Narrating Imperial Adventure: Isabella Bird's Travels in the 19th c. American West

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Narrating Imperial Adventure

Isabella Bird’s Travels in the Nineteenth-Century American West

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Feminist historical geographies of the American West are just beginning to come into their own. Although Western women’s historians have been producing feminist scholarship about the region since the 1970s, only in the last decade or so have feminist historical geographers of the West begun producing a distinctive body of work. Their interests overlap those of other critical and “radical” geographies of the West, particularly in their critique of labor practices and relations, as well as complement the traditional arenas of the historical geography of the region—exploration and frontier expansion, settlement patterns and sequence, environmental change, and emerging urban and economic integration. Feminist topics of interest range widely, but one significant area of critique concerns tourism development in the region. Such works principally examine the ways that gendered differences situate women in feminized job categories at tourist sites and the ways that sociospatial forces position women materially and discursively as particular kinds of consumers of tourist sites and as producers of cultural knowledge about them, especially via written texts.

Simply writing women’s experiences into historical geography remains of primary concern to many scholars, whereas others demonstrate a more fundamental interest in the production of gender differences themselves and how they work within and through economic, political, cultural, and sexual differences in the creation of past geographies. This chapter is concerned with both of the important agendas appearing in new feminist work of the West—the need to vigilantly continue incorporating women’s voices, views, and activities into the past and the need to examine the ways in which gendered differences were produced within and through particular historical landscapes, places, and spatialities.

To these ends, in this chapter I consider the ways in which the renowned explorer Isabella L. Bird wrote about herself and her mountaineering experiences in the Colorado Rockies in her extraordinary volume, A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains (1879). My purpose is to show how Victorian gender relations and imperial geographies—both British and American—worked together to produce many “subject positions” in Bird’s writing about the American West, a place with very different historical exigencies than the colonial contexts under which much nineteenth-century British women’s travel literature was produced. I want to highlight the ways in which conventional as well as more transgressive discourses of Victorian womanhood worked with (but also occasionally against) imperialist, nationalistic, and class discourses in Bird’s text, to examine their links and interconnections. Bird negotiated place, “empire,” and womanhood in a range of ways in the Rocky Mountain environs, resulting in many complex subject positionings.

Isabella L. Bird (1831–1904) (Figure 8.1) needs little introduction to historiographers of Anglophone travel writing. She was the first woman elected to the prestigious Royal Geographical Society in London, in 1852, largely on the basis of her travels to India, the Middle East, and Tibet. Later she traveled to and wrote about Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and China, producing nine travel books in the course of her career. Bird is one of the most popularized of all British Victorian women travelers, and, with two books on the subject, she is certainly among the best-known and most studied of women travelers to North America.

Born in Yorkshire to an Anglican clergyman and a clergyman’s daughter, Bird had the background of a deeply religious, well-educated, and well-to-do Englishwoman. She first took up travel at age twenty-three, when she came to the United States at the recommendation of her doctor for her recurring back problems. From this journey Bird produced An Englishwoman in America (1856). She spent most of her early adult life caring for her parents. After their deaths she took her first solo trip abroad in 1871–1873, at age forty, to Hawaii (the Sandwich Islands) via Australia. She traveled through the United States on her return home, and it was during this trip that Bird explored the Estes Park region of Colorado for four months in the autumn and early winter of 1873 and produced A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains. This volume was originally written as letters to her sister, then appeared serially as “Letters from the Rocky Mountains” in the genteel English weekly Leisure
site of one of the principal tourist attractions of the region, the fourteen thousand-foot Pike’s Peak. (Bird herself focused more attention on nearby Long’s Peak, as discussed later.)

