

Seneca Falls in Santa Cruz



Eliza W. Farnham and the varieties of women's emancipation in nineteenth-century California

To the struggling advocates of Woman's Rights, it may seem a hopeful sign of the times that one of their sex should put forth a book ... descriptive of farming, especially when they make the delightful discovery that the writer speaks in a great measure from personal experience in the business. But it must not be forgotten that life in California is altogether anomalous, and that it is no more extraordinary for a woman to plough, dig and hoe with her own hands, if she have the will and strength to do so, than for men to do all their household labor for months.

—*California In-Doors and Out*, 28

Eliza Farnham, once one of the best known and highly praised women nonfiction authors in the United States, is being rediscovered as an exceptional resource for the history of women in the West. Students of California's history, in particular, have begun to see lost visions of expansion, womanhood, and national destiny in Farnham's understandings of herself and of her sex in the epoch of gold and statehood. In Farnham's published writings, two idiosyncratic ideological assemblies bear examining. First, she relies on faith in the nation's achieving its Manifest Destiny through expansion and conquest as a framework for women's elevation. Second, while her commitment to women's advancement included many elements of the women's rights movement of her day, she refuses the call for equal legal and political rights. In this way, she defies the common link between feminism and expanding democracy.

The basic story of Farnham's life was quite extraordinary.

Eliza Burham, later Farnham, was born in the Hudson Valley of New York State in 1815. She spent her childhood in the far west of the state, working as a servant for a childless couple. The driving force of her early life was to join the small stream of ambitious women pressing for education and the wherewithal to become active thinkers, able to make their contribution to human knowledge. To this end, a largely self-educated Farnham published four major books dealing with the West, national destiny, and the elevation of women.

Perhaps the most unique among her books is Farnham's third, *My Early Days*. Published in 1859, it is an account of her childhood in western New York State. Unlike her two previous books—which celebrate western expansion as the salvation of American destiny and the exceptional woman—*My Early Days* is a portrait of relentless suffering in the backwoods of the eastern United States, among ignorant, brutal people. There, whatever source of redemption young Eliza might find had to be deep within herself. Farnham's other works are written in the treacly prose of antebellum, especially female, literature, but not this volume.



"Eliza Wood Burhans (Farnham)," artotype by E. Bierstadt (date unknown). Found between pages 192 and 193 in *Burnhans Genealogy*, compiled by Samuel Burhans Jr. (New York, 1894). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

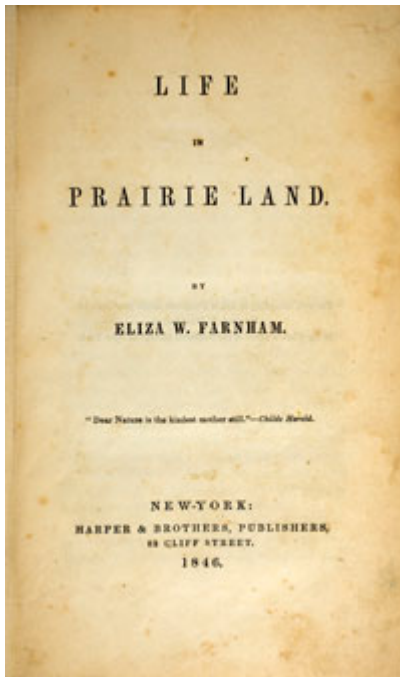
My Early Days begins when, at the death of her mother, five-year-old Eliza was separated from her father and her siblings and exiled to a rural community, peopled by drunkards, atheists, weak men, and brutal women. There she was placed in the home of the Warrens, a childless couple. Later as an adult, Eliza adopted a personal faith that emphasized belief in the divine (although carefully framed outside of conventional Christianity, without reference to

Jesus), in the redemptive power of "the West," and in the superior force of womanhood through maternal capacity. But Eliza the child lacked these spiritual resources, and the author faithfully renders the desperate emotions and impoverished understandings of her younger self. She portrays the evilness of "Aunt," the woman who raised and worked her, in psychological rather than moral terms. As part of a continuing effort to free herself, young Eliza stole money from Aunt, convinced that it was owed her as compensation for her labor and the unfulfilled obligation to educate her. Adult Eliza, the author, treats this as a thoroughly appropriate theft.

