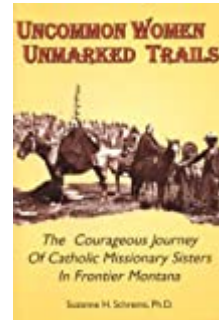


Suzanne H. Schrems. *Uncommon Women, Unmarked Trails: The Courageous Journey of Catholic Missionary Sisters in Frontier Montana.* Norman: Horse Creek Publications, 2003. x + 118 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9722217-0-2.



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The Trail to Heaven

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The prominence of the word “trails” in this book’s title and in the chapter headings indicates Sue Schrems’s intention to write “New Western History.”[1] And her book is decidedly *new* in its focus on two orders of Catholic nuns who were the first women to work with Native American children in Montana.

Schrems, a historian and free lance writer who lives in Norman, Oklahoma, states that the genesis of her book was in 1978, when she visited with the Ursuline Nuns at their convent in Ohio. Over lunch, she heard the nuns comment proudly on the nineteenth-century Ursulines who had volunteered as missionaries to educate Native Americans in Montana. Many years later, in researching the role of women in the development of the American West, Schrems discovered that the Jesuit fathers dominated the literature on Catholic missions in the Northwest. They seldom mentioned the nuns in their many histories, even though they had relied on religious women to perform numerous education and domestic functions at their missions.

To correct this omission in part, Schrems set about investigating the work of the Ursulines and Sisters of Providence in Montana, the first to establish schools at Jesuit missions. Schrems’s primary sources were the letters and manuscripts of the pioneer nuns who had volunteered for missionary service in Montana, which she found in the archives of convents across the country.

Unfortunately, Schrems’s book is also decidedly Old Western History in many ways. She refers to “frontier Montana” and the bringing of “civilization” to the Native Americans, for example, reflecting the traditional ethnocentric view of the conquest. Further, Schrems seems to take a sanguine view of the suffering that these women imposed on the Native American children in their deliberate attempt to divest them of attachment to their native cultures.

Schrems expresses none of the indignation that we find in works like *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* or *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on the California Indians*. [2] On the contrary, she professes admiration for these “courageous” women, as

evidenced in such sentences as the following: "On reservations in Montana, the Sisters of Providence and the Ursuline Nuns experienced hardship, sacrifice, and poverty, all requirements for leading an exemplary life" (p. 7). "The Ursuline Nuns continued to educate Cheyenne children no matter how difficult the environment or how small the school attendance" (p. 93). "The dangers inherent to the frontier did not phase [*sic*] the sisters. Their attitude seemed to be that they really were only serving God if they were deprived of the comforts [of] hearth and home" (p. 98).

After an introductory chapter, the book has three chapters that focus on missionary activities at the St. Ignatius Mission, on the Flathead Reservation in present-day western Montana; at missions around Miles City, on the Blackfoot and Gros Ventre-Assiniboine reservations; and at St. Labre's Mission, on the Cheyenne reservation. Interspersed is a chapter on missionary relationships with the federal government during this time. In addition, the book includes a chapter on a mission that the Ursulines established at Akulurak, Alaska (although the title had promised that the book would be limited to frontier Montana). A final chapter summarizes the fates of the respective missions through the twentieth century up until today.

To instruct the Native American children in how to lead a Christian life, Schrems writes, the missionaries considered it necessary to separate the children from their parents. Therefore, they typically set up boarding schools at the missions, where the children were seldom allowed to receive visits from their families or to return home, even during vacation periods. The nuns also educated their charges into Victorian culture. Instructing the young girls in their boarding school in how to attain the Victorian ideal of "refined womanhood," the nuns aimed to transform the girls into middle-class white women who would impart the domestic skills and culturally accepted values of white society.

To enforce desired behavior, the missionaries often resorted to corporal punishment, Schrems maintains. She recounts one incident at St. Ignatius in 1872, when the nuns noticed that two girls were making numerous trips to the water well. Upon investigation, they found that the girls were meeting boys. The Jesuit fathers then summoned the elders to punish the boys by public whipping, a form of punishment the Native Americans used for such crimes as wife-stealing, murder, theft, and slander. The nuns were responsible for disciplining the girls: "The girls were taken to the sisters' house where a blan-

ket was placed on the floor for them to lie upon while they each received twenty strokes," Schrems writes (p. 23). (Are we to think that the nuns put the blanket down so as to make the girls comfortable during their lashing?)