Colorado was also home to many wealthy British investors, titled remittance men, and retired colonels. Extensive investment opportunities, particularly in mining, cattle ranching, and railroad development, attracted British settlement and tourism.11 Historian Robert Atcham reports that Colorado “was almost an English reserve,” with one of every three ranches in Colorado in the later nineteenth century belonging to Englishmen. “Any capitalist could then come,” explains Atcham, “enjoy the delightful climate, and live comfortably” off his invested income that returned 10 to 15 percent on loans.12 British investments helped finance capitalist ventures such as the development of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad,13 which facilitated Colorado’s deepening entry into the global economy. And clearly, such expansionism into the region depended on drastic reductions in the Native American populations by warfare, disease, near extinction of the bison, and nearly complete alienation from their former lands through the reservation and then allotment process imposed by the U.S. government.14

Within the context of British imperialism outside the boundaries of its “formal” empire, and corresponding to leaping-and-bounding American expansionism in the West, Isabella Bird wrote about her rugged, outdoor life of 1870s Colorado. Much of the recent literature on the multifaceted and multipositioned figure of the Victorian “Englishwoman abroad” has focused on British women’s uneasy and complex relationships with colonialism and imperialism, especially in the ways in which imperial discourses on race, class, and nation combined with Victorian domestic ideologies in both the maintenance of feminine codes of behavior and conceptions of female liberation.15 However, little recent work has focused on the complex intersections between British imperialism and gendered subjectivity for “Englishwomen abroad” in the mountainous landscapes of the late nineteenth-century American West.

In the following discussion I identify the main tropes of mountain adventure in Bird’s writing, in what she wrote about both the indoor “domestic” spaces of the West as well as the outdoor, mountainous landscapes. I problematize notions of feminine codes of behavior, early “first wave” feminism, and convergences of these with imperial, national, and class discourses, as constituted within early foreign travel in the American West. In much of her A Lady’s Life, Bird represents herself as strengthened by the outdoors, overcoming or “conquering” her own frailty through arduous hiking or horseback
riding in difficult mountainous terrain. And yet Bird’s narrative also exhibits contradictory or paradoxical representations of herself as a gendered individual in those same environments, such as in expressing fear of danger and fatigue. It will become clear that in many ways Isabella Bird reinscribed herself as a feminine, domestic subject in her narrative; yet she also explored and contested the powerful inscriptions of domesticity that arose out of hegemonic (masculinist) versions of Victorian femininity. In so doing she articulated with, and thereby perhaps even can be seen to have reconstituted, hegemonic ideologies about femininity, domesticity, and more contestatory versions of Victorian womanhood in the American West.

Domestic Geographies of A Lady’s Life

A number of scholars have pointed out the extent to which British women travelers to the American West devoted considerable portions of their texts to detailing the quality of Western travel, accommodations, food, and clothing. Protestations over bad food and service clearly marked them as in need of servants to enact proper (English) domesticity, with the (apparently) servantless West inhibiting that. This trope was common in aristocratic and professional-class British women’s (and men’s) travel writing about the American West. However, more complicated ways in which gendered subjectivity intersected with domestic class relations can be read in Isabella Bird’s descriptions of establishing her own housekeeping in the mountains near Estes Park.

Early upon arrival in Colorado Bird stayed with a family named Chalmers while trying to organize an expedition to Estes Park. Holes in the roof of the cabin, unchinked logs, the absence of tables, beds, basins, towels, windows, lamps, or candles in her room and a litany of other deficiencies of the dwelling and property proved to Bird that Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers were ignorant, inept, and inefficient, even after nine years of attempted homesteading on their 160 acres. The Scotsman Chalmers frequently ridiculed the English, and Bird writes that he trusted “to live to see the downfall of the British monarchy and the disintegration of the empire.” Their lives were “moral, hard, unloving, unlively, unrelieved, unbeautified, [and] grinding.” Bird’s daily routine at their place consisted of drawing water from the river, sweeping, washing garments by hand (“taking care that there were no witnesses” to her inexperience, however), knitting, writing, and “various odds and ends which arise when one has to do all for oneself.”

