

Artist-Author Mary Hallock Foote and her *Angle of Repose*

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Mary Hallock Foote, the noted but neglected Western writer and illustrator, once admitted the limits of her realism as she confessed to the editor of *Century Magazine* when asked to draw a full-page picture of a sheriff's posse:

“The picture is not so sincere as it might be. The artist, in the course of many rides over these mountain pastures, by daylight or twilight or moonrise, has never yet encountered anything so sensational as a troop of armed men on the track of a criminal.”

Likewise, few posses ran across women like Mary Hallock Foote (1847-1938). The Victorian gentlewoman traveled the American West dressed in hoop skirt and petticoats, insisting that her children be educated by an English nanny and fed by a Chinese cook, so that she could work on her illustrations

Mary Hallock, circa 1874



and stories, without interruption. Due to the physical isolation of Foote's various homes, she thirsted for cultured visitors, as noted by a member of Clarence King's Fortieth Parallel Survey who wrote about a visit:

“King and I forged through the forest, crossing a mine ditch and in a little clearing espied a cozy log cabin. As we approached, we discerned a rustic porch made comfortable...suggesting that an Eastern woman, and a cultivated one, lived at the house...King had known her but this was the first time I had met Mary Hallock Foote...She was well read on everything and ripped out an intellectual go-as-you-please backed up by good looks and brightness. She told us of their hopes, hers and Arthur's, in Mr. Foote's engineering schemes. What was more interesting, she showed us some of her black-and-white illustrations for the work of other authors.”

Personally, I have sought out the novels of Mary Hallock Foote for the past 30 years, most of which are still only available as photocopies or on microfilm. The only “real” book I could ever lay my hands on should have been encased in glass where I found it at the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon. Instead, that volume crumbled beneath my fingertips with the turning of each page, and has since been discarded to make room for more computers. Such has been the fate of the novels of Mary Hallock Foote—disintegrating before their time—but now her life will be remembered thanks to Darlis Miller's compelling new biography, *Mary Hallock Foote: Author-Illustrator of the American West* (2002), a volume in the University of Oklahoma's Western Biographies Series edited by Richard Etulain.

Foote's legacy has been most closely intertwined with Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), whose Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Angle of Repose* (1971) is based on Foote's personal history. As a novelist, Stegner is especially credited with providing a refreshingly realistic portrayal of the men who first pioneered the American West. In *Angle of Repose*, his most acclaimed work of fiction, Stegner focused on the feminine experience of that era by exploiting Foote's literary effects.

Miller's biography tells the entire story of Foote's life, rather than concentrating on the difficult years in Idaho as Stegner did. The same year that *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize, Foote's autobiography, *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* was published by the Huntington Library at the

urging of Foote's descendants who objected to the great liberties that Stegner took in telling her story. Straddling fact and fiction, *Angle of Repose* was also met with charges of plagiarism in academic circles.

Stegner self-consciously wrote to the Foote family when he forwarded a copy of *Angle*:

"I must admit I send you this book with some trepidation...you may have expected me to stick with your grandmother's real life and character. And that I found I was unable to do." Instead, Stegner became fascinated by the Foote's marriage and the stresses it underwent in Idaho. For his own reasons, Stegner told a story of Victorian infidelity in the American desert high plains drawn from tidbits suggested by letters between Foote and Helena de Kay, Foote's lifelong literary confidant.

