlike them” (192). Alice Barrett Parke also became less accepting of stereotypes of 1890s feminists. In late 1894 she met Ishbel, Countess of Aberdeen, and after

spending some time with this early feminist (to which Harold Parke referred as “hobnobbing” – hence the title of Jones’s edition), Alice Barrett Parke became “a founding member of the Vernon chapter of the National Council of Women” (234). Alice certainly remained conservative: the “new woman” movement continued to agitate her, and she did not believe that women needed the vote. Nevertheless, she did alter some attitudes and lines of action during her time in the Okanagan Valley.

Included in this book are photographs of the family and Vernon acquaintances, a map of British Columbia’s southern Interior, and copious notes. Meticulously edited, *Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures* recovers Alice Barrett Parke’s “desultory” writings, to use her own description of her prose, for those interested in the history of British Columbia’s Southern Interior, in women’s history, and in life-writing.

Eunice Harrison’s *The Judge’s Wife: Memoirs of a British Columbia Pioneer* is a retrospective account of her life as a newcomer to this province. We are fortunate to have this memoir, which was composed in 1945. As Jean Barman notes in her introduction to this edition, Harrison’s “memoir is one of very few by the first generation of newcomer women to British Columbia” (7) – a small body of writing that includes works by, for instance, Susan Allison, Sarah Crease, and Emily Carr. Quesnel-based *Northwest Digest* published Harrison’s memoir, in serial format, between 1951 and 1953, and Harrison’s son placed the original typescript in the National Archives in Ottawa a decade later. The present edition, annotated by Louise Wilson (who also contributed several of its many fine photographs) and edited by Ronald B.

Hatch, is based on this original typescript.

Working with diaries, family letters, documents, photographs, and what she refers to as “my record book” (152), Eunice Harrison reconstructed more than forty years of her life. Beginning with her distant memories of leaving London, Ontario, in 1864 when she was four years old, Eunice Seabrook briefly describes her family’s journey, via the Isthmus of Panama, to New Westminster, where they lived for four years before moving to Victoria. The memoir concludes in 1906 with her account of the San Francisco earthquake, which she and her two youngest children survived during a visit to California intended to relieve her rheumatism. Eunice Harrison selected this date to conclude her account because, as she sensibly points out, 1906 “is within the period to which my title *The Judge’s Wife: Memoirs of a British Columbia Pioneer* refers, for from 1906 forward, the times can hardly be called pioneer” (241).

Between Eunice Harrison’s account of contracting smallpox in New Westminster as a young child and her description of the desolation wrought by the 1906 earthquake are myriad tales. Particularly lively are her reminiscences about the time she spent on the Lower Mainland, first in 1877, when she travelled to Granville (Vancouver’s predecessor) on a tugboat called the *Etta White* and then, in 1878, when she returned on the ship *Enterprise* and remained for several months. Eunice Seabrook not only participated in a makeshift orchestra, boating contests, and entertainments onboard ships docked at Burrard, but she also attended an “Indian war dance,” which she describes at some length. Persuaded by a friend, she also entered what she calls “the first bathing beauty contest ...

held on the coast, if not in the whole of Canada" (35). Much to her surprise, she won.

Back in Victoria, Eunice Seabrook resumed a conventional life, and in 1880 she married Eli Harrison, a lawyer ten years her senior, with whom she had six children. In keeping with the societal expectations for wives of her time, Eunice Harrison shaped her activities to suit those befitting a lawyer's wife and, subsequently, a judge's wife. Not surprisingly, she proudly records in her memoir her husband's appointments and achievements, noting at one point that some "unusual events associated with my husband's work held my interest deeply" (197). Eunice Harrison also includes selections about her husband's travels in British Columbia's central and southern Interior from his own unpublished memoir. For a brief period, the Harrisons lived in Nanaimo after Eli Harrison became a judge there in 1889, but they soon returned to Victoria, which became their permanent place of residence. Here, they purchased property and built a house designed by the renowned architect Samuel Maclure. Eunice describes this design in some detail.