Bird presents herself as equally at ease killing rattlesnakes outside the cabin as helping an emigrant who had just given birth. And in fact later in the text, at the home of her more refined neighbors, the Hugheses, she writes of helping out by baking bread, washing dishes, and working in the fields, although preferring “field work to the scouring of greasy pans and to the wash tub, and both to either sewing or writing.” In these and other excerpts, Bird portrayed herself as enjoying the “freedom” to perform domestic tasks to which she was unaccustomed, such as washing her own clothes. She was pleased with the log cabin she finally moved into alone, which she illustrated as her “home in the Rocky Mountains” (Figure 8.2). She claimed that “it is quite comfortable—in the fashion I like” and takes only “about five minutes to ‘do,’ and you could eat off the floor.”

A complex nexus of gendered subjectivities seems to be operating in these passages. Bird’s western displacement on one hand appears to offer her a sense of prideful self-sufficiency in the simple circumstances of the log cabin. Bird distances herself from the domestic realm in her descriptions of killing rattlesnakes, performing hard physical labor in the fields, and climbing mountains. But rather than casting off her domestic self altogether, to become a “heroic adventurer,” she represents herself as embracing the domestic tasks, which presumably her own servants normally performed at home, and becoming empowered by them. She enthused that, “I really need nothing more than this log cabin offers.”

Figure 8.2. This sketch of Bird’s cabin near Estes Park appeared in A Lady’s Life, 1879, p. 103. Reproduced courtesy of University of Oklahoma Press.
Although her narrative might begin to resemble a “tour” of the working class, at other points in her text Bird represents herself as unfamiliar with and unaccustomed to unpleasant domestic work. When she offered to wash some plates, Mrs. Chalmers replied that her hands “aint no good; never done nothing, I guess.” Then to her awkward daughter: “This woman says she’ll wash up! Ha! ha! look at her arms and hands!” Thus, although Bird enacts domesticity she simultaneously maintains her own version of true femininity by presenting herself as ill prepared and too delicate for work other than knitting, sewing, and writing, all of which were signifying practices of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Although Bird claims that her own hands are “very brown and coarse,” it is Mrs. Chalmers who frequently appears manly and with whom Bird contrasts herself: Mrs. Chalmers “is never idle for one minute, is severe and hard, and despises everything but work,” she reports. Mrs. Chalmers’s unceasing work and heavy manual labor do not approximate the role of proper bourgeois women embedded in English Victorian patriarchal discourse: Whereas bourgeois men were judged by their success at entering and competing in the commercial sphere, the women “proved” the success of their men by their idleness and leisure-time activities—enabled through the domestic labor that servants performed—which Bird herself carefully maintained by activities such as writing.

Rhetorically distanced from the manliness and hard labor of working women, Bird asserts that class distinctions, and servants, do not inhere in uncivilized places like Colorado. She submits that “I really need nothing more than this log cabin offers” but also contends that “elsewhere one must have a house and servants.” The mountainous dwellings of the American West provide, then, a venue for testing new forms of gendered subjectivity for Bird—forms that ultimately rest on highlighting national differences in the employment of proper class relations. And it must be noted that she ignores the extent to which the class structure and labor relations of the West, particularly in regard to the domestic labor of Chicanas in the mountainous West, differed little from her “ideal.”

“Plucky Nell” and the Useless Guide

As Isabella Bird narrated her outdoor excursions into the mountains, by foot and horseback, she drew on the rhetorics of emergent feminist empowerment, more conventional femininity, and British nationalism and imperialism. One literary device that Bird deployed was the signifying of a local guide on a mountain excursion as incompetent, and Bird, through the prized Victorian values of resourcefulness, perseverance, and intelligence, in some way saves herself and others from indeterminate ends. This trope resonated well with the Victorian literary heroine who, as long as she retained her purity and proper manners, could be admired for her fortitude in the face of adversity.

The Victorian adventure tale was a deeply gendered myth about a male hero who was courageous, strong, and persistent, who was in search of gold, land, or other “imperial dreams,” and who directly or indirectly promoted British overseas investment or emigration. Given the particular educational, religious, and administrative context of masculinities in Victorian Britain, colonial work itself was often constituted as an adventure for male colonial administrators, travelers, capitalist developers, or military officers. Although the identity politics of colonialism often involved adventure for men, it was not as available to colonial women, who were often discursively and materially placed within the domestic sphere and whose jobs were to articulate with and maintain proper British households in the colonies.

