

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

108

Volume 108

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
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Mary Hallock Foote

1847–1938

American short story writer, novelist, diarist, and illustrator.

INTRODUCTION

A local-color writer as well known in her day for her illustrations as for her prose, Foote was often grouped with other Western writers such as Owen Wister and Bret Harte and was well received by reviewers and the public. Her work was largely ignored by later critics, however, until 1971, when Wallace Stegner used Foote's sources for his novel *Angle of Repose*, precipitating a revival in Foote criticism. Novels by Foote such as *The Led-Horse Claim* (1883) and *The Desert and the Sown* (1902) and stories like "In Exile" (1881) and "A Cloud on the Mountain" (1885) emphasize women's reactions to the Western experience.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mary Hallock was born on a farm near Milton, New York, on November 19, 1847, a daughter of Quaker parents. Her later writing was influenced by the relative seclusion in which her dissenting family lived. A talented artist, Mary was educated at the Cooper Institute School of Design for Women in New York City. There she broadened both her knowledge and her social connections, forming a particularly useful friendship with Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *Scribner's Monthly* and later *Century Illustrated Magazine*. Gilder helped her to publish her first illustrations and writings and remained her most important mentor for many years to come. In 1876, she married Arthur De Wint Foote, a mining engineer who took her West with him to California, South Dakota, Colorado, and Idaho. Mary turned to writing as a respite from frequent domestic upheavals and Arthur's unpredictable income, finding an eager audience among easterners for the new literature of the West. Foote wrote a number of stories and novels during the 1880s but slowed her literary production late in the decade in order to cope with a growing family and Arthur's alcohol abuse. After one of many of Arthur's business failures, she again began producing what she called "potboilers" in the 1890s in order to supplement the family's income. When Arthur finally settled into a more prosperous period in California, she turned again to more serious novel-writing. After enjoying considerable popularity during her lifetime, Mary died on 25 June 1938 at the age of ninety-one, leaving a considerable legacy of writings which explored her own unique vision of America and the West in her time.

MAJOR WORKS

Although Foote was influenced by Western writer Owen Wister, she did not share his idealized version of the Western past. In one of her first short stories, "In Exile," Foote explores one of her frequent themes, the ways in which both marriage and the West itself prove confining to women. Serialized in *Century Magazine*, her first novel, *The Led-Horse Claim*, is romantic in its plot structure but presents a realistic picture of life in a frontier mining town, a frequently used Foote setting. She also used a frontier setting for her novels *John Bodewin's Testimony* (1886), *The Chosen Valley* (1892), and *Coeur d'Alene* (1894). Her short story "A Cloud on the Mountain" melodramatically explores the tragic possibilities of the Western experience. A number of her stories, such as "The Rapture of Hetty" (1891) and "The Watchman" (1893), were transparent attempts to make money in a hurry. Her own frustrations with the circumscribed life she led in the West were mirrored in her 1902 novel *The Desert and the Sown*. After producing another novel, *The Prodigal*, and two short story collections in the early 1900s, she was too grief-stricken to write for several years after her daughter's death in 1904. In two later novels, *The Royal Americans* (1910) and *A Picked Company* (1912), she switches from strictly local-color writing to more sweeping historical romance. In *Edith Bonham* (1917), Foote pays tribute to her friend Helena de Kay Gilder, wife of Richard Watson Gilder. Foote's autobiography did not appear until 1972, when it was published under the title *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*, after being used as a source by Stegner.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Early critics received Foote enthusiastically as one of several new chroniclers of the Western experience. Although Foote never reached the status of other local-color and realistic writers such as Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries she was quite popular, partly because of her own illustrations of her work and also because her work was most often serialized in popular magazines. After a long period of neglect, Foote's writing again gained attention when Stegner used a great deal of her unpublished material for *Angle of Repose* in 1971. Many critics failed to note Stegner's debt to Foote, but his novel did reawaken interest in her work. Foote's *Victorian Gentlewoman* and several monographs and full-length, biographical-critical studies of Foote were produced during the 1970s and 1980s. Critics in this period emphasized her realistic portraits of the West, despite

her flair for plot twists and melodrama, as well as her sophisticated treatment of themes associated with Westward migration. Later critics pointed to Foote's important analyses of women's reactions to the West and praised her subtlety in portraying the ambivalences inherent in the Western experience.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Led-Horse Claim: A Romance of a Mining Camp* (novel) 1883
John Bodewin's Testimony (novel) 1886
The Last Assembly Ball: and, The Fate of a Voice (novel and short story) 1889
The Chosen Valley (novel) 1892
Coeur d'Alene (novel) 1894
In Exile, and Other Stories (short stories) 1894
The Cup of Trembling, and Other Stories (short stories) 1895
The Little Fig-Tree Stories (juvenilia) 1899
The Prodigal (novel) 1900
The Desert and the Sown (novel) 1902
A Touch of Sun and Other Stories (short stories) 1903
The Royal Americans (novel) 1910
A Picked Company (novel) 1912
The Valley Road (novel) 1915
Edith Bonham (novel) 1917
The Ground-Swell (novel) 1919
A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote (reminiscences) 1972
The Idaho Stories and Far West Illustrations of Mary Hallock Foote (short stories and illustrations) 1988