The account of backwoods irreligion is particularly fascinating. The Warrens were Quakers, yet thoroughly atheistic. The only reading materials in their house, which the young Eliza hungrily consumed, were condemnations of religion and praise of reason, including Paine and Voltaire. The author's ability to recapture her childish hunger for knowledge and the joy she found in her unfolding reason compete with her adult condemnation of this repulsive literature of infidelity. Although she never quite escaped the imprint of this early teaching, Farnham came to regard having been denied faith in Jesus's redeeming and comforting love and in the existence of an afterlife as the greatest of the many abuses (physical, emotional, intellectual) she suffered as a child.

Without the twin socializing forces of Christian redemption and maternal love, the child grew up virtually outside of society. People called her a fool, when in truth she had the seeds of a considerable intelligence and read everything she could get her hands on. At the beginning of the book, she isn't even called by her real name but by hostile nicknames. One of these is Tonewanta, a reference to Eliza's dark, Indian-like complexion, deepened by exposure to the sun and hard outdoor work. The personal struggle described throughout the book reaches far beyond issues of gender: the child Eliza had to become not just a true woman but a knowing human being. "The *I* which I understood to be my true, suffering self ... was wandering in frozen desolation," the author writes, "vainly seeking alleviation of its present anguish."

Three quarters of the book, by far the most powerful parts, cover Eliza's vain efforts to escape this backwoods prison. She imagined "walking, when the snow should have gone and the roads become dry, to some distant town or city, and seeking some rich and benevolent person for a patron, who would educate me and wait til I could repay the kindness by the fruits of my knowledge and labor, or if I failed to find such a person, then I could certainly find somebody who would hire me to work and so I could get money on my own." Finally, after seven years under these conditions, she found the strength within her young self to reach out to a brother, who came to bring her out of the wilderness. "This is my niece," he lied when they return together to the Hudson River Valley of her birth, "a wild girl, whom I have just caught in the forests of the West." This is where *My Early Days* ends.

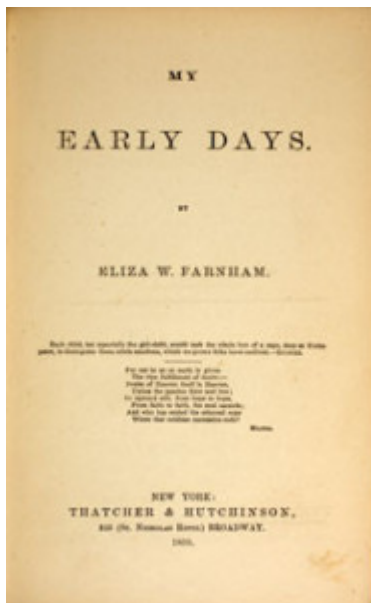


Title page of *Life in Prairie Land*, by Eliza W. Farnham (New York, 1846).
Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Over the next ten years, Eliza became educated, civilized, and superficially Christianized. In 1836, at the age of twenty-one, she married an Illinois lawyer, Thomas J. Farnham, ten years her senior. Few figures more fully embody the spirit of Manifest Destiny than T. J. Farnham. Very soon after marrying Eliza and fathering their first son, Farnham contracted a virulent, aggressively nationalist case of the western fever. After leading a party of Illinois patriots in an ill-fated invasion to drive out the British in the Willamette Valley, he turned to central California as a more promising site for his expansionist ambitions. In Santa Cruz, he joined the growing Yankee community and acquired land from a local Californio family in payment for legal services.