The federal government also believed that the best way to hasten the assimilation of the Native American children into the white culture was for the children to be sent to boarding schools. As Americans prepared to move west in the 1880s, they demanded that the federal government break up tribal lands. Consequently, the government promoted a plan to take the reservation children from their parents at a young age and to send them to manual labor schools like the one in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where the children could learn English, develop a white work ethic, and become useful citizens. The Catholic missionaries, however, opposed the manual labor school concept because it meant fewer students in their own boarding schools. They also argued that educating the children under the very eye of the "savage" parent would bring about the conversion of the parent to Christianity, which they considered synonymous with civilization. Both sides used intimidation to win students. The priest threatened excommunication if parents did not send their children to the mission school. Government officials threatened to send soldiers to take their children away and to withhold their rations.

The nuns often had trouble filling their schools to capacity because of the reluctance of the parents to relinquish their children to the missionaries. Ostensibly to demonstrate the nuns' sensitivity, Schrems quotes one nun as writing: "Who has not heard of the extreme fondness of the Indian for his offspring? To tear the child away from his parent is like inflicting a deep wound in the Indian heart while to punish the child by corporal punishment is almost an outrage on the parent" (p. 62).

At the Holy Family Mission on the Blackfoot Reservation, the missionaries had to resort to driving their wagon into the mountains to collect Native American children. According to one missionary, they "went up mountain in a wagon, returned in the night with one school boy. After sunset, boy began to cry, and cried on till we came to school" (p. 62). Once the missionaries had the children at the school, they had a difficult time keeping them there because the students ran away at every opportunity. When students left without permission, the nuns went in the mission wagon to bring them back, and having recaptured them, punished them severely by administering public whippings and expelling those identified as leaders of runaways.

The missionaries experienced their least success at St. Labre's Mission among the Cheyennes. From 1884 to 1897, three nuns and a Jesuit priest, Father Aloysius Van Der Velden, tried to convince the Cheyenne to give up traditional religious customs, particularly those that offended Christian beliefs. The Cheyenne, though, for the most part, rejected Catholic doctrine and the dictates of white culture. They held onto their Native traditions, which strengthened their culture and renewed their faith that they would again control their destiny. The missionaries were successful at least in getting the Cheyenne to give up their native death customs and to adopt Christian ones. Commenting on this success, one nun wrote, "It took many years for the priest to show them that God did not like this" (p. 74).

One of the biggest problems the missionaries had was overcoming their repugnance toward the Cheyenne. The nuns evidently were aware of their own uncharitable feelings and reasoned they could overcome their displeasure by invoking God's love. The priest Van Der Velden admired Cheyenne men, whom he considered fine "Specimens" of manhood. He viewed the women, however, as "not only homely, but most of them absolutely abominable. I think our Dear Lord at the last day will have a fine time to make something decent out of them, because if He does not, everyone else will run out when they come in" (p. 77). Van Der Velden, especially, did not like the strong influence that women had over Cheyenne men. Perhaps it was Van Der Velden also who described the Cheyenne as being "so lazy, that I doubt whether the devil wants them in hell, for they are too lazy to burn" (p.

80).

In addition to Schrems's tolerance for the missionaries' destruction of the Native American cultures with which they came into contact, other aspects of this book disappoint as well. For one thing, the book is, at 118 pages, an extremely short volume. Also, although the book has a list of sources at the end, Schrems gives no footnotes or end notes to document quotations, and in the text she sometimes identifies the speaker of a quote and sometimes not. Further, grammatical and punctuation errors abound. Take this sentence: "Unlike the Flat-head woman, whom was respected because of her work and contribution to the tribe, a Blackfoot woman's life was one of hard work and little reward" (p. 63).

Still, in spite of its many limitations, the book does provide valuable insights into the experience of an obscure group of women who helped settle the West.

Notes

[1]. Patricia Nelson Limerick, et al., eds., *Trails toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

[2]. George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and Robert H. Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on the California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

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