CRITICISM

Wallace Stegner (essay date 1958)

SOURCE: "Mary Hallock Foote: How the Pump Stopped at the Morning Watch," in *Selected American Prose, 1841-1900: The Realistic Movement*, edited by Wallace Stegner, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958, pp. 116-19.

[In the following essay from his collection of American realistic stories, Stegner provides an introduction to Foote's short story, "How the Pump Stopped at the Morning Watch," with particular attention to Foote's sources.]

Editor's Note: Mary Hallock Foote was both writer and illustrator, and the fact that her husband, Arthur Foote, was a mining engineer gave her unprecedented opportunities to observe at first hand the life of a series of mining camps in the West: New Almaden, in California; Leadville, in Colorado; Boise and Coeur d'Alene, in Idaho; and finally

Grass Valley, in the Sierra Nevada. Her writings reflect all of them—the only serious writing after Bret Harte to deal with mining-camp society, and virtually the only serious fiction which has dealt with the camps from intimate knowledge.

The present story was published in *Century Magazine* in June, 1899, but I saw it first in a typed, hand-sewn, and hand-bound copy which Mrs. Foote had made as an intimate childhood gift for her granddaughter, Mrs. Tyler Micoeau of Grass Valley. It was written sometime between October, 1896, and its publication date in 1899, and is included in this collection partly because it is one of Mrs. Foote's better stories, and shorter than most; and partly because, in the Foote papers now in the Stanford University Library, there are three letters to Helena DeKay Gilder which indicate part of the process by which mining-camp fact was transmuted into fiction. The letters reveal Mrs. Foote's painstaking intention to get the facts right—to deal fairly with the real life of the mines—and also her concern to get behind the facts to what she called the "human element," the significance of facts for people, the meaning of events in human terms.

The first of the three letters, for which I am indebted to Mr. George McMurry, is dated from Grass Valley, October 16, 1896. It speaks of Mrs. Foote's difficulty in getting the "feel" of this new place, so "stern and concentrated," so different from the raw newness of Idaho, from which she had just come. Then it summarizes what would later become the central incident of "How the Pump Stopped":

There was a tragedy in the mine the other day. John Thomas, an Englishman, who had been pump-man at the North Star for many years, was killed in the shaft. The first I knew of it Clemmo, the gardener, came to the kitchen door asking for an umbrella: "Any old one will do." Then he explained that the pump-man had been hurt and he wanted the umbrella to hold over him as they were carrying him home. I made the useless enquiries that one makes, and the useless offers: then I saw them carrying the old man by the house, on a mattress, six men, and Clemmo holding the umbrella over the head. His arms were bare to the elbow and crossed on his breast, and white in the sun as bleached bones—His head was wrapped in something red, and his profile was majestic in its endurance and its pallor—and its age. The age of toil.

The North Star Mine Shaft is an incline shaft 2000 feet deep and more. There is a series of pumps worked by one pump rod and the pump-man has a most important trust—on the pumps depend the life of the mine. They think that this man, for some time, has not been quite right in his head. He used to come out above ground, the men say, "between shifts," and seemed dazed and not sure of where he was. . . . No one spoke of this, for fear it might lose him his place; and they were not certain of his symptoms: but now it is thought that he did not know what he was doing when he came out into the hoisting shaft, and an empty car struck him going down, and dragged him a hundred feet.

We went to his funeral . . . Arthur and Captain Glewas (Capt. of the Mine) walked with the procession of min-

ers. They followed him from his house to the church—hundreds of men—with the strong old country faces all Cornish or *English* (they make the distinction) pale from years underground. “You men who go down into the Mines, take Christ with you!” said the clergyman. “You do not know what day you may be going to your death—Take Christ with you!”

The singing was most thrilling. The men’s voices, and the pure voices of the girls—very simple words—but a great volume of sound, and such sincerity. This, and two other Western funerals stand out in my mind . . . General Vinton’s at Leadville—John Sherman’s in Boise—though *mind* isn’t the word for that—and this old man killed at his post—because his long years of service in the depths of the mine had strained his faculties. . . .

