

Books

A VICTORIAN GENTLEWOMAN IN THE FAR WEST

The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote
Edited by Rodman W. Paul

The Huntington Library \$8.50

Reviewed by Ray Allen Billington

Thanks to Rodman W. Paul, Mary Hallock Foote may be more remembered by future generations for the revealing memoirs published for the first time in this handsome volume than for the short stories, novels, and illustrations that gained her modest fame at the turn of the century. Prepared late in her life for the eyes of her family and written in flowing prose marred only by a tendency toward Victorian effusiveness, they tell a fascinating, if tragic, tale of a talented woman forced to leave her beloved East to brave the discomforts of life in mining camps, to bear her three children amid primitive conditions, and to provide much of the income needed to sustain a husband congenitally incapable of translating dreams into a livelihood or catering to the whims of his employers.

Born in 1847 on a worn-out farm near Milton, New York, Mary Hallock studied art in New York, where she established lasting associations with the literary world before she married Arthur De Wint Foote, an ambitious young mining engineer who had largely trained himself for a glamorous new profession that promised a lucrative career in the West.

They settled first at New Almaden in California, one of the largest producers of quicksilver in the world, and there Mary produced her first child and her first stories—stories of “Mexican Camp” and of a company store where “the policy was frank extortion” and of anxious hours when her husband would vanish for days at a time into the deep tunnels.

What seemed a promising career ended when Arthur Foote suddenly resigned—there were, his wife wrote, many people “he couldn’t work for”—moved his family to Santa Cruz, and began a fruitless attempt to develop a new type of hydraulic cement for use in mine shafts. Only the paternalistic aid of his brother-in-law, James D. Hague, a successful mining engineer, rescued the family from that venture; Hague sent young Foote off to

Deadwood to investigate Black Hills mining properties for eastern investors while Mary fled eastward to her family.

That was the first of a series of moves: to Leadville in Colorado (where logs for their cabin cost a dollar each “and they were not very long logs either”), to Mexico where he worked in mines near Morelia, to Idaho to manage properties near Boise. In Idaho, Foote succumbed again to his visionary dreams, abandoning his profession to spend years on an irrigation project that collapsed when British capitalists tired of pouring money into a scheme that was a generation in advance of its time. Only Mary’s “potboiling,” as she called it, kept her little family together during those trying times.

Not until James Hague again came to their rescue with a chance for his brother-in-law to manage his North Star mine in California’s Grass Valley did their fortunes turn. This time Arthur Foote stayed on, using his considerable mechanical skills to turn the North Star into a profitable operation. For the next 30 years the Footes lived in Grass Valley, fairly com-

fortable despite his inability to resist expensive and unworkable ventures; most of his savings were squandered on an attempt to build a road into the High Sierra.

This is the story told by Mrs. Foote in her reminiscences, and a compelling story it is. She never really liked the West (“I love my West when I am in the East,” she once wrote), yet she was so fond of the soft, dry air, the riotous scenery, the vastness of the landscape, that neither was she happy when visiting the literary circles of New York for which she constantly longed. Nor did she merge into western society; the Foote’s friends were almost exclusively well-educated mining engineers of their own cultural level. With the ordinary folk they had nothing to do. Her memoirs, hence, shed little light on the frontier social order. They more than compensate for this lack with their magnificent descriptions of the countryside, their accounts of mining operations at New Almaden and Leadville, their word pictures of the lot of a cultured woman in Idaho’s Boise River Valley.

Rodman Paul has performed well beyond the call of duty in placing Mrs. Foote’s remembrances in a useful setting. His historical introduction is a model of compact writing, essential to understanding the story that follows. His editing, particularly in the identification of the many literary allusions, is unbelievably thorough; what labors went into locating the line “as the legs without a man” in William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785), or “joy in its mighty heart” in Kipling’s “The Conundrum of the Workshops”; what research was needed to explain such dated phrases as a “ha-ha fence,” “wearing the willow,” and “the softness of Baloo.” The Huntington Library has provided these efforts with a worthy setting by publishing a superbly designed volume, lavishly illustrated with family portraits and Mrs. Foote’s drawings, at a price that is today a remarkable bargain.



Rodman Paul

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