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(review)

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***This Wild Spirit: Women in the Rocky Mountains of Canada.*
Edited by Colleen Skidmore.**

Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2006. 475 pages, Can.\$34.95.

Reviewed by Carmen Pearson
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Romantic myth or truth? The West has been and still is a place to escape from who you have been, to become the person you never would have been if you had stayed put. The West is a place without limitations.

“Ever westering...”—we think of rugged pioneers, trappers, cowboys, outlaws, dreamers, and schemers. But do we think of genteel women from the East, braced with sketchbooks and compasses, eagerly seeking to be the first to summit a peak in the Canadian Rockies? To discover a hidden lake? To identify a rock formation? To map an unknown valley? To be the first white woman to speak and befriend an aboriginal family? Most likely not. But these women came and did all those things, and Colleen Skidmore’s unique new collection chronicles their experiences and observations—in their own voices. Some of these women just visited the Canadian Rockies and some made it their home; but to all who came, whether for a brief summer trip or for the rest of their lives, a single word consistently echoes through their recorded experiences, and that word is *wild*. This was a wild previously unknown to these women, their time, and their experiences. Although these women came mostly in the luxurious trains that rode the newly laid tracks of the Canadian Pacific and sometimes dined in the splendor of the opulent Banff Springs Hotel, their joy and the lure that infected them was but a few footsteps past the coddling of the Victorian-inspired world of colonial Canada.

“Somehow when this wild spirit enters the blood ... I can’t wait to be off again,” exclaimed Mary Vaux Walcott, after her first visit to the Canadian Rockies in 1887 (210). Walcott was what today would be called an amateur botanist, glaciologist, painter, photographer, and mountaineer. However, given the absence of experts in the newly opened Canadian West, the word *amateur* did not tarnish her name nor diminish her enthusiasm or her professionalism in pursuing her interests in her beloved Rockies. Walcott’s spirit and multi-faceted nature is representative of many of the women featured in Skidmore’s collection whose writing inspired its title. For instance, Quaker Philadelphian-turned-Canadian resident Mary Schäffer (most famous for her 1911 book *Old Indian Trails of the Canadian Rockies* and for mapping out the area around Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park), when considering and planning for one of the

first pack trips by a white woman into a section of the Canadian Rockies, wrote:

There are few women who do not know their privileges and how to use them, yet there are times when the horizon seems restricted, and we seemed to have reached that horizon, and the limit of all endurance,—and to sit with folded hands and listen calmly to the stories of the hills we so longed to see, the hills which had lured and beckoned us for years before this long list of men had ever set foot in this country. ... Then we ... said: “Why not, we can starve as well as they [men]; the muskeg will be no softer for us than them ...” and so we planned a trip. (297)

This spirit of adventure, defiance, and appreciation for a landscape big enough to bury the pain and limitations of the past and to birth new dreams and trails inspired Walcott and Schäffer and drew these and many other talented women to the Rockies in the early years of the twentieth century. *This Wild Spirit* brings together many of their previously unpublished impressions, letters, essays, entries from diaries, artwork, and historical material from public and private archives.

The collection reflects Skidmore’s own postmodern sensibilities and professional interests. As a professor of art history, design, and culture at the University of Alberta, Skidmore includes (as difficult as the translation to written text is) records of artwork, handicrafts, and forms of cultural expression beyond the written word. Skidmore divides the text into six sections with the following subtitles: Taking a Deep Interest (Métis and Aboriginal Women), Being a Woman, I Wanted to Tell about Them (Literary Travelers), Free among the Everlasting Hills (Botanists and Brides), At Civilization’s Limits (Exploring Women), On the Rockies Stark (Mountaineers), and Wild and Solitary and Beautiful (Mountain Culture/Mountain Wilderness). Although many of the records of the Métis and aboriginal women are secondhand—told through the voices of white women—Skidmore takes pains to highlight the influences and inspiration these females had on the living and lasting culture of the Canadian Rockies and on their white visitors. By doing so, she encourages future scholars to pursue further research into all these women’s lives and cultural output.

This Wild Spirit offers new insights into the complexity of the female experience in the West and should be of interest to readers searching for newly unearthed voices and experiences in the North American West.