

“FAR MORE THAN I EVER DARED TO HOPE FOR”:
VICTORIAN TRAVELER ISABELLA BIRD IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

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ABSTRACT

At age forty-two Victorian Englishwoman Isabella Bird traveled alone on horseback and in the winter through the Colorado Rockies, stopping at cabins and homesteads for shelter. Background biographical information informs the discussion of Bird's travels and her lifelong invalidism, for which doctors prescribed travel. Her health vastly improved while traveling; possible reasons for this improvement while she was away from Victorian England and the demands of her homeland culture are explored. From her experiences in Colorado, she wrote the travel memoir, A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains. Bird claimed that her memoir was written from letters she wrote home to her sister Henrietta, but a recently published collection of her transcribed letters, Letters to Henrietta, reveals that Bird did edit her letters before publication of A Lady's Life. Some of the changes she made are noteworthy and therefore, are identified and discussed.

Bird's reaction to the Colorado landscape is a mixture of awe, enchantment, fascination, and fear. This thesis examines Bird's conflicting feelings toward the wilderness environment from feminist and psychoanalytical perspectives. Further, Bird often seems at home not only in a wilderness setting, but with the company of marginalized individuals, most notably Mountain Jim Nugent, a desperado. Her relationship with Mountain Jim is revealing as he reflects many of her own struggles with alienation. Bird, stifled by Victorian conventions, found relief from her mental and physical ill health in her travels and through her contact with others who lived outside the rules of polite Victorian society, as well in the wilderness landscape that welcomed and then challenged her.

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DEDICATION

For Phillip.

INTRODUCTION

I first discovered Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* in a small book store on Main Street in Park City, Utah, in 1993. Formerly a seedy, run-down Victorian era mining town now turned ski resort, Park City sits 7,500 feet high in the Wasatch Mountains, and before settlement probably looked much like Englishwoman Isabella Bird's beloved Estes Park in Colorado. I had settled in Park City after some travels of my own—about 40,000 miles around the U. S. in an old Ford van and a 1964 Holiday Rambler camper trailer with my future husband, Phillip Bruce. I admired Isabella's Victorian-era travel book so much that I bought copies of her adventures in the Rockies and sent them to several friends and family members back East. When we left Utah to return to North Carolina in 1994, we sidetracked to Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park to retrace some of the route she took in 1873.

Isabella Bird hovered in the back of my mind for years, stepping forward from time to time as I somewhat evangelistically continued to press her book on new friends. I couldn't forget her and found myself describing her to my fellow graduate student and friend Alicia Skipper, as we drove to Florida for a conference. When Alicia sensibly asked "Why don't you write about Isabella Bird for your thesis?" it was a "Eureka" moment. Up until that point I had wondered if I would ever come up with a suitable thesis idea. Despite my affinity for Bird, I initially had concerns about her status as a travel writer; I feared that she was not "literary" enough to be a thesis subject. But with the support of Professors Janet Ellerby, Barbara Waxman, and Kate Montwieler, and theorists like Sarah Mills, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, I realized that Isabella Bird was indeed "worthy" of study.

As I researched Bird, I wished that I could somehow get access to her original letters, since the letters she wrote home to her sister Henrietta supposedly were the basis of her travel books. As a trip to London or Edinburgh where her surviving letters are held was out of the question, I resigned myself to working from secondary sources—that is until a web search turned up a bit of serendipity. An American scholar at Princeton University, Kay Chubbuck, had just edited a book of Isabella’s letters, not yet released in the United States but which was available in Great Britain. Kay was kind enough to respond to my frenzied email and I received the book, Letters to Henrietta, within a week from England.

Although Isabella destroyed many of her letters, the ones that survive from her days in the Rockies proved to be an invaluable source of information for my thesis. Bird had claimed to her publisher, John Murray, that her travel books were the original, unedited letters to her sister. Chubbuck’s diligent work reveals this was not the case. Comparing the letters with the travel books was fascinating and illuminating for me. In her letters to Henrietta, Isabella portrays much more of her frank reactions while on her Rocky Mountain “ravage”-- of the delights of riding astride, of her relationship with Rocky Mountain Jim Nugent, and of her dread of leaving Estes Park. In my text, I differentiate between the two texts by referring to Isabella’s “letters” when I am citing and discussing Letters to Henrietta, and to her travel book when I am citing and discussing A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains.

My enthusiasm and admiration for Bird only continues to grow. I find much with which to identify in the restless life of this Victorian traveler. Her late-blooming wanderlust, her complicated emotions about the Colorado wilderness, her struggles to “fit

in,” and her attraction to marginalized people like Mountain Jim remain compelling for me. She was a complex woman who defies labeling and almost a hundred years after her death, she remains something of an enigma. But when she writes of galloping across the meadows of Estes Park at “delirious” speed, she is not a stranger. She is any woman who has ever loved the exhilarating feeling of wind lifting her hair and of unconstrained freedom from the confines of femininity. Through A Lady’s Life I experience with her the joy of finding in the Colorado Rockies “far more than I ever dared to hope for” (82).

CHAPTER ONE

“This is no region for tourists and women, only for a few elk and bear hunters at times, and its unprofaned freshness gives me new life” (Life 54).

For a woman who traveled alone to remote parts of the world in the Victorian age when women were called upon to be the “angel of the hearth,” Isabella Lucy Bird had prosaically “normal” middle class beginnings. Bedeviled by ill health, her travels began in earnest only after she passed the age of forty. Once she discovered that travel alleviated many of her troublesome ailments, there was no holding her back. “Between the ages of 23 and 70 Isabella made seven major journeys and was away from home over nine years,” notes Olive Checkland, Isabella’s most recent scholarly biographer (xiii). She continued to travel until her final illness and by then had written a dozen books, including the best sellers: The Hawaiian Archipelago, The Golden Chersonese, Unbeaten Tracks in Japan, as well as A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains (Chubbuck 1).

Isabella Bird was born in 1831 in Yorkshire, England, the daughter of middle-class Rev. Edward Bird and Mrs. Dora Bird (Checkland 3). Her father was a clergyman whose ideas about Sunday observance were so strict that he was run off from at least one of his appointments by angry, stone-throwing congregants (6). As a father, Edward Bird was perhaps unusual for the Victorian era. Checkland notes he found in Isabella a daughter who was “a surrogate for a longed for son and [gave her] opportunities normally reserved for a boy” (3). Most importantly, he gave young Isabella the opportunity and the money to travel.

Whatever his rigidity on the subject of working on Sunday, Edward Bird seems to have been a tender and understanding father. As a toddler, Isabella rode on the front of

her father's saddle as he made the rounds through his parishes. Edward Bird taught his daughter to be a keen observer by questioning her on details in the scenery they passed (4). Checkland goes so far as to credit Isabella for recognizing that her father was the source of power in her world and claims that this recognition led Isabella to "emulate him" (3-4) and calls Isabella the "acting son" (7).

Checkland's somewhat Freudian interpretation of young Isabella's actions may have merit, but I tend to believe that Isabella's strength of character, most prominent when she was away on her travels, is a personality trait perhaps inherited from her strong-willed father or at least influenced by growing up in his care, and is not necessarily a conscious yearning for power as Checkland implies. The relationship between Isabella and her father does seem central to her later development into "the Samson abroad" even if she remained the "invalid at home" (Edinburgh Medical Journal qtd. in Chubbuck 5). Edward Bird, Checkland surmises, "must be given the credit for encouraging independence in his older daughter," "encouraging her from earliest days to go her own way," and to "travel light and to travel alone" (xiii).