Meanwhile, Eliza, who had moved to New York from Illinois, was struggling to support herself and her children. Following the model of her husband (who himself wrote a series of books about his western triumphs), in 1846 she published her first book about her years in Illinois, *Life in Prairie Land*. The book remains one of the earliest female-authored accounts of the life of American settlers "on the frontier." Farnham presents herself as an observer of frontier quaintness and charm and a propagandist for the redemptive potential of the West. What remains from the experience she would later describe in *My Early Days* is a contempt for the moral weakness and frivolity of eastern middle-class women. While Farnham came to believe that exceptional women like herself could have a leading role in the unfolding of the national destiny in the West, she also believed the majority "of my sex ... unfortunate as to have had their minds thoroughly distorted from all true and natural modes of action by an artificial and pernicious course of education ... endure the self-denial that [western life] imposes without enjoying any of the freedom it confers."

Farnham's "West," as it emerges in *Life in Prairie Land*, is thus a brutal yet potentially liberating environment. While it afforded women new opportunities—for "strength of mind and bold thought"—the brutality of the frontier also threatened the destruction of womanliness. Farnham explores one side of this tension through the many "untrue" women who appear in *Life in Prairie Land*. One farm wife for instance is "the mere physical material of the woman, put together in a somewhat exceptionable style and sadly soiled." But there are also true women, untouched by eastern falseness, who lead the settler enterprise past its initial challenges, through loss and violence, to the edenic possibilities of the West.



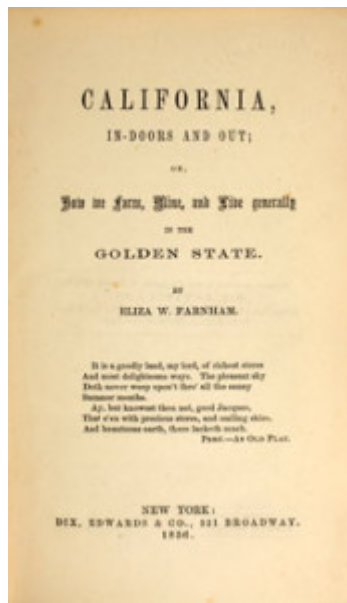
Title page of *My Early Days*, by Eliza W. Farnham (New York, 1859). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Life In Prairie Land was completed in 1846, just as Farnham undertook the next of her odyssean labors. Still in search of paying work, she secured an appointment as the first matron of women at the New York State prison at Sing Sing. Following in the footsteps of the British Quaker Elizabeth Fry, the first female reformer of whom she ever learned, Farnham adapted modern notions of rehabilitation to women prisoners, formerly regarded as morally irredeemable. As her assistant, she hired Georgiana Bruce, a young English immigrant and former member of the utopian community Brook Farm. The prison's trustees came to regard Farnham as a dangerous radical, and after two years, in 1848, they succeeded in driving her out. She was briefly employed by the physician and reformer Samuel Gridley Howe. Farnham worked most notably with Howe's deaf and blind student, Laura Bridgman. And she even read draft versions of *Life in Prairie Land* to Bridgman using a finger spelling method devised by Howe and Laura's teachers.

In 1848, just after the end of the U.S.-Mexican War, news came to Eliza that her husband, with whom she had lived only briefly, had died in Santa Cruz. She

would now have to head west to manage the land he had left her. To fund the trip, Eliza announced that she would organize a "company" of upstanding Yankee women to sail with her. As wives and paragons of morality, these female migrants would save the men of California from the moral and spiritual decline threatened by the Gold Rush. When this plan failed, Eliza determined to go west anyway and, in 1849, sailed from Boston with her two children, one other Yankee woman, and a young nursemaid, possibly a former inmate at Sing Sing. Along the way, the nursemaid ran off with a crew member. When the ship stopped in Valparaiso to take on stores, Farnham went in search of a replacement. The captain, irritated at her for charges she had made against him, departed without her, taking the rest of her goods and party, including her children. Eliza waited in Chile almost two months for the next ship and arrived in San Francisco in February 1850 to find her son quite ill. With her children and her baggage, Farnham finally made her way to Santa Cruz, determined to realize the tremendous moral and domestic potential of the Far West. All she was missing was a companion, a partner, another woman. Her old friend Georgiana Bruce soon joined her. Together these two roofed and joined their new house, broke sod and planted potatoes, ordered fruit trees, and raised poultry. To be able to work and move freely, they wore bloomer costumes, to their neighbors' amusement. They discussed the future of women as they hammered and planted and harvested.

