



True Women and Westward Expansion (Elma Dill Russell Spencer Series in the West and Southwest)

Adrienne Caughfield

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Expansion was the fever of the early nineteenth century, and women burned with it as surely as men, although in a different way. Subscribing to the “cult of true womanhood,” which valued domesticity, piety, and similar “feminine” virtues, women championed expansion for the cause of civilization, even while largely avoiding the masculine world of politics.

Adrienne Caughfield mines the diaries and letters of some ninety Texas women to uncover the ideas and enthusiasms they brought to the Western frontier. Although there were a few notable exceptions, most of them drew on their domestic skills and values to establish not only “civilization,” but their own security. Caughfield sheds light on women’s activism (the flip side of domesticity), attitudes toward race and “civilization,” the tie between a vision of a unified continent and a cultivated wilderness, and republican values. She offers a new understanding of not only gender roles in the West but also the impulse for expansionism itself.

In Texas, Caughfield demonstrates, “women never stopped arriving with more fuel for the flames [of expansionism] as their families tried to find a place to settle down, some place with a little more room, where national destiny and personal dreams merged into a glorious whole.” In doing so, Texas women expanded not only American borders, but their own as well.

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