Edward and his daughter appear to have shared an extraordinary closeness, collaborating on religious research and writing, and had many interests in common (Checkland 11). However, it is doubtful that Isabella's father can be seen as the source of her inclination to travel alone, for so often in her letters Isabella herself indicates her preference for solitude or for the company of only a few individuals, preferably non-English people, without attributing this trait to her father's influence. As seen in The Lady's Life In the Rocky Mountains, Isabella sought out people of alienated or fringe status such as Mountain Jim Nugent. By no means a recluse, she eventually lectured

about her travels to large crowds at home in England, spoke to the Royal Geographic Society and answered questions about Armenian Christians posed by a Committee of the House of Commons (Checkland xv). Nonetheless, her letters often express how much she enjoys solitude or a small company and then contradict themselves at other times when she seems to fear solitude, especially in nature. Clearly she has conflicting feelings about being alone, but in her letters an aversion to crowds of people seems to predominate. Although Isabella's lifelong distaste of some people, particularly pompous English aristocrats or middle and upper class dandies, may have been learned at her father's knee, this distaste is a characteristic that Isabella herself arguably carried to her own extremes for her own motivations. That she did often travel alone is important to her freedom of movement and choice of where and when she traveled and ultimately greatly affects the experiences she had traveling.

One clearly remarkable act of Edward Bird's that launched his daughter on a life of travel and eventually of high adventure, was the generous gift of 100 pounds Bird gave his daughter for her first long journey to America in 1854 when she was twenty-three. Virginia Woolf would have appreciated Edward Bird's gesture, since she recognizes that for a woman to be able to write, she needs "money and a room of her own" (Woolf 4). Interestingly enough, although Edward staked Isabella for her first lengthy travel, she eventually became such a popular travel writer that she was well fixed for money to travel (Checkland 96) when and where she would, and as for a room of her own, the whole world became her room, or at least some of the more remote parts of it. She made herself at home in both the outer world of nature and the "inside" world of primitive huts, tents, and cabins, often remarking in her letters that the more primitive her "room," the

more peace and comfort she found. Even an unchinked cabin in Estes Park with snow blowing in through the gaps in the rough hewn logs merits her praise—"I don't think I ever liked a room so well as this" she wrote in an 1873 letter to her sister (Chubbuck 192). If it had not been for Edward's initial contribution of those 100 pounds, along with his "leave to stay away as long as [the money] lasted" (Stoddart 29), Isabella may never have experienced the travels that eventually gave her the breakthroughs in physical and emotional health that she so desperately craved.

Her mother's influence on Isabella was strong as well. She taught both her daughters (sister Henrietta was born more than three years after Isabella) at home, and of her schooling Isabella said, "No one can teach now as my mother taught; it was all so wonderfully interesting that we sat spellbound when she explained things to us. We should never have liked an ordinary teacher" (qtd. in Stoddart 12). A Sunday school teacher and a quiet woman (Stoddart 8), Dora Bird remains a more shadowy figure than Edward Bird, which is perhaps indicative of her position as a Victorian wife and mother whose name, Victorians thought, should only appear in print on the occasions of her birth and death. However, Dora Bird's love for learning seems to have lived on in her daughters. Isabella early on became a writer, with her first article, on free trade, published when she was sixteen (Chubbuck 307) and her first travel book, The Englishwoman in America, before her twenty-fifth birthday. Isabella relished education throughout her life; she was unafraid of technology, fascinated by the microscope, and later, past mid-life, took up the camera (Barr 336). Biographer Pat Barr notes that as late as 1900, when Isabella was nearly seventy, she was taking lessons in conversational French and in cooking, and had purchased a tricycle. Isabella had progressed so far in the art of

photography that in her late sixties she took lessons in “developing, platinotyping and lantern slide making by reduction” (Barr 336). Although always overshadowed by Isabella, sister Henrietta was still known as a “classical scholar who excelled at translations of Greek and Latin manuscripts,” primarily to “assist her in understanding the scriptures” (Checkland 30). Chubbuck details a long list of many other of Henrietta’s academic accomplishments including the study of “astronomy, botany, chemistry, philosophy,” calls her a “skilled mathematician,” and observes that she had her work published in literary magazines (Chubbuck 9).

The relationship between the two sisters is intriguing and puzzling. Once both parents had died, Edward in 1858 and Dora in 1867 (Checkland viii-ix), it was to Henrietta that Isabella wrote most of the lengthy letters that were to form the basis of much of her travel writing. At first glance, it appears that they had an extremely loving and caring relationship, yet more recent studies of Isabella such as those by Checkland and Chubbuck reflect a deeper examination of the interaction between the two women. Checkland calls into question why the two sisters took up separate residences immediately after the death of their mother, when if they had been as close as imagined, they might have been expected to cling to one another in their grief. They seldom lived together afterwards, and were able to afford to live apart because they fortunately possessed “modest private means” after inheritances from their parents (Checkland 30). In her letters home to Henrietta during her travels, Isabella often refers to her sister as “My Dearest Pet” or “My Darling,” and refers to herself as “Its All” and “Its Poor Suffering Little Pet” (qtd. in Chubbuck 8). Isabella asserts to Henrietta in one letter from Colorado that “I generally dream of you, and awake so disappointed because you are not

there” (LTH 165). “Through such endearments, Isabella portrays Henrietta as an adoring but passive ‘It.’ ‘My heart yearns over my good sweet little thing.’ ‘My sweetest thing, it does not know how I care for it,’” Chubbuck observes (qtd. in Chubbuck 8). I wonder, along with Chubbuck, do these terms of endearment convey love or guilt (11)? Isabella would have probably suppressed any guilt feelings about leaving her sister behind by the rationalization that after all, she was “traveling for her health.”

Little physical evidence of Henrietta remains. One photograph survives, but much of Henrietta’s writing is lost; all of her letters except for one, her diaries, and her articles have disappeared. Her small volume of poetry was only known among a few readers in Scotland. Isabella’s biographers Stoddart and Barr construct an image of “Hennie” as the “idealised Victorian ‘angel of the hearth’” (Chubbuck 8), while Checkland and Chubbuck challenge the static vision of Henrietta as the “fire-keeper for Isabella’s return and inspiration for Isabella’s best writing” (Barr 20). Isabella does seem to have jealously guarded the solitude of her travels from her sister, while ironically claiming to miss her severely. “Oh my sweetest how I long to see its sweet unworldly face again” she writes Henrietta from the Rocky Mountains (Letters 180), yet when Henrietta suggests coming out to join Isabella from time to time, the answer is always “No” (Chubbuck 10). Isabella’s travels remained her own, and the freedom she enjoyed while traveling became almost like a cherished possession that she guarded jealously even from her only sibling.

In addition to her family ties, central to Isabella’s life story is her ill-health. Apparently sickly as a child, Isabella is thought to have had a tumor removed from her spine at age eighteen. Her back trouble was life-long, and she was at one time so weak that a steel brace was devised for her neck because she had difficulty holding her head

up. She also was often plagued by insomnia and serious depression (Stoddart 68-70, Chubbuck 5-7). Chubbuck reveals a theory that Isabella's biographers have not: that Isabella suffered from a distressing ailment called carbunculosus, "a staphylococcus skin infection that results in large, infectious knobs on the back and spine" and that "can be accompanied by fever, fatigue, inflammation and malaise" (6). Isabella, naturally reticent about discussing this illness even in letters to Henrietta, only refers to it as "that other" and notes in one letter from the Rocky Mountains that this ailment is better, she believes because of "washing with cold water" (Letters 178).