Written mostly between 1853 and 1855, Farnham's second book *California In-Doors and Out* is an intimate account of the peoples of California at the very beginning of statehood. Farnham finds the land's natural beauty thrillingly uplifting, a spiritual stand-in for Christian conviction. One long episode describes a horseback trip that she, Georgiana, and two men took to a valley covered with strawberries, in which fresh beef (left by Californios who had just slaughtered long-horned cattle) was literally hanging from trees. Yet the very richness of California had within it the seeds of destruction in the gold fields, where greed, violence, and corruption were turning the heaven of California into its opposite. How could the possibility of California be realized and the dangers it posed be survived and tamed?



Title page of *California, In-Doors and Out; Or, How We Farm, Mine, and Live Generally in the Golden State*, by Eliza W. Farnham (New York, 1856). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Like many others, Farnham approached this dilemma as a devoted Anglo-Saxonist. Those who she regarded as the “noblest race on earth” were the proper stewards of California’s cultivation and development, the only race that could be trusted to lead its orderly, forward progress. And yet these same people, lured by the land’s promise of unlimited wealth, had become speculators without conscience, greedy aspirants for personal gain, gold-driven monsters who had created a hellish society of immorality, intemperance, and criminality.

Farnham organizes the duality of the Anglo-Saxon confrontation with California—embodied in the conflicting impulses to exploit and cultivate its riches—around the distinction between Man and Woman. Thus, to race must be added gender. Man represents the worst of the Anglo-Saxon spirit, the values of gain and speculation; Woman, the best, the alternative outcome of improvement and redemption. Thus only Woman can lead the way to America’s true Manifest Destiny in the new western lands. As Farnham wrote in the notice she circulated to recruit other women for her first California enterprise, “Among the many privations and deteriorating influences to which the thousands who are flocking thither will be subjected, one of the greatest is the absence of woman, with all her kindly cares and powers, so peculiarly conservative to man under such circumstances.”

Men are too weak to confront the fabulous potential of the West. Gold is a drug and men cannot be trusted with it. Woman is the only force that can counter this horrible descent. “Man may never be so coarse, gross or selfish, yet, if his fireside be presided over by purity, uprightness, and integrity in his wife,” he might yet be saved. This formulation of female devotion to the general good versus male pursuit of individual gain is not unique to Farnham. Catharine Beecher, writing at the same time, offered a similar solution to the dilemma that excessive individualism posed to the creation of an orderly,

stable, republican community: woman's essential selflessness, her inherent capacity for republican virtue, could work as a counterbalance to man's fundamental individualism. What distinguishes Farnham is that she situates this trope in western lands and imbues it with the Manifest Destiny of national expansion. "There is," she declares, "no country in the world where the highest attributes of the female character are more indispensable to the social weal than to California."

But the nature of Woman's role in the destiny of expanding America, for Farnham, presented its own dilemmas. What exactly is required of Woman to take up this profound, national responsibility? How must Woman's standing in society change? Farnham found herself on the very border of women's rights convictions, but to go further was to threaten the lofty difference of womanhood that lay at the center of her hopes. These were dilemmas about women, their roles, and their rights that she may well have shared with others in the 1850s. In order to resolve them for herself and her readers, Farnham included a series of conversations in *California In-Doors and Out* between herself and Georgiana Bruce; in these conversations Bruce articulated sentiments about social order, democracy, and women considerably less conservative than the author's. It is as if Farnham was sufficiently divided on these matters that she needed a surrogate to give voice to the dialogue she was conducting within herself.