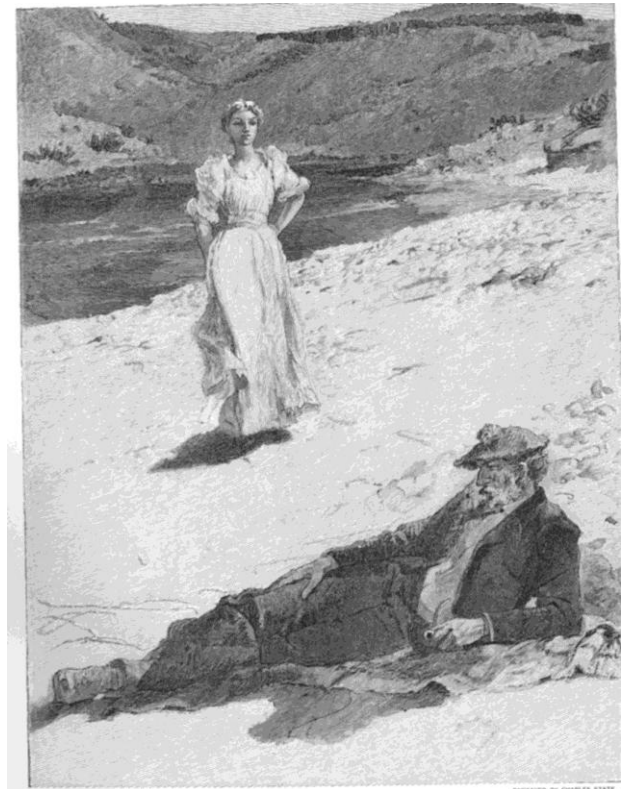
In his book, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner* (1983), Richard Etulain, now a retired professor from the University of New Mexico, and author and editor of more than 40 books of Western history, coaxed his friend Stegner into explaining some of the motivation for writing *Angle*: "...the generation gap, and especially the anti-historical pose of the young, at least the young of the 1960s. They didn't give a damn what happened up to two minutes ago and would have been totally unable to understand a Victorian lady. I could conceive students of mine confronting Mary Hallock Foote and thinking 'My God, fantastic, inhuman,' because they themselves were so imprisoned by the present that they had no notion of how various humanity and human customs can be."

Miller carefully avoids the debate as to whether Stegner misused the access granted by Foote's family to her personal correspondence. What is clear is that Stegner and Foote both wrote about a beautiful land beset by humanity's desire to dominate. While Stegner advocated the preservation of wilderness, Foote lived in that era before the West was conquered, part of a generation which sought to harness and shape the land. Today, Foote's self-conscious enthusiasm for that enterprise, as expressed in *Victorian Gentlewoman*, seems a lavish extravagance, as she witnessed the government completion of Arrowrock Reservoir on the Boise River years after Arthur had given up on the project:

"There it was finished—the last of our dreams in Idaho...the small but mighty work of man and the vast overpowering Nature to be used and controlled... What insolence—what a gesture!"

Although Foote's novels were largely driven by romantic plots that mirrored her own life, readers were drawn to her work because of an acute attention to detail about the locales in which the stories were set and she received fan mail from across the American West:

"These letters would be signed sometimes by a group of names from the 'Old Man' to the 'Kid,' Foote writes in her autobiography. "The Old Man, they said had just been reading aloud to them the last story (or installment of a serial) under discussion, there being only one copy of *Century* in camp; and would I please tell them how I came to know these things which the eye of woman hath not seen? I



"Father on the Beach"
The Chosen Valley (1892)

answered delightedly and told them that I had married one of their own lot and knew them, in their remotest hiding places...”

Born into a Hudson Valley Quaker farm family, Mary Hallock Foote was originally trained as an illustrator, only later to become a novelist out of sheer financial necessity. The young Mary studied art at Cooper Institute’s School of Design for Women in New York City, where she met Helena de Kay, the descendant of New York aristocrats, educated in Europe and married to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *Century Magazine*.