When elite British women such as Isabella Bird traveled to the American West, however, the context was quite different. British women traveled to the West as professional writers, tourists, and/or with husbands or male relatives who were involved in capitulative ventures with American entrepreneurs. This requires then a much different reading of the relationships between gendered subjectivities, adventure, and empire, specifically in the ways that transgressive feminist empowerment can be read as uniquely intersecting with other modalities of British imperialism.

Isabella Bird took the trope of the incompetent (male) guide to the extreme as she described a failed attempt to reach Estes Park guided by the “useless” Mr. Chalmers. An accomplished horsewoman, Bird wrote much of her text as a heroic adventure tale as she trail-blazed to mountaintops and other destinations despite blizzards, incompetent guides such as Chalmers, and logistical obstacles. In one section entitled, “Nameless Region, Rocky Mountains,” Bird describes her couple of days’ frustration following Chalmers through the St. Vrain Canyon in search of Estes Park. She complains that, after immediately getting lost after lunch on the first day,

For four weary hours we searched hither and thither along every indentation of the ground which might be supposed to slope towards the Big Thompson River, which we knew had to be forded. Still, as the quest grew more tedious, Long’s Peak stood before us as a landmark in purple glory . . . Chalmers, who had started confident, bumptious, blatant, was ever becoming more bewildered, and his wife’s thin voice more piping and disinconcerted, and my stumbling horse more insecure, and I more determined (as I am at this moment) that somehow or other I would reach that blue hollow, and even stand on Long’s Peak where...
the snow was glittering. Affairs were becoming serious, and Chalmers' incompetence a source of real peril.10

They and their horses and mules eventually fell into a gulch, mistakenly having followed a bear trail. Recovering from that, and with no remaining provisions, Chalmers, his wife, and Bird camped out the night. In the morning, to her horror, all the horses had escaped because, according to Bird, they had been improperly secured by Chalmers the night before. In resignation, Bird reported that they finally decided to return home and, dejected, wrote that "we never reached Estes Park." In what she represents as a "last resort," Bird demanded control of the doomed expedition:

Vainly I pointed out to him that we were going north-east when we should have gone south-west, and that we were ascending instead of descending. . . . He then confessed that he was lost, and that he could not find his way back. His wife sat down on the ground and cried bitterly. We ate some dry bread, and then I said I had had much experience in traveling, and would take the control of the party, which was agreed to, and began the long descent.11

Bird probably did have more traveling experience at this stage of her life than Chalmers, and it might also be argued that travelers had access to some resources that local people did not, such as maps. However, Bird would not likely have depended upon Chalmers had she known the route to Estes Park. In the end she compares her own (superior) knowledge of mountaineering to that of a local (man), and by stressing the failings of others (Chalmers and his wife) in comparison to her own leadership abilities and mental toughness, she guarantees her own heroine status in the narrative.

Many scholars of British women's travel writing have noted the extent to which many women travelers represented themselves as women undertaking particular activities, especially transgressive ones.12 The trope of women's heroic adventures challenged and transgressed dominant ideologies of gender roles and relations. Privileged women emphasizing attributes of courage, strength, and persistence directly challenged ideologies of self-sacrificing, duty-bound Victorian mothers and wives. In that sense they helped redefine the terms of the Victorian adventure tale itself, and often without relinquishing their femininity to do so.13 Isabella Bird actively created space for women outside of the domestic sphere, in this case, in the mountains of Colorado, reconstituting where bourgeois women might feel "at home." As she portrayed outdoor Rocky Mountain landscapes as a plausible destination for women, one might also read her narrative as extending British influence—a particularly progressive form of women's advancement—in Colorado. And, of course, encouraging British mountaineering in the region advanced American development as well. Furthermore, because Colorado was already home to many British immigrants and investors, her additional "mappings," particularly in successful and "heroic" narratives, may have reinscribed it as an appropriate place for British assistance in American empire building, especially in mining, cattle, and railroad enterprises.14

The "Conquest" of Long's Peak

Such as it is, Estes Park is mine. It is unsurveyed, "no man's land," and mine by right of love, appropriation, and appreciation; by the seizure of its peerless sunrises and sunsets, its glorious afterglow, its blazing noons, its hurricanes sharp and furious, its wild auroras, its glories of mountain and forest, of canyon, lake, and river, and the stereotyping them all in my memory.