Another troubling aspect of Isabella's health is the drugs she freely used to treat herself. Most disturbing is her use of potassium bromide, a drug now only used to treat dogs for epilepsy (Thomas). In Victorian times, it was commonly prescribed, Checkland notes, as a "mild sedative" (31); Chubbuck notes that it would not in any event have benefited the carbunculosus from which she may have suffered (6). What Isabella did not immediately recognize was that potassium bromide built up in the body over time and had toxic effects known as bromidism. Bromidism could cause "drowsiness and ... various psychological ailments" as well as a rash (Checkland 31). Isabella, who seems to have taken enough bromide at times that she did suffer from shaking and nervousness, was "oppressed with undefined terror," (qtd. in Chubbuck 6) and complained of a rash, apparently experienced bromidism while traveling in Australia in 1872 (Checkland 31). She seems to have believed so strongly in the "miraculous" power of bromide that while traveling in the Rocky Mountains, she administered bromide to her friend Evans who needed a good night's sleep, and even to his pregnant wife, who had been feeling poorly (Letters 173). Fortunately, Checkland observes, bromide does "not produce a state of

euphoria” and is “not addictive”; she surmises that some of Isabella’s ill health may have been brought on by “the bromide habit itself” (31). It seems unclear how much bromide Isabella may have used while in the Rockies, but judging by the apparent improvement in health from her days in Australia, one can assume she was not overusing the drug during her stay there.

From 1872-1873 Isabella took an extended journey to Australia, the Sandwich Islands and then on to the Colorado Rockies after her mother’s death. Isabella was past forty and her health had deteriorated so much that her doctors had again prescribed a trip. Little did Isabella know that this trip would be different from any other that she had undertaken. After a “miserable” time in Australia under the “white unwinking scintillating sun” (qtd. in Checkland 35), she left on the rickety steamer *Nevada* for the first leg of the long journey back to England (Checkland 35). Shortly after embarking, the ill-prepared *Nevada*, her passengers and crew were caught in the middle of a tropical cyclone, and the vessel was in real danger of sinking. Instead of retiring to her cabin like the helpless Victorian Englishwoman she may have appeared to be, Isabella rose to the occasion and assisted the frightened and sea-sick passengers. The ship survived the storm, barely, and Isabella experienced the “breakthrough which changed her life” (Checkland 36). She learned to her amazement that excitement, physical hardship, and danger were what made her finally feel intensely, exhilaratingly alive. Almost giddy at the discovery, she wrote:

At last I am in love and the old sea-god has so stolen my heart and penetrated my soul that I seriously feel that hereafter, though I must be somewhere else in body, I shall be with him in spirit! . . . It is so like living

in a new world, so free, so fresh, so vital, so careless, so unfettered, so full of interest that one grudges being asleep; and instead of carrying cares and worries and thoughts of the morrow to bed with one to keep one awake, one falls asleep at once to wake to another day in which one knows that there can be nothing to annoy one—no door-bells, no “please mems,” no dirt, no bills, no demands of any kind, no vain attempts to overtake all one knows one should do. Above all, no nervousness, and no conventionalities, no dressing. If my clothes drop into rags they can be pinned together . . . I am often in tempestuous spirits. It seems a sort of brief resurrection of a girl of twenty-one. (qtd. in Barr 22)

Isabella credits the sea god with introducing her to the “new world” of which she now sees herself a part. Nature, always important to her from the days she rode through the English countryside as a toddler on the front of her father’s saddle, seems to have worked some kind of cure on her troubled psyche and on some of her physical complaints, but this “nature” is not the benign nature of the flowering English garden. Isabella’s travel books and letters reveal an awe of “wild” nature that is not without a component of danger. She shows an attraction to this very danger she presumably fears that is especially inherent in the natural world that she eagerly sought in the Rocky Mountains. Maria Frawley notes a common thread which links Victorian women travelers in the “adventuresses” category, and which includes Isabella Bird, is that danger was part of the “empowering vitalizing experience” of travel for these women (112). Nature and danger seemed to cure Isabella of many of her health problems. Mary Tinning reflects, “Perhaps her doctor had enough insight to realize that her problems stemmed

from a strong personality at odds with an enfeebling environment; at any rate, he prescribed travel” (qtd. in Frawley 112). Isabella realized what travel could do for her, and Checkland suggests:

as a sick gentlewoman [Isabella] evolved a foolproof *modus operandi* which allowed her to have the travel alternative available when required. Acting through her attentive medical advisers she so arranged matters that they, once her health had deteriorated sufficiently, readily recommended that she seek a ‘change of air.’ She then rose from her sick bed, made her preparations and set off, not for the staid delights of Worthing, Torquay or even Cannes but for far off, distant and exotic places. (xvi)

Frawley surmises, “a woman who suffered from physical ailments that left her all but completely debilitated at home could make such enormous use of strength and fortitude abroad suggests much about the energizing function of travel for Victorian women” (112-113).

No wonder then that by the end of her sojourn in Estes Park, Colorado, Isabella experienced real dread at the thought of returning to civilization and somehow anticipated that the return to “home,” to England, and to the conventions of Victorian womanhood would be unhealthy for her. In her letters to Henrietta, she reveals her concerns about going home, and in fact is so disconsolate about leaving that she acts to hasten her departure:

It is no use staying here. I feel so convinced that the old miseries would begin again at whatever time I gave up this life that I intend to leave the first day I can get anyone to go down with me. It is so sad that you can

never see me as I am now with an unconstrained manner, and an up-to-anything free legged air. I did not expect to have so 'good a time' as this in Colorado because I had no idea I could ride here. (Letters 184)

Later she adds "I am howling frightfully, fearfully about leaving the place and the life. It will be better when it is over now. It is strange that a place and life totally unconnected with people can have such charms, but I am thoroughly attached to it ..." (Letters 184). And again she maintains to Henrietta, "I believe I should always be pretty well here, but that whenever I left it would be the same miserable downfall so what good is there in staying, when I weary to see its blessed little mean face again" (Letters 185). Estes Park has even affected how she feels about her age; Isabella asserts "I don't feel old here. I do so dread the thought of getting back with literally no place to be the homeless life without its charms" (Letters 185). Her reference to the homeless life probably refers to the fact that she had given up her rented abode at 3 Castle Terrace, Edinburgh and had no home place waiting for her upon her return (Checkland ix). Her apprehension about homelessness in Edinburgh stands in contrast with her homeless existence while traveling, which was an enjoyable experience after her breakthrough and as she says, has its "charms."

So Isabella, a few months after her life-changing experience on the Nevada, seems to have realized that home equated ill health for her, and even before she got home, she already acutely dreads the ill health that seemed inevitable upon her return. Why is this the case? Did Isabella, a Victorian woman like Margaret Fuller, suffer because "womanhood is at present too straitly-bounded to give me scope" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 71)? Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar prompt one to examine Isabella's

choice of profession--writing--for answers about how her illness could be related to the conventions of Western culture. They note that Elizabeth Barrett Browning found that “the contradictions between her vocation and her gender were so dangerous that they might lead to complete self-destruction” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 70).