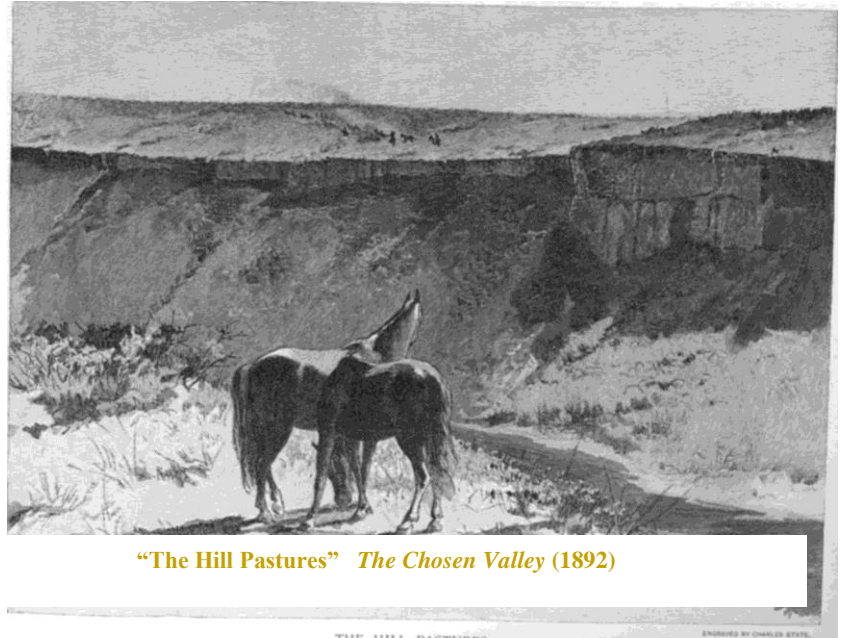
Mary Hallock quickly became an accomplished artist and illustrated editions of major writers including Longfellow, Whittier and Hawthorne. Her talent brought her public acclaim, including a review from the *New York Times* which stated that her “drawings reveal the hand of a thorough artist and...are as full of poetry and feeling as Mr. Longfellow’s lines.”

Hallock’s life changed sharply in 1875, at the age of 28, when she married Arthur De Wint Foote, a civil engineer who decided to practice his profession in the American West. Mary followed her husband across the breadth of North America as he pursued a series of jobs as mine manager and surveyor. Impressed with descriptive letters from the West, Helena de Kay encouraged Mary to compose fictions set in exotic locales and convinced Richard to print them in *Century* with illustrations by Foote. In addition to short stories, her novels were serialized in *Century* alongside Rudyard Kipling, Henry James and Mark Twain, and in turn were published by Houghton Mifflin.

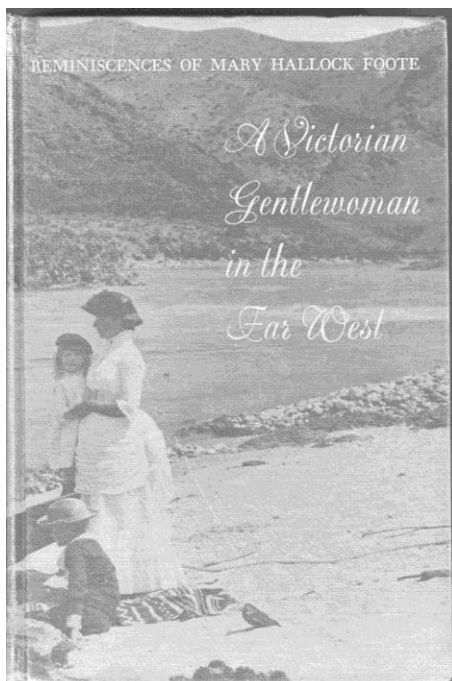
Arthur was only marginally successful as an engineer, due to his unimpeachable honesty in a business filled with speculators and rascals. In 1884, he changed the focus of his engineering and announced plans for a massive irrigation project in the desert high plains of southern Idaho. As Arthur pursued his dreams of irrigating the desert, his wife put bread on the table by publishing short stories and novels with realistic Western settings.

After ten years in Idaho, the engineering enterprise had to be abandoned and only then did Arthur Foote realize professional and fiscal success as manager of the North Star Mine in Grass Valley, California. While the need for Mary’s literary income decreased, the interval between her books lengthened, until the twelfth and final novel in 1919. In literary circles, she was largely forgotten by the time of her death in 1938.

Writing in an era dominated by such mythic male prototypes as



“The Hill Pastures” *The Chosen Valley* (1892)



the Mountain Man and the Cowboy, Foote's fictions did not fit the mold and had more in common with the Bronte sisters than western writers like Jack London and Bret Harte (although, not surprisingly, she was commissioned to illustrate four of Harte's works).

Darlis Miller's biography of Foote is the 19th in Etulain's series, which aims to provide "readable life stories of significant westerners." In this series, Foote joins the likes of John Muir, Alexander Mackenzie, Annie Oakley and Red Cloud, yet her novels are still not available at the library or bookstore.

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