The second letter, dated February 7, 1897, reports the second event on which the story would finally be built—the stopping of the pump. It did not occur in precisely the way the story has it occur, and in the difference may be observed something of how fiction, even realistic fiction, may legitimately warp history and fact to arrive at a human truth larger than the factual truth.

We have had a catastrophe at the North Star. The great spur wheel that drives the pump broke, three days ago, with a sound like the explosion of a magazine. The pump is old and the iron had crystalized. The pump rod is one half mile long! descending the incline Shaft (Main Shaft) and driving six or seven pumps at different stations, down to the 2000 foot level. All these pumps are stopped now, and the water is rising in the lower levels. Arthur is in San Francisco, attending to the casting of a new wheel. . . .

The events of those two letters, recombined and given a relationship that in fact they did not have, gave Mrs. Foote the stuff of her story. The third letter makes it clear that the material continued to be recalcitrant, that shape and meaning were hard to come at, and that for all her attempts at understanding and sympathy she found the “Cousin Jacks” difficult people to like. It may have been this difficulty, which she ultimately ignored entirely in order to get the story written, which persuaded her not to publish it: she may have felt it a failure, down “in the same rut with all the other new Western and Mining stories.” This third letter is dated January 3, 1898, close to two years after the first.

. . . I have to soak things in long and silently before I can make any fit use of them. There is material here, but it requires strong and original handling—else it will go into the same rut with all the other new Western and Mining stories . . . and there are enough of them.

I haven’t got down to the human element here, yet. It is difficult to do so, for there is a different race, first, to comprehend. The Cornish are a peculiar people—and the second generation has taken a start and changed the type and made it still less to be taken for granted.

The worst is they are a false people—and to write of them one could hardly leave out their timidity and pro-

pensity to underhandedness, but one must deal with them largely, not on local or personal lines.

Get a big strong theme first, that will sweep along the personal and local elements and fuse them into a homogeneous talk that will not suggest Grass Valley, or anywhere—I haven’t been long enough in Grass Valley to get outside of Grass Valley. . . .

James H. Maguire (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: A review of *A Victorian Gentlewomen in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, in *Western American Literature*, 1972, pp. 81-3.

[In the following essay, Maguire reviews Rodman W. Paul’s edited version of Foote’s reminiscences, *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*.]

Most of us hope that the writers of our region can find some way to escape from the burden of all the debased myths of the West created and nurtured in pulp fiction, on T.V., and in the movies. Perhaps unconsciously we fear that the myths might be true, that the early West might have been after all that land of good guys and bad guys, of Injuns and cowboys, of melodrama and bathos which appears every time we turn on the tube. Such fears may explain the considerable attention given recently to Mary Hallock Foote, an early writer of the American West. Her life served as the model, in part, for Wallace Stegner’s *Angel of Repose* (1971); last spring Richard W. Etulain’s bibliographical essay on Mrs. Foote appeared in *American Literary Realism*; and my own study of her life and work was issued last fall as the second pamphlet in BSC’s Western Writers Series. Now, Rodman W. Paul’s superb new edition of Mrs. Foote’s reminiscences makes clear the reason that this woman and her work suddenly seem important subjects for consideration.

In his introduction, Paul explains why this renewed interest seems justified:

Because Mary Hallock Foote was such an unusual person to settle in the West, the story of her career as wife, mother, artist, and writer challenges many of the stereotypes of western history and raises provocative if sometimes unanswerable questions

(p. 1)

Paul says that she was “an unusual person to settle in the West,” because, when she married Arthur D. Foote (a young mining engineer who brought her to the West), her background was so solidly Eastern. She was born into an old Quaker family that lived near the little town of Milton close to the Hudson River. Her training as an artist/illustrator at the Cooper Union School of Design and her close friendship with Helena DeKay Gilder, wife of *The Century’s* editor, had assured her of a promising career in New York. She left the East, but did not give up her career. She continued to do illustrations for books, and she

began to write novels while moving with Arthur from the mines of California, Colorado, and Mexico to the irrigation projects of Idaho. By the turn of the century, she was called "the dean of women illustrators"; and her books—most of them printed serially in *The Century* before they appeared in book form—drew praise from the very people they portrayed, the miners and engineers of the West.

