

sponsors. These limited errors, however, do not diminish the excellence of this perceptive, original, and interpretive study of the western Indian frontier.

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind. Donald J. Berthrong

The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860. By Annette Kolodny. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. Pp. xix, 293. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$28.00; paperbound, \$9.95.)

On the morning of July 20, 1846, George Donner's party of eighty-two left the Oregon Trail to strike off on a wholly untried shortcut to California's paradise. They were pursuing a fantasy set down by Lansford Hastings, a speculator in human dreams whose *Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California* (1845) capitalized on generations of American mythologizing about the thrill of possessing virgin land. All but Tamsen Donner were "elated and in fine spirits" at their quickening fortunes. Tamsen was "gloomy, sad, and dispirited."¹ She could not shake her fear that, by abandoning the known road and the larger wagon train for a speculator's promise of easy going, her husband was making a terrible mistake. Caught straggling in the wilds four months later by early winter snows, thirty-five of the party died hideous deaths. Forty-seven survived, nourished in their gruesome mountain refuge by the flesh of the dead. For Tamsen Donner the disjunction between fantasy and experience was fatal.

Annette Kolodny, in *The Land before Her*, makes it possible to see Tamsen Donner's apprehensions as part of a rich legacy of women's fantasies, fears, and imaginary projections of the American frontier. Although Kolodny does not discuss the portentous conflict between Tamsen's rationality and George's adventurism, she does find in women's voices precisely the sensible fears of the unknown, the communal values, and the domesticating instincts that might have restrained such "American Adams" as George Donner in their reckless assault on the continental wilderness. The book begins with captivity narratives from the early woodland frontiers. Women held captive by Indians experienced paralyzing fear, sexual displacement, and despair in the wilderness, but almost never the seductions of the forest or heroic liberation

¹ The quotations are from the diary of Jessy Quinn Thornton, who had traveled with the Donners since Illinois but who stayed on the Oregon Trail. Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston, 1942), 315.

from civilization that characterized men's fantasies. Confronted with the raw environment, women consistently expressed their preference for gardens, for neighbors, for community. The middle chapters find women like Margaret Fuller and Caroline Kirkland publishing their own views on forest and prairie frontiers. The voices are ambivalent, simultaneously seeking new hope in the parklike grasslands and documenting the tragedies of women who endured isolation, endless labor, pregnancies, and child care in cramped cabins while their menfolk hunted, fished, and ravished the earth with ax and plow. The final chapters turn to a flowering of hopeful expression in the domestic novels of the 1850s. Severely restricted by the conventions of Victorian "domesticity," female authors seized upon the prairies as settings for feminine fantasies about communities purged of such historical fruits of man's aggression as industrial blight and black slavery.

Kolodny insists that her book is "neither social history nor literary history, but the sequence of fantasies through which generations of women came to know and act upon the westward-moving frontier" (p. xii). As an explication of previously unheard voices in American literature, it is a welcome gift. But Kolodny's subtitle and much of her argument promise connections, between these "paradigms" of the head (p. xii) and the historical landscapes of experience, that are never delivered. She links women's perceptions only to the act of composing literature, but the implied connection is to pioneering itself. She treats female expressions as literary triumphs precisely at the moment they lose touch with reality and begin projecting their own utopian (and life threatening) images of paradise. Thus, Tamsen Donner is quoted (p. 233) as one of a new generation of females participating for the first time in hopeful projections of frontier garden communities. But Tamsen Donner died in the High Sierra and was probably eaten by a male survivor; she was the most extraordinary victim of the continuing power and domination of reckless male fantasies of possession and conquest. Fantasy and experience are in savage discord, but readers are not told so. Instead, against this awful reality Kolodny sets the literary prediction that on the California and Oregon frontiers "Eve" would assert a garden "wholly her own" in which "Adam would become superfluous to the Homestead Eden" (p. 241). Kolodny's promise of another volume to bring the fantasy "full circle" does little to satisfy the reader's craving for conclusions to many provocative threads of her complex argument.

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind. John Lauritz Larson