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Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight. Shannon D. Smith. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 264 pages. $39.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

The myth of the Fetterman fight has emerged as a topic of renewed interest among frontier historians. By questioning the sources in unique ways, a different image of this tragic event is unfolding. In *Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight*, Shannon Smith significantly alters the narrative of the infamous Fetterman massacre with clear and convincing evidence drawn from the testimony of the investigating commission that has been overlooked by other historians. Furthermore, the reason she suggests it was overlooked was because "gallant" and "chivalrous" men wouldn't question the words of matronly women who published their accounts and received a wider readership than the commission's report. Her story is a good military history of this infamous frontier massacre informed by feminist theory. It deserves the attention of those uncertain how the study of race, class, and gender can improve the historical narrative.

Just what happened in the Powder River country of northeastern Wyoming on December 21, 1866, is a matter of no little controversy. On that day, Captain William Fetterman rode into an ambush planned by the Cheyenne and Lakota under the direction of Crazy Horse. For years, historians have looked to Fetterman's supposed boast that with eighty men he could ride through the entire Sioux Nation as indicative of his rashness, seen as the major cause of his defeat and the destruction of his entire command. In her account, Smith questions this explanation and even asserts that Fetterman never uttered these infamous words. Her research applies feminist theory of the cult of true womanhood in order to understand the refusal of men to question the assertions of the women who were present at Fort Phil Kearney—women who played a large part in the creation of the standard narrative depicting Fetterman as arrogant.

As Smith tells the story, these women are an interesting lot. They include Margaret Carrington, the wife of the commanding officer of the fort, Henry B. Carrington. Encouraged by General William Sherman, she wrote an autobiography of her life as a woman on the nation's frontier during this tumultuous time and includes a lengthy account of the massacre. Her book, *Absaraka*, went through several editions, allowing the Carringtons—husband and wife—to tell their side of the story, which exonerated Henry, who was blamed in official reports for being incompetent and failing to maintain discipline. These conclusions challenged Henry's official report that blamed the defeat on his not having been supplied with enough men and ammunition by the army. However, Margaret's version of the story came in a medium that chivalrous men were

reluctant to criticize and that shifted the blame yet again to Fetterman—who was dead and left no wife to defend his reputation.

In addition to Margaret, the women at the fort that winter included Carrington's second wife, Frances Courtney Grummond Carrington, whose husband at that time was George Grummond—an officer who was demonstrably rash during a December 6 battle outside the fort. He led the cavalry the day of Fetterman's defeat and lost his life in the same battle that took Fetterman's life, leaving Frances a widow. Having befriended the Grummonds earlier, the Carringtons assisted Frances in her despair. When Margaret died, Frances wrote Henry to express her condolences and the correspondence blossomed into something more, culminating with his second marriage to Frances. She later wrote another defense of Henry's command of the fort in *My Army Life*, a book ostensibly written to defend the honor of another soldier slain in the battle, Tenedor Ten Eyck, at the request of another woman—Ten Eyck's daughter, Frances. Thus Smith found more than enough women in her research to apply theories of "chivalry" and "womanhood" in order to test her hypothesis.

According to Smith, these women subtly changed the image of Fetterman, whom Margaret at first championed as "gallant, chivalrous, and gentlemanly," into the egotistical commander who could boast of riding through the Sioux Nation (191). Each book they had a hand in writing—and there were many as they corresponded with frontier historians and significantly impacted the development of the standard narrative—went further to create the image of an egotistical Fetterman. Originally they were attempting to demonstrate Fetterman's disobedience to Henry's explicit command not to go beyond Lodge Trail Ridge. However, Smith demonstrates how the accounts they published changed over time in order to emphasize Fetterman's rashness and to protect Grummond's and Ten Eyck's reputations. Finally, Smith details the evidence that the "eighty men" quote came from the Carringtons, who used the mythical statement to further an arrogant image, thus explaining Fetterman's demise and releasing Henry from scrutiny.

Unfortunately for the Carringtons, Smith could find no evidence that he gave Fetterman this command and describes Fetterman from the obituaries of hometown papers written by others who knew him, demonstrating no history of such haughty behavior. Instead she found plenty of evidence that Henry had a reason to take the fight beyond a defense of the woodcutting party. With pressure from above to act decisively against the tribes, she suggests Carrington and Fetterman likely planned to use the incident as a way to take the war to the enemy. Smith demonstrates that it was Grummond to whom Carrington reiterated his instructions to obey orders and, in Smith's words, directed a further order to "'tell' Fetterman—not remind him—not to cross the ridge" (100). Although Henry wrote a note during the battle appearing to reprimand Ten Eyck for taking a

circuitous route to the scene, forty-two years later when dedicating a monument on the site, Carrington exonerated Ten Eyck by stating that he hurried to rescue Fetterman whom he characterized that day as "blindly arrogant" (192). Then, before the crowds and in a speech that Frances Carrington published in her book, he went on to claim that Fetterman had boasted that with eighty men he could ride through the Sioux lands along the Tongue River.

The jest of the "eighty men" quote had been incubating for some time. Margaret originally credited the remark to Fred Brown, another officer at the fort who died in the massacre. The number of men and the location of the anticipated foray in the quote changed over time. The exact number of eighty men, matching the number of men who were killed in the massacre, finally appeared in Cyrus Townshend Brady's *Indian Fights and Fighters* (1904) whose chapter on the Fetterman massacre relied on Margaret's account of the battle. Furthermore, Henry was allowed to "correct" this chapter before publication (168).

However, Smith does not really blame Henry for the disaster either. She points out that although he was not exactly the man for the job, he was under the constraint of fighting for an army that was busy downsizing after the Civil War. By deconstructing the context of the massacre in light of national concerns, Smith adds important dimensions to the episode. She reminds the reader that, at this time in Washington, the nation was absorbed in the gathering storm between the Radicals in Congress and an embattled President Andrew Johnson over the course of Reconstruction—a conflict that increasingly centered on the role of the army that could ill-afford public scrutiny of such a major defeat on the frontier. As General Ulysses S. Grant was drawn into the debate when Johnson offered him Edwin Stanton's position, he likewise could not allow the embarrassment of the debacle at Fort Phil Kearney to divert the public's attention. Smith suggests then that Grant and Sherman accepted the blame that subordinates were placing on Carrington and thus led Carrington to fight for his honor by slandering the reputation of Fetterman. As Smith wryly observed, "Only the word of a lady could transcend the dominance of Grant" (191).

Obviously, the story Smith tells is complex, but it is also more satisfying than the mythic view of an arrogant officer throwing caution to the wind as he took his regiment to its destruction. It is a story that suggests the power that frontier women wielded when protecting their men. It is a story that suggests historians can ignore feminist theory only at their own peril. Smith has done a marvelous job of deconstructing the attitudes of the men and women who were caught in circumstances beyond their control and used the "noble" image of women to cover their mistakes.

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