In the preface, entitled "The Why of This Book," Eunice Harrison explains the impetus for composing a memoir: "The bygone days are growing more mythical and few of the earlier pioneers remain. I am therefore venturing to add my testimony to that of some other pioneers as to life in the early days" (14). Her testimony is largely anecdotal as she incorporates an eclectic series of entertaining tales about topics such as Tom Pool's murder, an ancient disk found outside Hazelton, the "exhilarating camping days" at Cordova Bay beach in 1898, the social activities of Victoria's elite, and the dissolution of the Vancouver

Sealing Company. She also offers brief sketches of many people, ranging from family members, to Chinese servants, to Aborigines, to politicians such as James Douglas and Lady Douglas. The memoir is quite loosely structured, but this is its charm: Eunice Harrison's writing style is unpretentious and her tone is consistently conversational.

Of the four books reviewed here, *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History* is most academic in design and in origins. Edited by Catherine Cavanaugh and Randi Warne, this collection consists of a substantial introduction and eleven chapters (three of which have been previously published) on women's history in both British Columbia and the Prairies between 1880 and 1950. Cavanaugh and Warne promise to introduce us to recent scholarship, and in their opening essay they succinctly summarize the three key categories of contemporary historians: (1) traditional historians who emphasize "great men," the "public sphere," and nation building; (2) historians interested in those either absent from or subordinated within master narratives (i.e., the working class, Mennonites, etc.); and (3) postmodernist historians who distrust homogeneity and thus foreground multiple narratives and emphasize the multiple subject positions constructed by the shifting identities of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Cavanaugh and Warne then argue for diversity in both content and approach.

Evident in the subject matter included and the cross-cultural/multi-cultural approaches used by the contributors to *Telling Tales* is the diversity insisted upon by its editors. Subject matter ranges from an analysis of the experiences of Anglican missionaries in the Canadian North-Western mission field between 1860 and 1945 (with an

emphasis on gender construction) to an examination of the lives of John M. Telford and, especially, Gertrude S. Telford (with an emphasis on how the spirit of cooperation infused the lives of this couple that was so profoundly committed to the Saskatchewan Co-operative Commonwealth Federation). Other subjects discussed from cross-cultural/multicultural perspectives are the appalling conditions of childbirth on the Canadian Prairies between 1880 and 1930 (as revealed in homestead women's childbirth stories) and the stock images and roles assumed by western women who participated in the campaigns that led to the formation of the Victorian Order of Nurses in western Canada at the end of the nineteenth century.

The organizing principle behind the chapters is loosely geographical and chronological. Cavanaugh and Warne arranged the eleven chapters so that they begin "on the Pacific Coast and [move] in roughly chronological order from 'encounter,' to settlement, to the construction of diverse communities" (7). Chapters that focus on "encounter" include Sarah Carter's on the derogatory images of Aborigines in a settlement discourse that was used to secure control over this segment of the West's population, and Nancy Pagh's on the ways in which women boat travellers (such as Septima Collis and Kathrene Pinkerton) constructed Northwest Coast Aboriginal women in their travel writing. Chapters on Irene Marryat Parlyby and the political activism of southern Alberta's English-speaking farmwomen between 1905 and 1929 speak about the period of settlement. And, finally, chapters on topics such as the ways that Ukrainian men and women in the Vegreville bloc in east central Alberta negotiated the issues of sex and gender between 1915

and 1929 speak about the construction of communities (233).

The focus of *Telling Tales* is "newcomer women of dominant and minority cultures during the turbulent, sometimes violent, decades from the 1880s to roughly the 1940s" (7). Particularly enlightening is Sherry Edmunds-Flett's contribution, "Abundant Faith': Nineteenth-Century African-Canadian Women on Vancouver Island." Working with household census records, diaries, newspapers, church archival holdings, and court records, Edmunds-Flett uncovers signs of, and occasionally stories about, the approximately 179 African-Canadian women who lived on Vancouver Island during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Equally engaging is Frieda Esau Klippenstein's "Scattered but Not Lost: Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s-50s," based on her interviews with thirty-four Mennonite women about their experiences as immigrants. Most of these women were born in Imperial Russia only to immigrate to Canada between 1923 and 1929 (201). Arriving empty-handed, many Mennonite women had to leave their families in the Canadian countryside and become live-in maids in cities such as Winnipeg. To make this situation somewhat agreeable, Mennonite girls' homes were established; they developed into places of temporary refuge and then into hiring halls.

Telling Tales is an ambitious collection. Its strength is diversity: diversity in subject matter that highlights the experiences of newcomer women and diversity in cross-cultural/multicultural approaches that navigate the myriad ways western women confronted changes and negotiated race, class, ethnicity, and gender between 1880 and 1950. This strength, however, makes for a tenuously unified col-

lection, and each chapter could easily stand alone. Individually or collectively, the essays in *Telling Tales* contribute much to the fields of women's studies, gender studies, and western women's history, and this collection usefully recovers and analyzes women's lives and stories.