Though Mrs. Foote's talent as a writer did not approach that of Twain, James, or Howells, she still gave in her fiction a clear view of her Western experience. Unfortunately, as Paul points out, what she saw of the West was limited to only those aspects of life that her husband Arthur thought she should see. She used her limited experience to good advantage, giving the reader a strong impression of her honesty (a trait that Stegner noted fifteen years ago). In addition, she was one of the few women of her time to describe in fiction what it meant to be a woman in the West of the late 1800s. Yet, as the narrator says in *Angle of Repose*, the Footes' "life depended on continuities, contacts, connections, friendships, and blood relationships. Contrary to the myth, the West was not made entirely by pioneers who had thrown everything away but an ax and a gun" (p. 41). In her novels, the characters lead lives very similar to the lives of Mary and Arthur Foote. In spite of occasional touches of melodrama, an element of realism pervades her works, a feeling for life "in the light of common day."

Mrs. Foote's realistic vision clearly marks her reminiscences; and her mature style makes the reading smooth and interesting. It is also a pleasure to read a book that has been so well edited. Paul's careful and extensive research shows through in his well-written, thorough introduction and in the numerous necessary footnotes. A useful bibliographical essay and a discussion of the text and illustrations make this edition a model of its kind. The Huntington Library had the book printed on paper of high quality and set in a nice style of type; even the cover and the end papers are striking.

Such a fine book will surely be read; and I hope that such a reading will give us back a part of our past; together with *Angle of Repose*, it should do just that. I hope, too, that some publisher will reprint in paperback some of Mrs. Foote's works; *Edith Bonham*, *The Groundswell*, and many of her stories are at least as significant and often better written than some paperbacks in print by such of her contemporaries as Albion Tourgee, John Hay, E. N. Westcott, and Paul Leicester Ford. Even if the Eastern publishers continue to ignore her work, *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* should give us a more complete sense of our heritage.

Lee Ann Johnson (essay date 1980)

SOURCE: "Apprenticeship: New Almaden and Santa Cruz," in *Mary Hallock Foote*, Twayne Publishers, 1980, pp. 27-37, 49-55, 79-84, 117-23, 155-58.

[In the following excerpts from her full-length biographical and critical study of Foote, Johnson discusses the ways in which Foote's life in the West influenced her early writing; evaluates her first novel *The Led-Horse Claim*, her more mature novels *The Chosen Valley* and *The Desert and the Sown*, and her historical romance *The Royal Americans*; and provides an overall assessment of Foote's importance in American literary history.]

FOOTE'S EARLY WESTERN WRITINGS

Frontier is a beautiful word, full of history and romance. To the young men of all the generations it has been a challenge and a lure. The East was East, in my time, and the West was the Far West; and the frontier meant placer gold and lumber and wheat and of course land—all you could grasp and hold. It meant "go West, young man." The young man lead and the woman followed—around the horn, across the Isthmus, by the covered wagon trail.¹

Thus wrote Mary Hallock Foote when she was nearing eighty years old, romancing the long journey thousands of easterners had taken during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As the twenty-eight-year-old bride of a California engineer, she had followed her young man, crossing the continent in seven days via train and stagecoach. "Home," once she joined Arthur in July 1876, was the small mining community of New Almaden, California, located some fifty miles southeast of San Francisco. The town of 1,000 was, as Mary quickly perceived, rigidly stratified according to social class: the professional geologists and engineers, along with the administrators of the mines, formed the upper echelon. To this group Arthur belonged by virtue of his position as resident engineer of the large New Almaden Quicksilver Mine. The next stratum was formed by the Cornish miners, followed by the Mexican miners and then by the Chinese laborers.

While the Footes chose to cultivate few friends in New Almaden, the community's proximity to San Francisco made it possible for them to form a close, lasting relationship with their relatives in the city, James and Mary Foote Hague. Hague, who had secured for Arthur the New Almaden position, was one of the most influential mining consultants in the West, and he aided his brother-in-law's career by introducing him to his own distinguished friends and colleagues. Likewise, Mary Hague ministered discreetly yet sympathetically to Mary Hallock Foote's initial needs, attempting to ease the shock of transplantation. As Mrs. Hague shrewdly observed apropos her sister-in-law, "Plant a wild-flower that has grown up under the shelter of New England rocks and woods out in the midst of a glaring, level valley in California, and it will either change its nature or die—either way the poor flower is very much bewildered."²

Mary Hallock Foote's introduction to western living was a large, one-room redwood-lined cabin atop a hill in the Santa Clara valley, with her only companion the servant girl who doubled as a model for her drawings. Arthur

rarely was home, even for dinner, because he worked long, grueling hours at the mine. "What he called interesting," Mary later recalled,³ "was to breakfast by candlelight at 3:00 A.M. and go underground and remain there, stooping at a transit in low dark drifts, till after midnight of the following night, a twenty-hour shift, and crawl home nearly blind with eyestrain, and call it a day." Left largely to her own resources, Mary Hallock Foote tried to stave off homesickness by making preparations for the arrival of her first child, due in April, and by dedicating herself to her art.