Isabella not only wrote in a time when women writers were a rarity, she also wrote in a specialized field--that of travel writing--a field that while often popular with readers, was even more outside the “literary” spheres of poetry or fiction that were considered provisionally permissible for women writers. Gilbert and Gubar note that “many of the most distinguished late eighteenth-century and nineteenth –century English and American women writers do not seem to ‘fit’ into any of those categories to which our literary historians have accustomed us. Indeed, to many critics and scholars, some of those literary women look like isolated eccentrics” (72). The woman travel writer is even further beyond the pale. Travel writing, especially by women, is still looked at askance by many literary critics. Sarah Mills observes that Paul Fussell “explicitly refuses to consider women travel writers within his account of literary travel, as he states that they are not sufficiently concerned either with travel or with writing itself” (Mills 3). Women’s travel books, writes Mills, “have been read [as] primarily ‘realist,’ that is, they are not analysed as textual artefacts, but rather as simple autobiographies. The only critics who have been concerned with women’s travel writing have been women critics, who have usually situated themselves, at least implicitly, within a feminist framework” (Mills 4). While Mills shows some prejudice herself against the genre of female “simple autobiography” (she argues for a postcolonial critique of these writings), she does make a valid point. Women’s travel writing has been relegated to a status inferior not only to

men's travel writing and but also to other supposedly more "literary," and, therefore, more critically worthy genres. Considering that women's travel writing is only recently gaining some acceptance as a literary form meriting study, a woman who worked in that genre in the Victorian age, especially an unmarried, middle aged woman, a semi-invalid like Isabella, was arguably regarded by her contemporaries as beyond eccentric. While some may have admired her daring, they may have also, as Isabella herself chronicles after she gained notoriety in newspapers in the Rockies, have seen her as a "monster" (*Life* 235). She says in *A Lady's Life* that "the newspapers, with their intolerable personality, have made me and my riding exploits so notorious, that travelers speak courteously to me when they meet me on the prairie, doubtless wishing to see what sort of monster I am!" (235).

Perceptions of Isabella during her lifetime may certainly have been disturbing to Isabella, even if some contemporaries managed to admire her by the time she had published some of her later travel works—she was, after all, the first woman accepted as a fellow into the Royal Geographic Society (Checkland x). But even as successful, well-known, powerful women today struggle with the public's negative perception of them (a phenomenon I think of privately as the Hillary Clinton/Martha Stewart Syndrome), so Isabella probably found many detractors and skeptics in her day. Even one of her trusted publishers, John Murray IV, went so far as to call Isabella's veracity into question, advising Anna Stoddart, her first biographer, that Isabella

... was intentionally the most truthful of people, but she had that endowment which I have come across in several people, of seeing incidents in the superlative degree—if I may coin the expression. This

involves a high colouring of the mental picture and the colouring used to vary in varying recitals. I have very often noticed this, and it is a quality which must be borne in mind, tho' not perhaps expressed, in describing her character. (qtd. in Checkland 53)

Even almost a hundred years after Isabella's journey in the Rockies, Pat Barr, the 1970 biographer of Bird, opens her text with a description of Isabella on her 1872 journey as "a quiet, intelligent-looking dumpy English spinster" calling her "desperate for physical and mental health" and sums up her first paragraph reflecting that Isabella was "growing old, unused, unfulfilled; she was fretful, depressed, frustrated, and near mental collapse" (19). Barr's assessment of Isabella's unfortunate physical and mental illnesses rings true when recorded in a raw manner that draws attention to Bird's gender in ways that probably would not have been used on a male subject—I can't imagine a man of Bird's stature being called "old, unused, unfulfilled" or "fretful." Calling her "dumpy" disturbs me even further. Barr characterizes Bird by attacking her femininity, and backs up Joan Didion's notion that "writing is an aggression" because it is "an imposition . . . an invasion of someone else's most private space" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 20). In this case the aggression is not only against the reader but also against the subject being written about. In her petty assessment of Isabella as a "dumpy spinster" perhaps Barr is revealing her own "anxiety of authorship" by describing Isabella so pejoratively. Despite her inappropriate beginning, Barr is more often than not admiring of Bird throughout the remainder of the biography. By calling her "dumpy," Barr may fulfill her need to set Bird apart from the long-held feminine ideal of willowy thinness, so that she can write about her—perhaps writing goes easier, is more interesting, more enjoyable, when one writes

about the “monster” rather than the “angel,” even though Bird of course is neither. Gilbert and Gubar might interpret Barr’s characterization of Bird as the continued influence of the “angel- and monster- imagery” and a demonstration of their influential premise that “some understanding of such imagery is an essential preliminary to any study of literature by women” (20).

Maria H. Frawley gives some contemporary Victorian examples of the conflicting imagery that some men attached to women travelers. W. G. Blaikie wrote about the “adventuresses” that their “spirit defied ‘hurricanes, shipwreck, arctic cold and darkness, and all other dangers and discomforts of the sea: and by land, fatigue, hunger, and sickness, robbers and extortioners, wild beasts, scorpions, mosquitoes, heat and cold, filth and fever’” (qtd. in Frawley 110). However, when Isabella and other women wanted to be admitted to the Royal Geographic Society, Frawley reveals, “the debate took a nasty turn” (111). She quotes a letter of George Curzon, an “influential MP” who wrote to The Times:

We contest *in toto* the capability of women to contribute to scientific geographic knowledge. Their sex and training render them equally unfitted for exploration, and the genus of professional globe-trotter is one of the horrors of the later end of the nineteenth century. (qtd. in Frawley 111)

Frawley finds that “the geographical knowledge to which Victorian adventuresses had access threatened the public at home on some level, and this threat was articulated by translating geographic knowledge into sexual knowledge” and led to the notion that these women were “sexual anomalies” (111).

Isabella battled with such prejudices in her A Lady's Life. Often she seems to want to prove her femininity by demonstrating how concerned she is for the women and children of Colorado (at least those of European descent) such as when she deplores that the life of Griff Evans's wife as "compared with her lord's, is like that of a squaw" (111), or when she shows her concern for keeping house while "baching" in a cabin with two men in Estes Park. One day she notes that after breakfast at 9:30, "I never sat down till two. I cleaned the living room and the kitchen, swept a path through the rubbish in the passage room, washed up, made and baked a batch of rolls and four pounds of sweet biscuits, cleaned some tins and pans, washed some clothes, and gave things generally a 'redding up'" (208). Frawley calls such concerns of Victorian women travel writers "the domestication of adventure," but I contend that Isabella was less susceptible to this "domestication" than Frawley suggests. True, at times Isabella wants to prove she is capable of the everyday feminine activities that occupied so much of a woman of that era's day, but she can't resist being unconventional, no matter how concerned she may be with public perception. While staying with a family on the plains before gaining access to Estes Park, Isabella helps with getting in the corn crop and asserts, "I much prefer field work to the scouring of greasy pans and to the wash tub, and both to either sewing or writing" (Life 69). When Griff Evans offers her the job of "hired girl" for the winter at the sum of six dollars a week, she is not offended at what may have been seen by another Englishwoman as an insult to her status as a "lady." "I think I should like playing at being a 'hired girl' if it were not for the bread-making! But it would suit me better to ride after cattle" (Life 134). And she does ride after cattle with the men on Evans's ranch in Estes Park, earning their respect and becoming, as she calls herself in her letters, a centaur, at

one with her horse (Letters 186). Rounding up cattle with the men gives her an opportunity that is almost unthinkable for most women of her station—an opportunity when she and others can forget that she is “*a lady*.” After a particularly wild round-up, Isabella rides up to the lead cowboy, whom she observes “received me with much laughter. He said I was ‘a good cattleman,’ and that he had forgotten that a lady was of the party till he saw me ‘come leaping over the timber, and driving with the others’” (Life 129). Not only is the experience extraordinary, but that Isabella reveals it to her readers is daring as well. Apparently the risk to her feminine reputation is less important to her than the heady excitement of affirming these days of freedom. In her letters to Henrietta, she is even more frank, “It is a man’s life but all people here seem to think it fitting for me!” she asserts (Letters 154).

