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Isabella Bird and Mountain Jim: Geography and Gender Boundaries in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*

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<1> “He is a man whom any woman might love but no sane woman would marry . . . He is so loveable and fascinating, yet so terrible” (Chubbock 175). Thus, intriguingly, writes Isabella Bird, a middle-class Englishwoman in her forties, of Rocky Mountain Jim, a notorious desperado, in a letter to her sister in the winter of 1873 from Colorado. During her stay in the Rockies, if we can believe her accounts, she rode hundreds of miles alone on her borrowed pony, Birdie, defying bears, snakes, the extreme cold, a fall through ice, and avoiding a place where the gruesome results of an Indian war still lay strewn on the ground. She had spent a day rounding up cattle and had lived with two bachelors in a log cabin in Estes Park. She would ride astride her horse until she came within a mile of Denver, when she would put on her skirt and ride sidesaddle in deference to Victorian convention.

<2> As has been noted by many critics, Bird’s account of her visit to the Rocky Mountains and her relationship with the “desperado,” Mountain Jim, in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), transgresses the Victorian boundaries erected around notions of gender, sickness, and sexuality, as well as the conventions of the New World travel writing genre. In her account of her quest to reach Estes Park, a high plateau in the Rockies, and her ascent of Long’s Peak, Bird builds her narrative around a phallus-rich, metaphorical landscape in which she transcends geographic boundaries and overcomes physical obstacles. I would argue that Bird’s use of this metaphorical landscape and an allegorical hero not only blurs the lines between fact and fiction, but enables her to escape societal and moral restrictions, as well as narrative ones. “I have found more than ever I dared to hope for,” she claims on reaching Estes Park (82).

<3> Bird and her sister Henrietta, both single women, had lived a quiet life in Scotland, but Isabella was very sickly, and started travelling for her health. She became probably the nineteenth-century’s most traveled woman, her destinations including Japan, the Malay Peninsula, India, Tibet, Korea, China, Persia, Kurdistan, and Canada. And in 1891, she became the first woman ever elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

<4> But her adventures in Colorado came fairly early on in her travelling career. After spending some time in Hawaii, where she found relief from the various ailments that had plagued her at home, she visited San Francisco and then Colorado. Kay Chubbock suggests that the illness she constantly suffered from when in Britain was carbuncle, a staphylococcus skin infection, and Olive Checkland has theorized that her illness was caused in part by medical treatment. For example, she wore an uncomfortable steel brace on her neck, supposedly to relieve the pain in her back after several spine operations, she was bled regularly by leeches or incisions, she took laudanum and chlorodyne and drank a great deal of alcohol prescribed to help her nerves. And the list goes on. So that while it is easy to equate her relief from illness with her escape from the oppressive Victorian restrictions on middle-class women, assuming psychosomatic sources for her symptoms may be a somewhat simplistic view. Whatever the facts of the matter, it is clear that in her writing, like many female travel writers before her, Bird intends to escape the restraints of illness and propriety which controlled middle-class Victorian women’s behavior.

<5> Women’s accounts of their travels to the United States in the nineteenth century, such as Fanny Trollope’s, adhere to a set of conventions, as do those of the male writers. Visits to certain sites such as Niagara Falls, remarks on the “domestic manners” and critiques of the “low” culture and bad behavior that the great democratic “experiment” had engendered, were expected to appear in these travel books. Bird avoids this paradigm. While her book is ostensibly a reprint of her letters to her sister, her travel narrative has been shaped to resemble a quest romance—this time, with a female hero. Bird does follow the female travel writing conventions in that she takes pains, at some points, to emphasize her domestic abilities and values: she remarks priggishly in

her narrative

I have seen a great deal of the roughest class of men both on sea and land during the last two years, and the more important I think the 'mission' of every quiet, refined, self-respecting woman—the more mistaken I think those who would forfeit it by noisy self-assertion, masculinity, or fastness. In all this wild West the influence of woman is second only in its benefits to the influence of religion, and where the last unhappily does not exist the first continually exerts its restraining power. (240-41)

Yet in her writing, Bird glories in recounting her feats of daring, being housed in primitive Western towns full of desperate men, and sleeping in quarters full of male belongings. She brags at being seen as a good cattleman because she rides as well as the men, and even being mistaken for Mountain Jim in women's clothes. She has long ago left behind at the beginning of her journey and her narrative any notion that the self she constructs is the ideal Victorian woman. In fact, the character Bird constructs of herself in the narrative bends gender expectations, and pushes boundaries in surprising and unexpected ways.

<6> Bird had seen Long's Peak on first arriving in Estes Park "rising above [the other peaks] in unapproachable grandeur" (81), and she had been determined to take it on. Fairly soon after, Bird ascends Long's Peak alone with Mountain Jim, the two students who accompanied them having had difficulty breathing in the rarefied air and turned back. Despite her bragging of physical feats and shows of courage elsewhere in her narrative, the difficulty of the climb to Long's Peak seems to have mastered Bird. She writes: "'Jim' dragged me up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle" (94).