Her resultant drawings for Longfellow's *The Skeleton in Armor*, a ballad of Norse life, solidly established her credentials as an artist of male figures and evidenced unmistakable growth. Her greatest artistic achievement of this period, however, was her series of illustrations for a gift-book edition of *The Scarlet Letter*. The girl who early had been filled with awe by the writings of Hawthorne was, within the space of a few years, enhancing his talent with her own and winning him new readers. Howells, in an enthusiastic review of the Hawthorne edition, praised Foote as "the artist who perhaps unites more fine qualities than any other," and claimed that one particular illustration was "as yet quite unapproached in power by anything in American illustrative art."⁴

When not occupied with her commissioned drawings, Foote frequently entertained herself and her eastern friends with informal sketches and descriptions of the "strange, dear, horrid little place" she temporarily called home. Helena and Richard, receiving many of her lively letters, responded with an enthusiasm born not only of close friendship but also of discerning literary judgment. After suggesting that Mary prepare for Scribner's some illustrations of New Almaden with an accompanying article, they were not daunted by her modest demur. They fashioned from her letters an essay which Mary revised,⁵ and Gilder published it in 1878, heralding the beginning of Foote's career as an author-illustrator of the West.

"A California Mining Camp" is a first-person account of those aspects of New Almaden which Mary Hallock Foote assumed would be picturesque to her eastern readers. It is not the Cornish camp or even the Chinese settlement which receives attention, but rather the Mexican population. Attracted and repulsed by their languid manner, the author offers interesting, brief sketches of the life led by the Mexican miners, woodpackers, bread deliverers, junk dealers—and by their women and children. These figures seem to blend into the natural setting provided by the New Almaden landscape and to accept unquestioningly the relentless dry season which baffles the narrator.

Foote's ambivalence toward her material is evident in the tone of the article:

Toward the close of the dry season, when brown and dusty August burns into browner, dustier September, a keen remembrance of all cool, watery joys takes possession of one's thoughts. The lapping of ripples in

pebbly coves, the steady thump of oars in row-locks, the smell of apple blossoms on damp spring evenings, old millraces mossy and dripping, the bleating of frightened lambs at a sheep-washing and the hoarse, stifled complaint of their mothers mingled with the rushing of the stream,—all these once common sounds and sights haunt the memory. Every day the dust-cloud grows thicker in the valley, the mountains fade almost out of sight against a sky which is all glare without color; a dry wind searches over the bare, brown hills for any lingering drop of moisture the sun may have left there; but morning and evening still keep a spell which makes one forget the burden of the day.⁶

The nostalgic remembrance of apple blossoms and of bleating lambs contrasts with the ominous description of the western landscape. The mountains convey "the same feeling, whether dark with cloud-shadows or gorgeous in sunlight, the sense of a silent irresistible fate—waiting there, patient, un pitying, eternal." Drawn as it is from private letters written during her first prolonged absence from Milton, the essay reflects what Helena Gilder later termed "the difficulty of the daughter of the soil, whose people for generations had lived in and loved the river country of the East, to adapt herself to her new surroundings." It represents, in short, Foote's first literary confrontation with the West.

The New Almaden experience lasted little more than a year for Mary; in September 1877 Arthur resigned his position in favor of accepting free-lance engineering assignments out of San Francisco. The Footes determined that Mary, with their four-month-old son, Arthur Burling Foote, should move to a boarding house in Santa Cruz, a coastal town southwest of New Almaden where families could live inexpensively. Arthur, when time and money permitted, joined them on weekends.

For Mary, the Santa Cruz stay proved emotionally draining: "I did a good deal of . . . [waiting] that winter, sitting on the bench and watching the 'vacant smiling seas.'" Her letters to Helena during this time recount frankly her discontentment with the West. At one point she confided,

We have planned our future in the crazy ways people do "when hope looks true and all the pulses glow." Ten years on this coast and then *home*. Is ten years an eternity? . . . [W]ill we be Western and "brag" about this glorious country—and the general superiority of half civilized over civilized societies? That sounds bitter. There are such good people here but I *can't* care for them. I am too old to be transplanted. The part of me which friendship and society claim must wait or perish in the waiting. The part of me which my work claims will plod on in a dogged way. If I do anything worthwhile it will be because of the encouragement I get. There is very little joy in it. . . .⁸

During this period it proved fortunate that Mary's work "plodded" so successfully—*The Scarlet Letter* illustrations alone netted \$600—because the months following the move from New Almaden were not lucrative for Arthur. Though the money Mary earned was by mutual consent