

Life in Prairie Land

By Eliza W. Farnham. Introduction by John Hallwas

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Pp. xxxv, 269. Introduction, notes. \$19.95.)

Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land*, originally published in 1846, is a classic account of early settlements on the Illinois prairies. Increased scholarly interest in rural women's history and midwestern settlement makes the University of Illinois Press's reissue of the 1988 edition timely and welcome. Farnham, a New Yorker who lived in the Illinois Territory for about four years, reveals as much about herself as an eastern woman, steeped in the ideology of domesticity but troubled by inequities in patriarchal society, as she does about the nature of early nineteenth-century Illinois.

John Hallwas's introduction offers salient background on Farnham's post-Illinois career as a writer and reformer influenced by Transcendentalism, spiritualism, and ideas of female moral superiority. Hallwas also illustrates Farnham's method of setting up contrasts between nature as a beneficent garden and as a dangerous force, and between antithetical forms of human behavior. This useful introduction, however, was not revised for the 2003 edition and thus is not informed by recent scholarship on rural, women's, gender, or reform history.

Eliza Farnham, an opinionated observer, did not hesitate to mock some of those she encountered—especially “Kaintuckians” and “Hooshiers.” She presented dichotomous views of her sister Mary, a refined New Yorker and civilizer, and

Mary's neighbor from Kentucky whose family lived in squalor because of the “incapacity of the mistress of this family to appreciate a better condition, or help to create one” (p. 39). Women could either elevate society—their ascribed role—or they could degenerate in response to the harsh conditions.

Those interested in Indiana lore will relish Farnham's hilarious conversations with a “red-flanneled Hooshier.” Despite her depiction of an insensitive, chauvinistic lout, one detects in the Hoosier's remarks about his new wife the same practicality and pragmatism evident in letters and diaries of nineteenth-century Indiana farmers. Accused by Farnham of trapping his wife like a bird in a cage, the Hoosier replies that he “shouldn't make much account of havin' a bird in my cabin, but a good stout woman I should calculate was worth something. She can pay her way, and do a handsome thing besides, helpin' me on the farm” (p. 19). Farnham's efforts to enlighten him about treatment of women in “our country” are unavailing. Remarking that Yankees can treat women as they choose, he explains that he does not “think a woman's of much account anyhow, if she can't help herself a little and me too. If the Yankee woman was *raised up like the women here aar*, they'd cost a heap less and be worth more” (p. 22).

As she travels around the region, Farnham describes nature's glorious abundance as well as its destructive power; she ruminates on "the fraudulent precipitancy" with which settlers have sealed the fate of the area's Native Americans; and she explains her understanding of the reciprocity between the land and the people (p. 226). Death is a frequent presence in Farnham's account; during a two-week period in the summer of 1838, Farnham lost her sister and first-born child. Few accounts of children's deaths in nineteenth-century sources are rendered with as much emotional intensity. Elsewhere a father, absent to buy provisions, returns to find his home burned; encountering "perishing children, an infant corpse, a dying wife," he can only "curse . . . the

treacherous beauty that invited him there" (p. 184).

Despite such vivid glimpses of the harsh realities of prairie life, Farnham leaves little doubt about what she considers to be nature's ultimate "plan": prairie settlement, she proclaims, will reveal how "great, and good, and strong, is man when left to govern himself; free from want, from oppression, from ignorance, from fear!" (p. 268).

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*War Against the Weak
Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*
By Edwin Black

(New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003. Pp. xviii, 550. Illustrations, notes, major sources, index. \$27.00.)

The rise of the pseudoscience of eugenics and the sociopolitical use of its unproven theories form one of the darkest chapters in medical history. Edwin Black extensively reviews archival materials to document the connections between eugenics in the United States and the work of the German Nazis. He argues that flawed American research in the first three decades of the twentieth century provided an apparently rational cover for Hitler's deranged plans, and explores,

in the last two chapters, how the findings of modern genetics might well be misused today.

Eugenics in America combined a distortion of nineteenth-century scientific discoveries with the misinterpretation of sociological trends at the turn of the twentieth century. Darwin's theories opened new vistas on the natural world, biomedical and psychological research advanced, and Mendel's work defining inheritance of simple traits in plants was redis-