Isabella Bird, writing about Estes Park for the first time in A Lady's Life,16 often seemed concerned to defy Victorian femininity by portraying herself as strengthened by rugged mountainous environments, as an independent, adventurous woman heroically "conquering" the destinations of her travels. And yet she also, paradoxically perhaps, emphasized what some scholars have recognized as specifically feminine aspects of travel writing,17 such as in downplaying the adventurousness of her mountaineering adventures, complaining about how emotionally or physically difficult they had become, and in representing herself as passive, weak, and in need of men's help. This ambiguity is played out most significantly in A Lady's Life within the narrative trope of "conquest" of mountain peaks.

One of the principal excursions Bird describes was her ascent of Long's Peak, the summit of which is along the North American Continental Divide. This excursion also served as the peak literary moment in the narrative overall. She was accompanied by "Rocky Mountain Jim" and two student trappers.18 Her description of the panoramic view from the "nearly 15,000"-foot summit (Figure 8.3) contains many of the markers of heroic achievement:

at last the Peak was won. . . . From the summit were seen in unrivaled combination all the views which had rejoiced our eyes during the ascent. It was something at last to stand upon . . . this lonely sentinel of the Rocky Range, on one of the mightiest of the vertebræ of the backbone of the North American continent, and to see the waters start for both oceans.19

This description seems to illustrate what Mary Louise Pratt argues is one of the most distinguishing features of "imperialistic" Victorian travel writ-
ing,” that is, what she terms the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” trope. To Pratt, this trope described peak moments at which geographical “discoveries” were “won” for England. In this “discourse of discovery,” the imperial travel writer conquered the landscape and heroically claimed dominion and authority over it. Pratt characterizes the monarch-of-all-I-survey trope as deeply gendered masculine, whereby male explorers were able to render “momentously significant what is, especially from a narrative point of view, practically a non-event”—with the help of local guides “you pretend to conquer” what they already knew and thus convert local knowledge into “European national and continental knowledges—and relations of power.” Following Pratt, Sara Mills adds that the very act of describing a panoramic scene is also mastering or colonizing it. What is actually just a passive experience of “seeing” becomes momentous when the traveler brings the information home, puts it on a map, and lectures to Sunday afternoon geographical society meetings.

Although Pratt claims that promontory descriptions are very common in romantic and Victorian writing of all kinds, women do not spend a lot of time on promontories, “nor are they entitled to,” because the masculine heroic discourse of discovery is not readily available to women. Nevertheless, Isabella Bird does seem to have re-created such peak “imperial” moments in her narrative—claiming mastery and ownership of Estes Park—for home audiences in much the same way as [many] male travel writers did, and in a context very unlike the colonial settings of much British travel writing. With greater attention to the complexities of gendered subtextuality than Pratt, Mills and Alison Blunt argue that peak imperial moments do occur in women’s travel writing, but because particular kinds of ambivalences about gender inherent in them, ambivalence toward imperialism itself is produced in the narratives. Blunt’s very different reading of Mary Kingsley’s landscape descriptions of West Africa serves as a useful example. Blunt reads Mary Kingsley’s ascent of Mount Cameroon as marking her within the patriarchal and imperial tradition of exploration, but also outside of it. Because Kingsley could appreciate the value of a view obstructed by mist, her position in relation to the landscape ultimately . . . is esthetic, not “strategic” or resting on a relationship of domination.