Barr and other writers fail to address Isabella’s struggles within her chosen career and where that career took her geographically. She was a writer, but a writer who seems on the surface to be not as conflicted about her writing as she was about where she could do that writing. She needed to be away from England to write, and this need is more than just the obvious necessity that to write travel books one must travel. She did not just need to travel—if that was all she required, she could have traveled the British Isles her whole life and never have run out of material. But Isabella also needed to travel to remote, uncivilized, wild regions rather than to tour the British Isles or even to take the grand tour of Europe as would have been accepted and expected of a woman of her time and class. She needed to get far enough away from her homeland that the conventions of Victorian England no longer bound her hand, foot, and tongue.

Nevertheless, this burning need to escape the stifling conventionalities of that culture, the need that she discovered quite by accident at age 42 in the middle of a South Pacific gale on the vermin-infested steamer *Nevada*, is disguised in her travel works such as A Lady's Life although a careful reader can find it there. Her recently published letters home to Henrietta are the real mother-lode for mining Isabella's feelings, although I am reasonably sure that Isabella's feelings about civilization are modified even in those letters to reflect a more acceptable level of discontent. Her rage is masked even when she writes to her sister, although in these letters the churning discontent is much more apparent than in the sanitized "for public consumption" travel books ironically published by a man who thought she was an exaggerator. Quite probably Isabella's rage is masked from herself, for to look that rage in the face would have been more dangerous than looking into the boiling volcano at the top of Kilauea, as Isabella did in Hawaii.

In her letters to Henrietta, Isabella can be frank about her feelings for riding side-saddle. Another important breakthrough for Isabella occurred while in the Sandwich Islands when she was outfitted with a Mexican saddle (a Western style saddle with a horn) and began to routinely ride astride (Checkland 39). While at first glance this change in riding style may seem a more minor breakthrough than the events on the *Nevada*, riding astride was an important component to Isabella's newfound adventurousness. Because of her back problems, riding had become excruciating for Isabella, and riding astride alleviated much of her discomfort (39). Riding astride let her ride longer and harder. She could ride up and down steep slopes that would have been far too risky to attempt on a side saddle. Most delightful of all to Isabella was that astride she could

gallop faster than ever before (Checkland 39-40) and even race the cowboys over the snow in Estes Park (Letters 183).

But riding astride was a rebellious act for an Englishwoman and a lady. This way of riding was for men only in her culture, and Isabella quailed at the thought of it at first, since she was “strongly prejudiced against ladies riding astride” (Checkland 39). However, as Checkland reasons, “gossips from home were far away and she knew many foreign ladies had adopted the Mexican saddle” (39). So, after having quickly outfitted herself with ““full Turkish trousers and [a] jauntily made dress[,]” that she euphemistically called her “Hawaiian ladies riding dress,” Isabella was converted to the superiority of riding astride. She was free in confessing her “unspeakable relief of getting on astride” to her sister in her letters from Colorado (Letters 149). Still, when reaching a settlement of any size, Isabella would resentfully obey convention by stopping to change into different attire and mount side saddle. “I got off put on a skirt and rode sideways but it did not look like a place where any deference to foolish prejudices was necessary,” she writes Henrietta about her approach to Colorado Springs (Letters 153).

In A Lady's Life, Isabella must appear gentler and be less forthright for her presumably convention-minded readers than to her sister and confidante. Early in her narrative, she explains to a livery stable owner in a remote village that she can't ride “any distance in the conventional mode” and he gallantly offers her a Mexican saddle, rather than the “velvet-covered side-saddles almost without horns” that he naturally assumed she wanted. ““Ride your own fashion; here at Truckee, if anywhere in the world, people can do as they like,”” (10) he says, and Isabella responds to her reader, “Blissful Truckee!” (10). Isabella is careful to note when she gets off to change her dress from

riding bloomers to skirt and into side-saddle mode in A Lady's Life, and while her account of the same instance of riding into Colorado Springs is similar to that in her letters to Henrietta, when she mentions the word "prejudice," the adjective "foolish" is tellingly dropped from her travel text. Writing in A Lady's Life about leaving the village of Longmont, she makes an issue of her embarrassment at having to mount astride in front of a crowd in her "old Hawaiian riding dress," but affirms that the respectable "Dr. and Mrs. H. assured me that I looked quite 'insignificant and unnoticeable'" (Life 74). Isabella takes many chances in her writing, but she knows she must keep some of her most unconventional opinions to herself.

Reading her recently published letters and comparing them to her travel writings is to see Isabella Bird with a double vision and to know that, as conscious as Bird seems of her more inauthentic image, neither the Isabella in her letters nor the Isabella in her travel books is the "real" Isabella. As Mills says of Victorian women's travel accounts, these documents reflect fragments of Isabella and can only drop "hints of a story that can never be fully recovered" (6).

CHAPTER TWO

“Long’s Peak rises in purple gloom, and I long for the cool air and unfettered life of the solitary blue hollow at its base” (Life 198).

Part of what intrigues me most about A Lady’s Life is Isabella’s conflicted relationship with nature and that the nature she craves is what many people call “wilderness.” Yet while she seeks out this place, this “wilderness,” and recognizes its fragility in the face of the westward expansion of European American settlers, she is also at times afraid when she reaches the wilderness she desires. “Wilderness” appears to represent for her a place of freedom from a restrained Victorian lady’s life, as well as a place of health, of beauty, of spirituality but also of potential danger. Before exploring these issues in Bird’s narrative, the notion of “wilderness” begs some inquiry.

The definition of “wilderness,” Roderick Nash muses, is “elusive.” In Wilderness and the American Mind, Nash confronts the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the word “wilderness” when it is “so heavily freighted with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist easy definition” (1). He investigates the etymology of the word to find that its early roots from the Teutonic and Norse languages meant “will” and more particularly “self-willed, willful, or uncontrollable” and that from the word “willed” “came the adjective ‘wild’ used to convey the idea of being lost, unruly, disordered, or confused” (1). Nash explains that the word “wild” in Old Swedish referred to “boiling water” and the “essential concept was that of being ungoverned or out of control” (1). All this etymology gives a rich source for interpretation of Bird’s narrative.

For what is more uncontrollable, more unruly, disordered, or even confused, than Isabella Bird in the Rocky Mountains, at least as far as a conservative English Victorian male onlooker might contend? She leaves her warm, safe hearth in England, she travels

alone without the direction or protection of a male figure, she is unmarried, she is “old,” she wears tattered “riding trousers,” she rides a horse, rides it astride, and rides it through weather and over faint trails that even most men with any sense would not willingly choose to follow. And she admits in a letter home to Henrietta, speaking of her life in Colorado, “These are wild ways” (Letters 154). She elaborates the specifics of her day-to-day life, and the outline of her lifestyle in Colorado would surely drop more than a few jaws in middle-class Victorian England. “Having my luggage in a pack and my conveyance a horse I can stay wherever there is feed and shelter for us both. Feed for me has become a most unimportant matter. I am now eating and sleeping like a hunter,” she confesses to her sister (Letters 154).