Georgiana subscribed to ideas about equality of the sexes being put forward in the East at that moment by the women's rights movement. Farnham believed instead that each sex had distinct spheres and talents, that women were properly domestic and men public, and that women neither needed nor would benefit from individual legal and political rights. Yet leaving their differences at that misses much of Farnham's position and what it says about views of women's conditions, especially in a western expansionist environment. As Farnham concedes, "I actually did many of the things which her [women's rights] party demanded freedom to do." Side by side as they were debating women's rights, the two women broke ground and planted crops, donned bloomers, and became skilled carpenters, drawing strange looks from their neighbors, Anglo and Californio alike.



Title page (vol. 2) of *Woman and Her Era*, by Eliza W. Farnham (New York, 1864). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Still Farnham could not follow her friend onto the women's rights path. For her, the West became a test for different programs for women's elevation, and the results disproved the claims for women's rights. Even Eliza's own experience showed the complexities the West posed to women's freedom. Farnham's Santa Cruz farming experiment failed after less than two years. The labor was too hard, Farnham's business acumen too flawed and capital resources too limited, and the men she employed too untrustworthy. Within two years, she had married, and although she preached marriage as the highest service a woman could render to the new state of California, her own was a disaster. Her new husband, William Fitzpatrick, was abusive and a drunkard. Four years later, Eliza got one of the first recorded divorces in American California and then left the state. The most productive aspect of her time there was *California In-Doors and Out*, the publication of which helped her support herself and her children.

Farnham's alternative to the program of women's rights was the principle of Woman's Superiority. The idea that women are not only different from men but their superiors is just under the surface in *California In-Doors and Out*. But so much of her emphasis in this book is on women's greater fragility with respect to the harsh conditions of emigrating and pioneering that the argument from female superiority does not yet fully emerge. After a second trip to California in 1856, Farnham returned east to publish her fourth book, the two-volume *Woman and Her Era*.

Here, Farnham openly rejects both the call for equal rights and the claim that the two sexes are fundamentally the same. Although she appreciates "the courage and faithfulness" of women's rights advocates, she nonetheless regards their movement as "erroneous in philosophy, and in many practical matters, partially mistaken in direction." Instead of rights, she argues, women need recognition for their superiority. Not a conventionally religious person, Farnham does not

rely on Christian conviction or limit her claims of superiority to the moral sphere. As women were able to give birth to children, she thought that they were physically stronger, biologically superior, to men. So far in human history, she declares, "progress has been in the main undeniably intellectual and natural, rather than spiritual; as it needs be while it remains so exclusively in masculine hands."

While she was in the midst of writing *Woman and Her Era*, Farnham brought her alternative program of Female Superiority to the 1858 Women's Rights Convention. She agreed with most other women's rights advocates that much about the current condition of women constituted a kind of enslavement: the unjustness of male domination and female subordination in marriage laws, the sexual double standard that made women guilty of sexual crimes while ignoring and forgiving men, and the exploitation and underpayment of women workers. Like women's rights women, she called for unfettered freedom for individual women to seek employment and opportunity. She even seemed to envision something like an organized social movement of women: "The courage to speak out what social bondage bids us hide, can hence be moved, in the mass of Women, only by a support which assures them of sympathy; ... no earnest lover of our sex can fail to find in its position to-day, abundant cause for rejoicing, and rich inspiration to noble faith in its future."

Nonetheless, Farnham was not well received by her women's rights audience. Her class elitism, the insult her ideas conveyed to men (and male supporters of women's rights), and the strong strain of resentment for actually existing women—as opposed to the ideal essence of Woman—made the doctrine of the Superiority of Woman an unlikely candidate for a popular political ideology. The Polish and Jewish-born freethinking feminist, Ernestine Rose, who shared the platform with Farnham regarded her as an opportunist, who "wished to avail herself of whatever had been done, not caring to identify herself with the movement." Farnham returned the disregard. When she published *Woman and Her Era*, Farnham listed many female reformers and philanthropists as representatives of true womanly character. The list included Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, and Lydia Maria Child but omitted more radical rights advocates such as Rose, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony.

