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# ‘The First by a Lady’: Eliza Farnham’s account of California (1856)

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## Abstract

This paper proposes to analyze the first book published by a woman migrant to California. By 1856, the year when California In-doors and out came out, its author, Eliza W. Farnham, was well-known for her involvement in prison reform (she became the first matron of Sing Sing women’s prison) and her book on Illinois (Life in Prairie Land, 1846). She was also the widow of Thomas Farnham, an author of several books on the West who had bought the land in Santa Cruz where Eliza and her children settled during the time of the Gold Rush. California In-doors and out offers a unique insight into the early phase of California’s settlement, as well as a complex narrative of personal adaptation to a new environment. Its vivid and at times humorous descriptions of agrarian life, embryonic political institutions, social relations and violence, are permeated with the spirit of Manifest Destiny. The book can indeed be read at once as an entertaining tale and a vibrant utopia picturing California as a rough land destined to become “the world’s nursery of freedom”. Yet, the deep originality of Farnham’s account lies in its gendered perspective. For Farnham was not simply a woman gone west; she was a feminist convinced of the spiritual superiority of the female sex. In order to finance her trip to California, she initially tried to set up a project inciting hundreds of poor and virtuous eastern women to migrate west and civilize the male dominated territories. The project failed, but Eliza Farnham moved to Santa Cruz, built her own farm, and called, through her book, for the feminization of California, without which the process of democratization could not take place. This paper will analyze Farnham’s book as an account of California worth examining along race, class and gender lines; special attention will be paid to the disrupted dialectics of public and private spaces which traditionally founded the cult of domesticity. The paper will also highlight the autobiographical dimension of the narrative as well as the budding theory that the author subsequently developed in a voluminous work aiming to demonstrate the absolute superiority of the female sex (Woman and her Era, 1864).

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