Nash’s commentary on wilderness records even more specific meanings. He discerns that “wilderness,” because of its roots in northern European languages, also connotes a “forest primeval,” since in northern regions, uncultivated or untamed land tends to be “heavily forested,” and that wild animals of the forest also make a “wilderness” what it is. Nash continues:

The idea of a habitat of wild beasts implied the absence of men, and the wilderness was conceived as a region where a person was likely to get into a disordered, confused, or “wild” condition. In fact, “bewilder” comes from “be” attached to “wilden.” The image is that of a man in an alien environment where the civilization that normally orders and controls his life is absent. (2)

This “absence of men” seems to be important to Isabella’s quest for health. She seeks places where there are few people, areas that she admits are “no region for tourists and

women” (Life 54) While traveling in the wild, she often reports on the native animals, as though they interest her as much or more so than some of the humans she meets. She writes about her first days in the Rockies:

If one were compelled to live here in solitude one might truly say of the bears, deer, and elk which abound, ‘Their tameness is shocking to me.’
[...] Just now a heavy-headed elk, with much branched horns fully three feet long, stood and looked at me, and then quietly trotted away. He was so near that I heard the grass, crisp with hoar frost, crackle under his feet.
(Life 53)

Isabella doesn’t exactly “go native” in her “disordered, confused, or ‘wild’ condition” while in the Colorado Rockies, but she does come to love the fauna and flora in the area around Estes Park, even though she seems to struggle, at first, with her confused feelings for her mountain sanctuary.

In her letters, this struggle is much more apparent than in A Lady’s Life. Isabella seems to sense that such indecision and confusion may reflect poorly on her image as a woman writing in a man’s field. She also feels that she owes some loyalty to Hawaii, from which she had recently come. Yet riding in the Rockies has a particular appeal to her, and after one ride she reports, “I am beginning to wonder if there is so grand and varied a place in the world. [...] I often recall the Wailuku or rather the Iao Valley [in Maui] the most beautiful thing I ever saw and wonder at my admiration of this but it is perfectly glorious. Every day I admire it more and the melancholy of its winter loneliness suits me”; then a moment later she claims, “This scenery makes a deep impression upon me yet it is not loveable” (Letters 183). By the next day, November 25, 1873, she decides

that she must leave Colorado soon; she seems to have found her darkening emotions reflected in the scenery and after a walk reveals, “It was nearly dark when I came home but the melancholy glory lingered chiming with my melancholy feelings. It is the grandest place on this continent I suppose, but oh so mournful or else my feelings make me think so” (Letters 184). Later, in the same letter, she reluctantly offers, “Yes, Estes Park is loveable after 5 weeks” (185). This admission is difficult for her to make, perhaps because of her despair at having to leave the place where she thinks she may have been able to enjoy reliably good physical and mental health. But as she points out, the most compelling reason she must leave Estes Park is Rocky Mountain Jim Nugent: “I could not prolong my stay here because of him,” she writes Henrietta and adds, “How sad it is that no walls of rock can shut out human woe and evil. I can’t do with this at all” (Letters 186). Her wilderness peace has been invaded by a man who wants more of her than she will give; so the untarnished setting and the “walls of rock” lose some of their healing power.

A source of confusion and conflict for Isabella while dwelling in “wild” Estes Park is her relationship with Mr. Nugent, as she addresses him. Mountain Jim merits mention here since Isabella’s “wild” and solitary state in the Estes Park environment leaves her feeling more open to the advances of an unconventional man, a desperado, like Mountain Jim. In civilization, with the conventions of Victorian society wrapped around her like a Kevlar vest or a straightjacket, it seems unlikely that Isabella would have come within a mile of a man like Jim, and even less likely that she would have begun a relationship with him if she had. But the wilderness gives opportunities for her to interact

with Jim in a way that would never have happened in the extremely unlikely event that they had ever met in “civilization.”

Nash’s statement regarding the “wild condition” is revealing in regards to our culture’s view of wilderness and who ventures into it. It is no accident that Nash refers to the image of a “man” in the wilderness, ecofeminist Linda Vance might argue. In her essay “Ecofeminism and the Politics of Reality,” Vance finds that “the literature and the history that purport to record the interactions of human consciousness with the nonhuman world are in fact the records of male consciousness,” and she asserts that nature is almost always written about by men. When women do write about nature, they generally do so without “any degree of gender consciousness” (Vance, “Politics” 119). This lack of a female tradition in writing about nature matters, Vance maintains, because it is all too easy to “slip into prevailing Western view of the forest, and nature, as separate, other, a place to go to” (118) rather than as “home.” Since Vance’s perception of the forest is shaped by, she admits, a historically male perspective and is “mediated by literature, by religion ... by ethnicity, by science, by gender, (and) by class,” she finds it difficult to even imagine a female tradition of interaction with the forest. She maintains, “I carry around an oral and written and cinematic history of adventure in the woods” that is male adventure. She affirms that anyone male or female is well acquainted with the male experience of the forest. We all know about the hunters, the trappers, the missionaries, the explorers and other outdoorsmen even if only through watching Davy Crockett on TV, Vance concludes (120-121).

While Vance muses about the dearth of “record[s] of the ways in which women of the past interacted with nature,” she recalls snowshoeing through the woods. In this

instance, she is wearing snowshoes that belonged to a neighbor's dead husband—and Vance wonders why more women don't own snowshoes. She becomes irritated when, upon seeing another set of snowshoe tracks, she imagines that the other, unknown person who has shared the woods with her is male. Returning home, Vance looks for written evidence of a female tradition in “snow and ice.” She finds a few women who wrote of their experiences in the cold, and quotes a few sentences from A Lady's Life of Isabella Bird's experience when her eyelids froze shut while riding in a blizzard. But Vance denies that the written accounts of Bird and a few other women constitute a “female tradition,” since “tradition is not found in obscure corners. Tradition is the commonplace, the banal, what ordinary people know and recognize” and is not the few, generally forgotten, “bold women explorers and adventurers of the nineteenth century.” Further, she says, “for experience to become tradition, it has to be known, but women's lives have not been seen as important enough to be told” (122).

I agree that Isabella Bird has been consigned for too long to an “obscure corner”; her story was “lost,” perhaps somewhat deliberately, for a time, but Isabella did tell her own story, even though she was writing under the influence of the dominant culture that insisted she adopt a discourse that would be accepted by that culture. Bird will probably always be something of an outsider, because she was a bold woman, a woman who wrote about travel rather than within the marginalized but accepted female literary tradition. Nevertheless, she and her texts were well known while she was alive, and her experiences in the wilderness can be revived and studied as part of the female tradition, even if that tradition was often overlooked, ill-defined, or intentionally excluded. To write Bird out of the female tradition is akin to writing out Jane Austen from the female tradition because

she was an anomaly, rather than a typical woman of her day. Bird *can* be written back into history, and *can* be claimed by feminist scholars as a literary foremother.

Isabella Bird was deeply affected by her lifelong attraction to and concern for nature, while writing in a discourse that she made a conscious effort to fit into the Victorian culture, as the differences between her original letters and her published texts show. Alienated from Victorian life and Victorian expectations of how a lady must live, wilderness seemed to help Isabella reintegrate the disparate sides of herself in a way that life at home in England could not. Wilderness exists in “disorder,” so perhaps Isabella’s own inner conflicts seemed to pale in comparison to the larger wildness of the Rocky Mountain landscape. The stress of this difficult task of trying to fit into Victorian expectations may have contributed to her alienation, as it certainly seemed to add to her ill health, and possibly, as Vance suggests, to her conflicted, yet generally positive feelings towards wilderness.

Nash expands on the meaning of “wilderness” by noting that to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “*Wildnis* has a twofold emotional tone. On the one hand it is inhospitable, alien, mysterious, and threatening; on the other, beautiful, friendly, and capable of elevating and delighting the beholder” (4). Particularly relevant to Isabella’s healing experience in the wilderness, Nash further notes that “Involved, too, in this second conception is the value of a wild country as a sanctuary in which those in need of consolation can find respite from the pressures of civilization” (4). Acknowledging that these definitions of wilderness may seem contradictory, Nash advocates that we avoid binaries and concludes that degrees of wilderness, along something like a “scale between two poles” need to be accepted within the definition (6).