Rosemary Neering's *Wild West Women: Travellers, Adventurers, and Rebels* is a collection of stories about women who came to the so-called "wild west" between the gold rush and the 1940s. These women, according to Neering, "aren't the women who built the west. Not nurses or teachers or crusaders for women's rights, they rarely show up in the history books, lauded for great political achievements. They are a different breed of women who often made their lives out beyond the cities. Adventuresome and rebellious, they strayed outside the permitted and undertook the unexpected" (9-10). The adventuresome and the rebellious include miners Nellie Cashman, Delina Noel, and Alice Elizabeth Jowett; photographer Mattie Gunterman; artist Emily Carr; trapper Ella Frye; and mountain climber Phyllis Munday. Two factors unite this eclectic group of adventurous individuals: most were daughters of strong fathers, many of whom died young; and many of the women were single, widowed, or divorced.

This popular history contains a brief introduction and twelve chapters. Neering arranges many chapters according to occupation: for example, "Shady Ladies, Stage Ladies" and "Rancher, Hunter, Trapper." Some chapters, such as "'The Deep Terribleness of a Wilderness': Northern Adventure," are arranged according to geography. The chapters themselves are tightly structured. Most contain biographical sketches of women about

whom we have a reasonable amount of information – women such as Agnes Deans Cameron, Emily Carr, Faith Fenton, Theodora Stanwell Fletcher, and Gilean Douglas. These women, however, may be little known to the mass public for whom Neering is writing. Interspersed amongst the biographical sketches are fleeting references to women about whom we know very little thus far but whose names appear in newspaper accounts.

Neering relies extensively on newspapers as a primary source; some of those about whom she writes "are found in a passing reference made by someone travelling through the region where they lived, someone who was impressed, shocked or amused by the lives they had chosen. They appear in newspaper articles written by reporters looking for the unusual" (12). From an item published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1953 we learn about the daily routine of Viola MacMillan, who purchased the Victor mine in the West Kootenays: "She lives in a decrepit one-room shack near the mineshaft and takes her meals in the camp cookhouse with the hired help. A small attractive woman, nearing fifty, she handles a diamond drill or pick with the best of them and often teaches novice miners the tricks of the trade" (33). This excerpt is typical of the very short portraits: because information about the women portrayed is so meager, we receive few (albeit vivid) details about them.

More satisfying are the vignettes of the adventurous women about whom we have fairly substantial information, usually from their own writings. Neering begins her account of the divining activities of Evelyn Penrose as follows: "In a room in Victoria, a slight woman in her thirties sat on a plate placed on the seat of a chair. Each leg of the chair stood on a plate

as well, on top of a rubber car mat. A rubber bathing cap covered her head, rubber boots her feet. Yet another rubber mat was wrapped around her chest. A third mat had been placed under the table at which she sat, its legs, too, standing on dinner plates. With such precautions, there could be no 'interference' from electrical fields in this experiment" (112). Upbeat and well-paced, this recounting of one moment in Penrose's life reveals Neering's desire to entertain her audience. Indeed, *Wild West Women* entertains as much as it informs.

Best known as a diviner, Penrose was also a writer, and in 1958 she penned the autobiographical *Adventure Unlimited: A Water Diviner Travels the World*. Sixteen of the women Neering portrays were writers who produced quite substantial works. Some of the sixteen are Lady Harriot Dufferin, Faith Fenton, Agnes Deans Cameron,

Theodora Stanwell Fletcher, and Gilean Douglas. Neering's sketches provide lively introductions to these writers' lives – and occasionally to their words. Readers who wish to turn to these women's own accounts of their adventurous lives and travels will find the bibliography valuable.

Those involved in the recovery of western women's narratives are to be thanked for sharing their work. In *Hobnobbing with a Countess and Other Okanagan Adventures: The Diaries of Alice Barrett Parke, 1891-1900*; *The Judge's Wife: Memoirs of a British Columbia Pioneer*; *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women's History*; and *Wild West Women*, we hear remarkable voices and read about often remarkably difficult lives. If these four books are any indication of the state of recovery of western women's history, then the prognosis for further recovery is good.