In July 1863, Farnham made her way to the Gettysburg battlefield. She arrived a few days after the shooting had stopped, ready to help nurse the thousands of wounded and dying men who awaited care. Exhausted and perhaps having contracted some sort of infection, Farnham subsequently returned to New York, worked for the next five months to complete *Woman and Her Era*, became sick, and then died, two days before Christmas, 1864.

A year and a half later, at the first women's rights convention held after the Civil War, writer Caroline Dall mentioned Farnham's life, work, and death. Her tribute was restrained, even hostile. Farnham's life, claimed Dall, had been "a bitter disappointment to herself," a charge to which Elizabeth Cady Stanton responded with far greater empathy. Stanton was exactly the same age as

Farnham, shared many similar ambitions, and seemed to understand that their paths and prospects had been, at least for a time, similar.

Who does realize in life all that in starting was looked for? Who has nothing to regret? With a heart so generous and sympathizing as hers ... a life so rich in practical usefulness, she was not only a blessing to others, but she must have had a more than an ordinary share of peace and happiness that gladdens every Christian life.

"I have just read her last great work," Stanton continued. Although she approached *Woman and Her Era* with "prejudice," Farnham's conviction about female superiority deeply affected her, conveying "a higher idea of woman's destiny." Such ideas—about women's specialness and superiority—do in fact characterize Stanton's postwar writings more than they do her prewar convictions. Perhaps Farnham was a source, and "the glorious thoughts that thrill my heart" were a genuine influence on Stanton's enduring thought.

E. P. Thompson, in his classic study of the precursors of British working-class consciousness, argued for the importance of studying byways of the past, which only in retrospect do we know to be historic dead-ends but which at the time seemed as straight a road into the future as any other. Such a historical subject is Eliza Farnham, once a prophet of women's glorious future, subsequently a minor figure, perhaps once again useful as an indicator of grand and influential visions of the interrelated possibilities of women's and the nation's expanding boundaries.

Further Reading:

Eliza Farnham published five books, four of which are discussed in this article in the order in which they discuss different parts of her life: *Life in Prairie Land* (New York, 1846); *California In-Doors and Out; or How we Farm, Mine and Live Generally in the Golden State* (New York, 1856); *My Early Days* (New York, 1859), which was republished by A. J. Davis & Co., as *Eliza Woodson: The Early Days of One of the World's Workers, A Story of American Life* (New York, 1864); and *Woman and Her Era* 2 vols. (New York, 1864). In addition, Farnham wrote an account of her relationship with Georgiana Bruce, *The Ideal Attained; being the story of two steadfast souls and How they Won Their Happiness and Lost it Not*, which was published just after her death (New York, 1865). Georgiana Bruce kept her own account of the relationship in a diary that has been published by the Santa Cruz Historical Society as *Georgiana Bruce Kirby: Feminist Reformer of the West*, Helen S. Giffen, et al., eds. (Santa Cruz, Calif., 1987). Georgiana Bruce Kirby (her married name) discussed Farnham in *Years of Experience: An Autobiographical Narrative* (New York and London, 1887). Madeleine B. Stern, the idiosyncratic and underappreciated scholar of nineteenth-century gender and sexuality, wrote about Eliza Farnham in several venues, most extensively in her introductions to replications of *Life in Prairie Land* and *California In-Doors and Out* (Nieuwkoop, Neth., 1972). More recently, Jo Ann Levy, historian of California women, has published an engaging joint biography of the two

women, *Unsettling the West: Eliza Farnham and Georgiana Bruce Kirby in Frontier California* (Santa Clara, Calif., 2004). Levy includes a full account of the shifting interest of historians and literary scholars in Farnham. Levy and others have noted that Georgiana Bruce Kirby was the unattributed historical model for Mrs. Elliot in Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Angle of Repose* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), other characters of which were also derived from historical figures Mary Foote Hallock and Helena DeKay Gilder. An account of the Rose/Farnham antagonism can be found in Carol A. Kolmerten, *The American Life of Ernestine Rose* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1999).

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