Many examples exist of Isabella's perception of the wilderness as "inhospitable, alien, mysterious, and threatening" while she traveled in Colorado, yet seldom does she express these feelings without at least some positive reactions to wilderness or to the natural setting at the same time. Riding in the Great Gorge of Manitou in the Rockies, she writes to Henrietta, "This is a fearful place a rushing torrent in a valley and mountains covered with snow rising on 3 sides and overhanging it to a height of nearly 15000 feet. It is grand and awful and has a strange solemn beauty like the beauty of death and locked in these snowy horrors a mile from here is the Ute Pass [...]. (Letters 154). Another ride traveling from Denver to Colorado Springs finds Isabella in a snowstorm, breaking through the ice of frozen creeks, and causing alarm to both horse and rider:

I cannot describe my feelings on this ride, produced by the utter loneliness, the silence and dumbness of all things, the snow falling quietly without wind, and the unusual and appalling aspect of nature. *All life was in a shroud*, all work and travel suspended. There was not a foot-mark or wheel-mark. There was nothing to be afraid of; and though I can't exactly say that I enjoyed the ride, yet there was the pleasant feeling of gaining health every hour. (Life 142, italics mine)

Again and again she seeks solitude in the wilderness and experiences these conflicting emotions of elation and something like fear. She does put herself in situations that are more risky than would seem necessary: she rides alone up icy mountain trails after dark because she "must" see Green Lake; she rides out late in the day in snowstorms with inadequate clothing rather than waiting the weather out; and she doesn't always bother to get complete directions for her remote destinations. Is she chasing danger, trying to

regain that high that she felt on the *Nevada* in the gale, or does she indeed have a death wish?

When Isabella makes reference to death, “a strange solemn beauty like the beauty of death” and “All life was in a shroud,” death in these descriptions does not have an entirely negative connotation. The Freudian concept of *thanatos*, the death instinct, explored in his text Beyond the Pleasure Principle, may apply to Isabella’s conscious/subconscious rebellion against civilization (32-33). Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents, from its title alone, sounds like a text written with discontents like Isabella Bird in mind. Scholar Tad Beckman reasons that the “‘discontent’ that civilization requires, according to Freud, is the pain of guilt feelings, the pressure of self-hatred, and the warping tendencies of neurotic symptoms” (Beckman) and some of Isabella’s actions do appear to have these neurotic underpinnings, from her ill health that improves when she travels, to her occasional disregard of personal safety. Critical of civilization, she wrote to her publisher that her intent was to stay away from it; she states, “I have succeeded in keeping in advance of its [Colorado’s] imperfect civilization confining myself to the regions which have not yet passed the log-cabin phase of existence” (Checkland 52).

Bird doesn’t truly seem to want to die, but her risk-taking may reflect the fact that her life at home was hardly worth living to her. Her ill health was extreme in England, and by the time she reaches the Rockies, she consciously recognizes that once she returns home she will become ill again. Chubbuck cites one of Isabella’s letters to her publisher, and even though it was written on a later trip to Korea, the dawn of understanding of the nature of her illness seems to have already occurred by the time she traveled in the

Rockies. In that revealing letter from Korea, Isabella confesses, “I suffer from fatigue of a social kind, and that part of *ordinary* life, the *attempt*, often fruitless, to make things ‘fit in,’ which produces attacks of nervous exhaustion and partial failure of the heart.” Chubbuck follows with quotes from other letters in which Isabella claims that “her malady derived from ‘severe prostration of the nervous system’ as opposed to ‘any constitutional tendency’” and that she believes she suffers from “constitutional depression” (Chubbuck 7). If her life at home is such a burden, a thing to be dreaded, she may compensate somehow while in the wilds—in a fatalistic way. If she is meant to die, she may be giving herself the skewed pleasure of risking death doing what she loves, in the wilderness where she feels most alive and not on the padded Victorian sofa that awaits like an open coffin at home.

Isabella does not seem to be aware of herself as an advocate for the preservation of wilderness, but in some sense she is. She observes the nearly pristine Rocky Mountains and describes for her readers the wondrous landscape, as well as its fauna and flora. She takes more than ordinary pleasure in the details of her environment, and perhaps owes a debt of gratitude to her father, who encouraged her on those rides around the parish as a girl to tell him “about the crops in such and such a field – whether a water wheel was under-shot or over-shot, how each gate we passed through was hung, about animals seen and parishioners met” (qtd. in Checkland 4). While some of her vivid descriptions seem somewhat garishly descriptive by today’s literary conventions, they also seem somewhat sexual in their exhilaration, at times bordering on the orgasmic:

This is surely one of the most entrancing spots on earth. Oh, that I could paint with pen or brush! From my bed I look on Mirror Lake, and with the

very earliest dawn, when objects are not discernible, it lies there absolutely still, a purplish lead color. Then suddenly into its mirror flash inverted peaks, at first a bright orange, then changing into red [...] the glory steals downwards, and a red flush warms the clear atmosphere of the park [...]. (Life 116)

Later that same day her ecstasy continues:

I couldn't go on writing for the glory of the sunset, but went out and sat on a rock to see the deepening blue in the dark canyons, and the peaks becoming rose color one by one, then fading into sudden ghastliness, the awe-inspiring heights of Long's Peak fading last. Then came the glories of the afterglow [...] a broad band of rich, warm red, with an upper band of rose color... this is the "daily miracle" of evening, as the blazing peaks in the darkness of Mirror Lake are the miracle of morning. (Life 117-118)

When she gleans so much pleasure from the wilderness, I'm led to speculate that her exposure to the rugged landscape supplies a kind of visceral satisfaction to this sexually repressed, sexually deprived Victorian woman. She is after all, a "virgin woman" in what passes for a "virgin wilderness" (although she notes that even this pristine Colorado has already been defiled, with the buffalo nearly all massacred and the mining practices that have raped the mountainsides).

The whole idea of wilderness, of nature, of "Mother Earth" as a woman, to be dominated and plundered by men, and the significance of the link between unspoiled wilderness and woman has challenged many ecofeminists. Some claim men want to

possess and exploit the wilderness as they possess and exploit women, but possession and exploitation do not always go hand-in-hand. When Isabella says:

“What is Estes Park?” [...] Such as it is, Estes Park is mine. It is unsurveyed, “no man’s land,” and mine by right of love, appropriation, and appreciation; by the seizure of its peerless sunrises and sunsets, its glorious afterglow, its blazing noons, its hurricanes sharp and furious, its wild auroras, its glories of mountain and forest, of canyon, lake and river, and the stereotyping them all in my memory. (Life 104)

I, too, have felt this sort of protective possession about wild places: Ocracoke Island in North Carolina and the Wasatch and Uintah Mountains of Utah. These places are mine, by “right of love.”

Intellectually I understand that I don’t and can’t possess these places, and indeed these places no longer exist in the conditions they once did when I lived there. The Ocracoke Island and Utah mountains that I “own” live only in memory, just as Bird promises she will “stereotype” Estes Park in hers. Nonetheless, I retain an undeniable, unshakable possessiveness towards these places and quail when I think how they have been altered—abused by over-development—since I have been away from them. I want to call these places “mine,” selfishly yes, I admit it, for my personal enjoyment, and this may be a shamefully masculine response on my part. However, if they were truly mine, I would protect them from over-exploitation. Perhaps my response is a learned patriarchal one, or even a capitalistic urge, although perhaps a gentler one than that of a condo developer. I want to “own” these places, but like the environmentalist I am, I don’t want

to “consume” them. Bird also dreaded the inevitable changes development would bring to Estes Park.