That Isabella Bird’s “heroic” voice could be undermined by a feminine discourse simultaneously available to her seems evident. She made her way to the top of Long’s Peak guided by Jim Nugent and in fact roped to him; she describes him “dragging” her up the mountain “like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle.” “I am only humiliated by my success,” she claimed. On the way down the mountain Bird followed Jim, so that his “powerful shoulders” could help steady her. In contrast to Mr. Chalmers, Jim is an intelligent and necessary guide to Bird’s discoveries and achievements. Throughout the climb Bird’s narrative voice was uncertain as she admitted to experiencing fear, danger, and especially fatigue and exhaustion. She wrote about crowning most of the way down the mountain, losing courage and strength and finally, on approach of the horses, wrote that

With great difficulty and much assistance I recrossed the lava beds, was carried to the horse and lifted upon him, and when we reached the camping ground I was lifted off him, and laid on the ground wrapped up in blankets, a humiliating termination of a great exploit.

Obviously, Bird’s admissions of frailty do not fit within the heroic discourse of discovery or adventure. Or do they?

Although women writers arguably had special access to the “feminine” discursive spaces of cowardice, mistakes, and defeat in the face of danger, it must be noted that men, too, described the suffering, fatigue, danger, and even death involved in exploration and adventure. Both women and men, by accentuating the difficulties connected with their achievements, in a sense improved upon them. Overcoming obstacles made the achievement that much more heroic and proved how much personal credit was due them in managing the ascent or discovery. Thus, in addition to the stock requisite features of Western travel narratives—evidence of dramatic feats of engineering and “exotic” animals and people—one might include imaginings of the West itself as a place of danger for women. Thus, Bird’s emphasis on danger shores up her own courage, strength, and toughness while creating points of interest in her narrative.

In addition, for women especially, mountaineering permitted a particular form of mental control over the body. Bird’s collapsing on the way down Long’s Peak illustrated the physical demands of the ascent, especially significant because she traveled to escape her spinal complaints (which seemed to surface only when she was at home). This type of willed control of the body to perform exceptional deeds contrasts with a more traditionally feminine way of controlling the body, through sickness, anorexia, neurasthenia, or even through wearing corsets. The medical discourses of the Victorian period, which “proved” women’s weaker bodily structure and their resulting limited intellectual capacities, feminized suffering itself, to the extent that overcoming suffering through arduous mountaineering might have had more discursive purchase for women climbers than men climbers.

Thus, Bird’s achieving a grand view and claiming Estes Park as her “own”
may be best analyzed as a mastering of the self rather than of Estes Park. In the context of travel in the American empire, Isabella Bird's claim that "Estes Park is mine—by love, appropriation, and appreciation" more than anything else seems to mark Bird's emotional attachment to place and conquest of her own frailty. Bird frequently located herself emotionally within Rocky Mountain landscapes. At another point in her narrative she described her horseback ride from the St. Vrain Canyon to Longmont, Colorado, through a snowstorm:

It was simply fearful. It was twilight from the thick snow, and I faced a furious east wind loaded with fine, hard-frozen crystals which literally made my face bleed. I could only see a very short distance anywhere; the drifts were often two feet deep. . . . I had wrapped up my face, but the sharp, hard snowbeat on my eyes—the only exposed part—bringing tears into them, which froze and closed up my eyelids at once. You cannot imagine what that was. I had to take off one glove to pick one eye open, for as the other the snowbat so savagely against it that I left it frozen, and drew over it the double piece of flannel which protected my face. I could hardly keep the other open by picking the ice from it constantly with my numb fingers. . . . It was truly awful at the time.17

Bird’s triumph over adversity seems to constitute a position of self-empowerment here, which contrasts greatly with both British imperial conquest of place and the image of the “angel in the house” Victorian matron. In this passage Bird emphasizes her pain and suffering but most of all her own endurance. It is her eye that is picking open, which again calls to mind Bird’s health problems and a newfound sense of self-control over her body in the Rocky Mountains.

Bird’s experiences in the American West, then, might be read as signifying an emotive attachment to place and/or personal empowerment through rugged physical exercise and the overcoming of fear. Tropes of British imperial conquest may be present in her text, but they are not largely cast in the empire-building terms of “domination over” the land (or people). It seems important, then, to acknowledge that the mountainous West enabled a particular kind of relationship to the landscape for Isabella Bird, perhaps in some way complementary to those described by Annette Kolodny.18 I have not been concerned here with landscape description per se, but it seems clear that a study of gendered subjectivity appearing in imperial discourse, through or outside of landscape description, obviously cannot proceed without close attention to geographical context.

