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Unfortunate Emigrants

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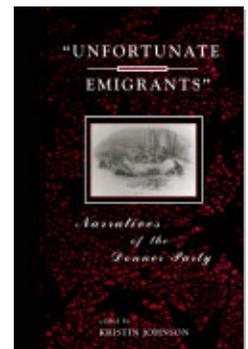
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ELIZA W. FARNHAM (1815–1864)

Eliza Woodson Burhans was born November 17, 1815 in Rensselaerville, New York. As a result of her unhappy childhood she resolved to dedicate her life to reducing misery in the world. Throughout her life she took an active interest in various social causes, writing and lecturing on such subjects as prison reform, phrenology, and the role of women. She maintained that the latter are morally and biologically superior to men and urged women to develop intellectual interests to further their high calling, motherhood. Her feminism was sincere but limited: she also believed that mundane physical tasks and public affairs (including voting) should be left to men. She served as the matron of several institutions where her advocacy of enlightened reforms sometimes led to conflict. She also labored as a nurse during the Civil War. In the midst of her many activities she found time to write five books and edit a sixth.

In 1836 Eliza Burhans married Thomas Jefferson Farnham, a lawyer who later became known for his writings on Oregon and California. Thomas Farnham died in California in 1848 and his widow traveled west the following year to see to his estate, taking her two sons with her. A firm believer in the civilizing influence of females, Eliza Farnham had advertised for young women to accompany her to the wilds of California, where their presence would be “the surest check upon many of the evils that are apprehended there.” Only three “migrating ladies” accompanied her, however.

Once in California, Farnham settled her husband’s affairs and farmed in the Santa Cruz Valley on a ranch she named La Libertad, tackling the many unaccustomed chores of frontier life with energy and courage, though not always with good sense. She married William Fitzpatrick in 1852 but divorced him four years later, after which she went back to New York. She traveled to California again in 1859 but after three years returned once more to New York, where she died of tuberculosis on December 15, 1864.

The Text

In 1851 Farnham began a book about her California experiences which was published five years later as *California, In-Doors and Out*. It contains a 108-page appendix about the Donner party, based on interviews with survivors. It is not certain when the interviews took place—some may have been as early as 1849—or when the narrative was actually written. Farnham names as informants John and Margaret Breen; her “Miss G.” can only have been Mary Ann Graves. There was at least one other, another member of the Forlorn Hope, whose contribution seems to have been minor.

True to her ideals, Farnham stresses an aspect of the Donner tragedy which continues to intrigue readers—the role of women. From 1847 to the present writers have noted that the women of the Donner party held up better than the men, a fact which Farnham attributes to women’s moral superiority and self-sacrificing love of others. She uses the Donner disaster to demonstrate her thesis.

Like Thornton, Farnham is overly emotional and relies on a limited number of informants; like Wise, she repeats rumors as facts. The single greatest problem with her account, however, is its lack of precision. The dearth of such hard data as names, dates, and places leads to the garbling of some incidents. In her defense, however, it should be remembered that Farnham was a social reformer, not a historian, and gave only as much information as she needed to support her argument. Unfortunately, Farnham seems to have accepted that information uncritically; there is no evidence that she attempted to verify it.

Despite its faults, Farnham’s account becomes comprehensible and useful, once one identifies the principals. Her narrative differs significantly in tone from Thornton’s. She omits the invented conversations and much of the melodrama so evident in the earlier account, and she only mentions in passing scenes upon which Thornton dwells. These differences reflect not only the personalities, agendas, and interviewing styles of the two writers but also the passage of time: by the 1850s the details of the disaster were not as fresh in the survivors’ minds and they did not have as much need to talk about it as had Thornton’s informants some years earlier.

California, In-doors and Out also contains information not found elsewhere: particulars of the Graves family’s journey before they joined the Donner party, a description of events at Starved Camp after the Second Relief had to abandon most of their charges there, an early account by John Breen which differs somewhat from one he wrote for H. H. Bancroft decades later, and the only statement we have by Margaret Breen. Like Eddy’s statement to Thornton and Trudeau’s to Wise, Mrs. Breen’s statement to Farnham is self-serving. She emerges as a heroine—generous, resourceful, pious, resolute—a perfect demonstration of Farnham’s thesis.

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Thornton had portrayed the Breens unsympathetically, which probably accounts for Margaret Breen's exaggerations to Farnham. Whether or to what extent Farnham may have been responsible for the overstatement is impossible to prove.

In addition to the first edition of 1856, lengthy extracts of Farnham's narrative appeared in McGlashan's *History of the Donner Party*, parts of which were then reprinted in *History of San Benito County, California* (1881). A facsimile edition of Farnham's book was published by B. de Graaf in 1972; it also contains a biography of the author. The present text omits the first eight pages of the appendix in which Farnham expounds her philosophy.