

**BY SNOWSHOE,
BUCKBOARD AND
STEAMER: WOMEN
OF THE FRONTIER**

Kathryn Bridge. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1998.

**BY DORINDA M.
STAHL**

By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer: Women of the Frontier details the challenges of four women as they embark on adventures from England to the Canadian West Coast. The book, which is comprised of letters, diaries and journals from the four featured women, is cleverly crafted in a way that allows for the women to tell their own stories.

The book is comprised of the writing of four individual women. The first section features the writing of Margaret Eliza Florence Askin Agassiz, who "came to the colonies as a child and lived at Hope and Yale before settling in the Fraser Valley." Her discussion reveals life as a nineteenth century pioneer. The second section, which highlights the letter writing of Eleanor Caroline Fellows, reveals much of the social life that was happening in Victoria at the turn of the century. Her writing includes a discussion on the post gold-rush era as well as the decline of the fur trade. The third chapter features Helen Kate Woods. Woods's journey to the New World is particularly interesting as she discusses her "snowshoe journey." This chapter reveals the difficult and unfriendly terrain of the New World. And finally, Violet Emily Sillitoe's stories revolve around her adventures, mostly social in nature, as she travelled with her husband, the first Bishop of New Westminster.

Undoubtedly, the four chapters, which all vary in style and content, provide the reader with a taste of life and an idea of what the frontier mean for women in the late 1800s. At first

there appears to be no connection between the stories, but editor Kathryn Bridge does a good job of methodologically connecting the pieces to provide an interesting tapestry that displays a variety of challenges encountered in a multitude of frontier environments. Although the specific challenges the women faced are different, it is quite clear, as Bridge suggests, that for all the women, the challenge of the frontier was "... a personal rather than a geographic one."

Two things in particular are working in the book. First is Bridge's introduction. Her detailed explanation of her approach and sources sets the stage quite nicely for the work to follow. Particularly impressive is the attention paid to colonial history. Whereas many historians have neglected this subject, Bridge has taken on colonial history (in social history format) head-on, realizing that in order to understand all history, a consideration of the social aspects of colonial history is necessary. As she says in her introduction, "The women were ... selected because their voices reflect different aspects of colonial history. Each of their accounts offers insight into the underpinning of native-white relations, inter-white relations and economic conditions, as well as communication and transportation activities."

The second positive aspect is the passages chosen by Bridge. Her editing has allowed clever and colourful pieces written by the four featured women, to shine through onto the pages. The writings Bridge has chosen support her mission, making it both easy to understand what life was like for these women, and to like and respect them.

However, this reviewer admits to a slight disappointment. Given the fact that Bridge begins the collection with a smart and concise introduction, I felt somewhat cheated that additional editorial comments were not provided throughout the piece. Although I understand her approach and wish to let the sources "speak for them-

selves," I cannot help but think that her collection would have been strengthened by subsequent analysis of the various subjects she touches on in her introduction.

Nevertheless, *By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer: Women of the Frontier* provides a missing link to Canadian history and joins several oft-separated genres of history together. Bridge's successful efforts at rediscovering and uncovering the social aspects of colonial history should be viewed as a model on which similar studies can be constructed.

**GLOBAL OBSCENITIES:
PATRIARCHY,
CAPITALISM, AND THE
LURE OF
CYBERFANTASY**

Zillah Eisenstein. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

**CRACKING THE
GENDER CODE: WHO
RULES THE WIRED
WORLD?**

Melanie Stewart Millar. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998.

**BY KRISTA
SCOTT-DIXON**

At times it is easy to feel smothered by the hype of what Millar calls "digital ideology." Technology, we are told, will lead us into the brave new world of cyberspace, an ethereal and utopic dimension where, eventually, all of our problems will be solved through mechanical magic. The rhetoric exclaims breathlessly that the future is now, progress is inevitable, and that we are all in danger of being left behind if we do

not acquire the correct machine, skill, or attitude. But what of the less entrancing corporeal reality of both discursive manipulation and physical exploitation? Both of these books critically address digital ideology and practice, focusing on how grand promises of cyberprogress actually obscure problematic relations of race, gender, citizenship, democracy, sexuality, labour, and most importantly, power.

Eisenstein's title provides us with a variety of entry points into her discussion. For example, if one takes the word "obscene" to refer to that which is off (*ob*) the stage (*scene*), then "obscenities" are things which are not allowed to be part of dominant ideological representation. In this sense, Eisenstein's project is to juxtapose the "on-scene" hype about cyberspace and the "ob-scene" reality of corporate control of everything from media to capital, occupational segregation and exploitation within industry, and systems of power which are cloaked by rhetoric of freedom and equality. In another way, Eisenstein's use of the words "obscenities" and "cyberfantasy" plays with our notions of what technological pleasure really consists of, and for whom this pleasure really exists.

Eisenstein begins by challenging current notions of the public-private dichotomy, arguing instead that our private lives have become public through the voyeurism of the media, while our public needs and services are increasingly put under private control of global corporations. New technologies such as e-mail and chatrooms allow us to substitute passive private reception of information for active public dialogue, despite the illusion that we are participating in liberatory exchange. Eisenstein argues instead for recognizing "the intersecting relationships" of power, privilege, and experience as fundamental to developing a democratic public sphere. Technology both obstructs and enhances possibilities for liberatory democracy; it reinforces cultural, racial, gender, and economic

inequalities while it also challenges them. "Herein," writes Eisenstein, "lies cyberspace's enticing and maddening paradox."

While Eisenstein's message and call to critique is significant, its clarity is hampered by stylistic concerns. Structurally, the book is chaotic, leaping from topic to topic with minimally apparent connections or internal logic. Eisenstein's staccato prose makes her writing seem didactic and reductionist. As a result, Eisenstein's critique lacks the coherency which is necessary for an analysis of this scale.

In contrast, Millar's work is refreshingly careful and clear. *Cracking the Gender Code* is a well-argued and documented analysis of digital discourse and ideology as presented by the popular technoculture magazine *Wired*. Millar grounds her work in current streams of thought on technology and women's places within it, as well as in concrete structural analysis of the publication. She argues that *Wired* represents a particular view of digital ideology that is sexist, racist, exclusionary, intolerant of difference, and above all focused on consumption of technological goods. Like Eisenstein, she proposes that "technoevangelism" obscures the promotion of large-scale socioeconomic change (largely in favour of global corporations), so that the possibility of challenge or alternative discourse is minimized. Engaging with what she calls "feminist politics of anticipation," Millar points out that most of this so-called "new" future relies on timeworn stereotypes and relations of power: poor women labour in electronics factories of the South so that affluent white men of the North (the primary demographic of *Wired's* readership) can indulge hypermasculine fantasies of warfare and control with video games like Duke Nukem.

Millar's analysis is compelling and fundamentally simple, requiring that we merely ask "for whom?" and "at what cost?" when we are confronted with hype about better living through technology. If cyberspace sets us free,

then why are technoculture and *Wired* obsessed with consumption and the worship of corporate elites? For whom is this vision of a shopping paradise really designed? And what are the very real consequences of pretending the physical body doesn't need to exist?

Though Eisenstein and Millar are not equally successful in their analysis, they both present compelling challenges to technohype. By demanding that the "real" continue to be as important as the simulacra, they articulate questions which are relevant to all future scholars, critics, and consumers of technology and its products.

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