A much different reading of the imperial tropes of adventure and empire emerges from Isabella Bird’s A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains. The West appears in her narrative as a sometimes dangerous place for women and one lacking in more civilized modes of behavior, accommodation, and so forth, tropes that are nonetheless necessary for her to enact transgressive modes of gendered subjectivity. “There’s nothing Western folk admit so much as pluck in a woman,” she declares.19 The West serves her as the site of expansive roles for women, usurping, perhaps, Britain’s hegemonic role in advancing feminist causes,20 while again proving its own lack of civilization in the process.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the importance of the epistemic and critical context through which we frame our understandings of exploration and tourism development of the American West—enduring issues raised within the disciplinary context of historical geography. Studying the travel writings of women such as Isabella Bird places in sharp relief the patriarchal, imperial, and capitalistic incentives that worked together, albeit in very different ways, to support both men’s and women’s journeys to the region in the late nineteenth century.

In this chapter I have explored several ways in which the American West served Isabella Bird as a site for aligning herself with conventional bourgeois femininity but also more transgressive forms of gendered subjectivity. In several ways Bird collaborated in and reinforced the ideological work of British imperialism, especially in its nation- and class-based ideologies and rhetorics, and yet her expressions of self-empowerment are unlike the familiar tropes of colonial and imperial discourses.

Bird’s text resonates well with late nineteenth-century female liberation and self-empowerment. She advanced into the public sphere, traveling, hiking and mountaineering, writing and publishing books, and so forth. How such modalities of self-empowerment and self-improvement worked through the impulses of empire in the American West is an important question, especially in the ways that such rhetorics articulated with class and national identity. Not surprisingly, the signifying practices of the Victorian bourgeoisie remain at the forefront of her narrative. Writing and sketching (Figure 8.1 is a portrait of Isabella Bird; Figures 8.2–8.3 are her own illustrations) and embracing and taking pleasure in domestic tasks that servants normally performed at home all helped align her with both a superior English identity and genteel femininity. And certainly her mountain excursions lend themselves to an analysis of the gendering of British adventure stories and their specific
relationships to empire, especially outside of the context of more “formal” colonial settings. Bird helped rewrite the terms of the Victorian adventure tale, but on her own terms; she asserted her genteel femininity by counterpoising herself against the more active and adventurous Jim Nugent, but at the same time reconstituted where white British bourgeois women might feel at home in the American mountains—even to the extent of guiding the unlucky Mr. Chalmers out of dangerous situations. Although Bird did not explicitly position herself as a feminist, she effectively championed new social spaces for traveling bourgeois women, marking in personal ways the transformative effects of travel and mountaineering. And importantly, such narratives of adventure articulated well with a growing American tourism industry that catered to such privileged international travelers.

![Image](Fig. 8.3. Bird's sketch of her panoramic view from the Continental Divide, from A Lady's Life, 1879, p. 175. Reproduced courtesy of University of Oklahoma Press.)

**Notes**


later, however, and immediately returned to her traveling life. Although she produced nine popular and well-received travel books, she insisted that "health and pleasure" were her purposes in travel, as well as raising money for missionary hospitals along her routes; see Birkett, Spinster Abroad, 276–377; Boorstin, "Introduction," xx; quote appears in Birkett, Spinster Abroad, 31.


12. Ahearn, Westward the Briton, 118, 120.


17. Bird, A Lady's Life, 45.

18. Ibid., 46.
41. Ibid., 201–202.
42. Mills, Discourses of Difference, 78–79; also see Kearns, "The Imperial Subject," 457–459.
43. Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 213.
47. Ibid., 100.
54. Burton, Burdens of History.

PART 3
THE WEST AS VISIONARY PLACE

What we will see in these essays is that the myth of the West is composed of equal parts fact and fiction, and that it depends on both for its durability.

—CHRIS BRUCE