<7> Bird's narrative voice plays coyly with notions of sexuality and threats to her "quiet, refined, self-respecting" person. But there is a suggestion of a more than a campfire closeness with Mountain Jim that, while yet unspoken by the narration, leaps out of the page—not accidentally, I would argue. Rather than the "king of all I survey" approach that Mary Louise Pratt assigns to colonial travelers, the Bird's-eye view from Long's Peak is one that sees beyond the societal boundaries and illness that have, in the past, restricted Bird's movements. "It is one of the noblest of mountains," she writes, "but in one's imagination it grows to be much more than a mountain" (83), and, it is this "more than a mountain" aspect of her ascent of Long's Peak on which I would like to focus.

<8> The ride to Long's Peak with Mountain Jim had begun with Bird commenting on his dress: "'Jim' was a shocking figure," she writes (85). And she goes on: "from under [his hat] his tawny, neglected ringlets hung; and with his one eye, his one long spur, his knife in his belt, his revolver in his waistcoat pocket, his saddle covered with an old beaver skin, from which the paws hung down . . . his rifle laid across the saddle in front of him, and his axe . . . he was as awful-looking a ruffian as one could see" (85). But not only is Jim in this description an "awful-looking ruffian," someone with whom a nice, middle-aged Victorian lady should not be seen, and should definitely not entrust with her safety in this isolated region, but he is also bristling with phallic shapes. Yet Bird insists on his chivalry throughout her narrative. On their ride to Long's Peak she describes him as having a "grace of manner which soon made me forget his appearance" (85). She goes on: "'Treat Jim as a gentleman and you'll find him one,' I had been told; and though his manner was certainly bolder and freer than that of gentlemen generally. . . He was very courteous and even kind to me" (89). Bird walks a fine line here—an earlier description of leading her horse along a narrow ledge that skirted a drop of hundreds of feet could stand as a metaphor for the situation she finds herself in with Mountain Jim. The admonition to treat Jim as a gentleman of course protects Bird from any suggestion that *she* has behaved as anything but a lady. Yet her claim that while courteous and kind, his manner is "bolder and freer" than the average gentleman, suggests the danger of the situation in which she has placed herself—she could "fall" at any moment.

<9> That Jim has coaxed her up to the Peak can, of course, be read metaphorically. Bird writes: "'Jim' always said that there was no danger, that there was only a short bad bit ahead, and that I should go up even if he carried me!" (96). She goes on: "As we crept from the ledge round a horn of rock I beheld what made me perfectly sick and dizzy to look at—the terminal Peak itself—a smooth, cracked . . . wall of pink granite, as nearly perpendicular as anything could well be" (97). And after reaching the peak, her euphoria is palpable: "It was something at last to stand upon the storm-rent crown of this lonely sentinel of the Rocky Range, on one of the mightiest of the vertebrae of the backbone of the North American continent, and to see the waters start for both oceans. Unlifted above love and hate and storms of passion, calm amidst the eternal silences

both oceans. Uplifted above love and hate and storms of passion, calm amidst the eternal snows, fanned by zephyrs and bathed in living blue, peace rested for that one bright day on the Peak” (98).

<10> After the success of the ascent, she describes Jim’s behavior as though he is a character in a sensation novel: “[he] had parted from his *brusquerie* when we parted from the students, and was gentle and considerate beyond anything” (99). As they descend, Jim carries her to her horse, and lifts her off the horse when they arrive at the camp. Wrapping her in blankets, he lays her down to sleep by the campfire. She wakes in the night and the two sit talking by the fire. She writes: “Ring [Jim’s dog] lay on one side of me with his fine head on my arm, and his master sat smoking, with the fire lighting up the handsome side of his face, and except for the tones of our voices and an occasional crackle and splutter as a pine knot blazed up, there was no sound on the mountain side” (101). The sense of isolation, the physical closeness suggested by the dog with his head on her arm, and the fact that the master sits smoking, is all too obviously post coital.

<11> What I am arguing here, then, is that despite Bird’s presentation of her account of her travels in the Rockies as letters to her sister Henrietta, and despite the apparent spontaneity of these letters, they have not only been edited, but shaped into a quest narrative, one that includes a metaphorical landscape and an allegorical hero. Jim himself is, in a sense a walking metaphor of whom her host in Estes Park supposedly said: “When he’s sober Jim’s a perfect gentleman; but when he’s had liquor he’s the most awful ruffian in Colorado” (80). Bird suggests that rumors abounded about Jim’s exploits, and everyone agreed that when he had one of his “ugly fits,” he would as soon shoot you as look at you. Yet Bird continues to insist that he is chivalrous to women, a sparkling conversationalist and has a literary bent. Researchers since have discredited the stories that Bird tells of Jim, suggesting that while a historical figure, he was not the romantic hero Bird describes. Here is her description of him when they first meet:

His face was remarkable. He is a man about forty-five and must have been strikingly handsome. He has large grey-blue eyes, deeply set, with well-marked eyebrows, a handsome aquiline nose, and a very handsome mouth. His face was smooth shaven except for a dense mustache and imperial. Tawny hair, in thin uncared-for curls, fell from under his hunter’s cap and over his collar. One eye was entirely gone, and the loss made one side of the face repulsive, while the other might have been modeled in marble. “Desperado” was written in large letters all over him. . . . We entered into conversation, and as he spoke I forgot both his reputation and appearance, for his manner was that of a chivalrous gentleman, his accent refined, and his language easy and elegant. (79)

Jim, then, is a Janus. The two sides of his face—one repulsive and blind, the other extraordinarily handsome—represent the two sides of his personality. And while Janus was the god in Roman mythology who was the guardian of doors and gates, Jim had, in Bird’s words, “located [his cabin] at the mouth of the only entrance to [Estes] park” (80), a clear indication that Bird is playing with fictionality in her travel writing. As Susan Bassnett argues, “it is impossible not to recognize the fictionalizing process that she is engaged in throughout her book” (234). And as Bassnett further notes, “there is an evident tension between this process of self-fictionalising and the travel writer’s claims to veracity” (234).

<12> A brief comparison of Bird’s letters as published in *Letters to Henrietta* in 2002 with those she published in the *Leisure Hour Magazine* in 1878, and then in book form as *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* in 1879, suggests just how much editing and shaping went on for publication in her travel narrative. For one thing, on the day she rides out with Jim and hears his life story, the name of a canyon changes from Fall River Canyon to Black Canyon, a much more suitable name for a place in which such revelations occur. In the letters published after her death, she admits that Jim has confessed his love for her, but this admission is left out of *A Lady’s Life*. She admits in the letters to her sister that she dreamed that Jim came to the cabin, revolver in hand, and shot her—a dream which some might want to interpret sexually, and which she saw fit to excise from *A Lady’s Life*. But there is, of course, no guarantee that what she originally wrote to her sister back in Scotland, is any more factual than the “letters” in *A Lady’s Life*. She knew her letters would be seen or heard by several other pairs of eyes and ears when her sister would read them aloud or pass them along to friends. And, according to Chubbuck, she organized the existing copies of her letters before she died, editing some and destroying others, so the letters that Chubbuck uses have also been screened by Bird.

<13> To argue, then, that Bird has embellished her adventures, and more importantly, used the

<13> To argue, then, that Bird has embellished her adventures, and more importantly used the landscape not only to increase the impact of her narrative, but to allow her narrative to go beyond what otherwise would have been possible for a nineteenth-century woman writer, is not too far fetched. Descriptions of current editions of *A Lady's Life* describe it as “A classic account of a truly astounding journey,” and, Daniel J. Boorstin, who wrote the introduction for the University of Oklahoma Press edition uses such phrases as Bird “reported,” or “carefully noted.” In other words, while it seems clear that, as with any travel writing, Bird’s book blurs the boundaries between the fictional and the factual, her book continues to be read as simply a report of what occurred.

<14> Even the most doggedly British and gender-bound traveling ladies such as Fanny Trollope, escaped the restrictions of Victorian domestic ideals through travel. And critics have suggested that the journey itself is a metaphor, one which represents the personal journey of exploration and discovery. Yet even the most daring lady travellers, such as Mary Kingsley in her accounts of her African adventures, are confined by their need to be taken seriously as women writers and to appear *not* to exceed the bounds of propriety. But for many a nineteenth-century woman traveler, unlike their male counterparts, the journey’s dangers are sexual dangers. Bonnie Frederick and Virginia Hyde have noted the implied sexual ramifications for a woman on a journey highlighted by the titles assigned to studies of women travelers. Examples are, *Ladies on the Loose: Women Travellers of the 18th and 19th Century*, or *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers*. Yet in some measure, nineteenth-century ladies who traveled alone, or as in the case of Fanny Trollope with men who were not their husbands, willingly opened themselves up to sexual speculation if not sexual dangers—and in the nineteenth century this pretty much amounted to the same thing. It has become a commonplace of criticism of nineteenth-century lady travellers that they sought and exalted in the freedom they found on the road, a freedom they were unable to find at home. So what place does this sexual danger play in that seeking after freedom? In Bird’s case it is not at all clear where the facts lie and whether or not she courted that sexual danger. But for me the facts are not the issue. Her travel narrative certainly exploits the sense of sexual danger and the possibility of crossing the bounds of propriety. But in so doing is she insisting on her virginal status, or reflecting the sexual danger always present for nineteenth-century middle-class women—even at home? Or, what seems more likely, is she embracing the possibility of experiencing, at least in her narrative, the sexual freedom unthinkable in Victorian society. Bird’s metaphorical use of landscape to shape her narrative enables her to push and cross these boundaries that have to do with both narrative restrictions and Victorian society’s expectations, opening up new territory for women’s New World travel writing.

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