Isabella seems to endow the wilderness of Estes Park with a perfection that may be a dangerous notion, according to Vance. In her article “Ecofeminism and Wilderness,” Vance points out the difficulties inherent in the “premise that wilderness equals nature” (62). Indeed, I have been uneasily conscious of how I use both the word “wilderness” and the word “nature” while writing this thesis. Vance finds:

Idealizing wilderness as “pure” or “perfect” nature ensures two things: first, that a privileged few will always be able to shake off the yoke of civilization—usually defined by reference to its “lower” aspects—and revert to a temporary state of primal purity where they can be appropriately humbled in the presence of God’s creation and then return restored and refreshed to the challenges of the human world; and second, that the inferiority of all other expressions of nature will be reinforced, thereby justifying continuing domination of them. (Vance, “Wilderness” 62-63)

The second part of Vance’s assertion rings true—that if the only nature worth preserving is “wilderness” nature, then less and less nature will “qualify” for preservation and more and more areas that are stressed by the use of humans will be abandoned by preservationists as already lost, or will be “managed as ‘sacrifice areas,’” areas where any amount or type of human activity is tolerated (Vance 63).

However, Vance’s assertion that only a privileged few can “shake off” civilization seems judgmental and incomplete. Isabella Bird, for instance, is not necessarily going to

the wilderness as an escape from the “lower” elements of civilization; in fact she particularly draws back from the some of the overbearing middle- and -upper class Englishmen she meets while traveling. Her difficulties as a woman in rigid Victorian culture send her looking for an escape from these restrictions to the relative freedom of the wilderness, the place where there are indeed fewer people, and especially the middle and upper-class English people who would disapprove of her “free-legged” behavior. For example, Isabella finds lodging at a rough cabin on the trail one evening, when an Englishman, who has been hunting with a local guide, comes in, much to Isabella’s displeasure. “...In spite of his rough hunter’s or miner’s dress” she explains that she “at once recognized [him] as an English gentleman” and scornfully relates:

This gentleman was lording it in true caricature fashion, with a Lord Dundreary drawl and a general execration of everything; while I sat in the chimney corner, speculating on the reason why many of the upper class of my countrymen—“High Toners,” as they are called out here—make themselves so ludicrously absurd. They neither know how to hold their tongues or to carry their personal pretensions. An American is nationally assumptive, an Englishman personally so. (Life 176)

Isabella is clearly ashamed of her “high toned” countryman, as he represents many of the qualities of “civilized” man that she has fled to the wilds to escape.

Vance maintains that the “freedom of nature in wilderness is far more mythic than real” and Isabella might agree with this assessment, since she felt that eventually she would always have to return to civilization, to “reality,” from her travels to remote mountains, deserts, or islands. She sometimes stayed gone for years at a time, but she

always returned from what I see as her “mythic” and yet also more authentic travels, home to England and to the sad “reality” of a “mythic” illness.

Vance resents the assumption that God is present in the wilderness, arguing against the notion, “Wilderness exists not for itself but for the recreational, scientific, life support, aesthetic, and spiritual needs of humans.” Vance wants humans to move beyond the treatment of wilderness as a “colony,” a place to be exploited for human needs (“Wilderness” 64-65). Although I share to some measure Vance’s environmental concerns, I also believe that as humans we are a part of almost any ecosystem, and it may be something akin to a biological necessity for us to experience unspoiled nature from time to time, even if only to be reminded that *we are part of nature*. That “nature” may be a tiny city park, a back yard, a roof top, or a wilderness preserve, but many humans do seem to have such a need to be in whatever piece of undeveloped nature they can access. And whether Vance understands or condones the practice, many people, including me, find spiritual renewal in natural settings. That connection with nature may be made by looking through my suburban home’s window or by standing on top of a mountain in Utah, but what Vance calls a “Protestant ideal of one-on-one contact with God” (71) is not just a Protestant, or even a Western imperialistic ideal. The sublimity of unspoiled nature has inspired, renewed, and healed human souls throughout history.

Isabella, the daughter of a minister, certainly seems to have found spiritual inspiration in her Rocky Mountain travels. On her first unsuccessful foray into the Rockies to reach Estes Park, she says, “This scenery satisfies my soul” (Life 55). Later, having gained Estes Park, she reflects on Long’s Peak, the mountain that guards one end of the park. After describing the magnificent peak, she muses that “here under its shadow

one learns how naturally nature worship, and the propitiation of the forces of nature, arose in minds which had no better light” (Life 84). She apparently does not share the vehemence of her father’s concern about refraining from work on Sundays, since she calmly informs readers that in Estes Park, “On Sunday work is nominally laid aside, but most of the men go out hunting or fishing till the evening, when we have the harmonium and much sacred music” (Life 114). Isabella makes a wry comment on how much she enjoys worship without the worries of feminine fashion and hairdressing:

To be alone in the park from the afternoon till the last glory of the afterglow has faded, with no books but a Bible and Prayer-book, is truly delightful. No worthier example for a “Te Deum” or “Gloria in Excelsis” could be found than this “temple not made with hands” in which one may worship without being distracted by the sight of bonnets of endless form, and curiously intricate “back hair,” and countless oddities of changing fashion. (Life 114)

Beyond her spiritual concerns, Isabella has fears for the condition of the environment in Colorado. She knows that the land is not as it was before the European settlers came and she is concerned about the animals of the Rockies, if possibly less so about the indigenous peoples. Early in her narrative, she notes “...the Indians are raiding in all directions, maddened by the reckless and useless slaughter of the buffalo, which is their chief subsistence” (34). Some of the news that reaches her while in Estes Park is that “The Indians have taken to the ‘war path’ and are burning ranches and killing cattle. [...] The Indians say, ‘The white man has killed the buffalo and left them to rot on the plains. We will be revenged’” (120). Later in her narrative, while in a very high and

remote part of the Rockies, she witnesses for herself a bison graveyard. “I passed the last great haunt of the magnificent mountain bison, but unfortunately, saw nothing but horns and bones,” she laments (170).

Isabella is also dismayed at the effects that mining has had on the landscape. “These mines, with their prolonged subterranean workings, their stamping and crushing mills, and the smelting works which have been established near them, fill the district with noise, hubbub, and smoke by night and by day,” she writes in A Lady’s Life. She compares mining to agriculture, not only to demonstrate the damage mining does to the environment, but also to show the damage it does to men’s lives: “Agriculture restores and beautifies, mining destroys and devastates, turning the earth inside out, making it hideous, and blighting every green thing, as it usually blights man’s heart and soul” (193). Isabella continues, “Many a heart has been broken for the few finds which have been made along those hill sides. All the ledges are covered with charred stumps, a picture of desolation, where nature had made everything grand and fair” (193). On a side trip to Georgetown she observes a canyon, and reflects that “Unfortunately, its sides have been almost entirely denuded of timber, mining operations consuming any quantity of it” (189). While still in the forest when ascending Long’s Peak, she enjoys the prospect of reaching a place where “no lumberer’s axe has ever rung” (87). She has few kind words for hunters, aside from Mountain Jim. Isabella claims the many and varied wild animals within Estes Park as “hers,” but “in a better than the sportsman’s sense.” On a prayer-like note, she says of the animals: “May their number never be less, in spite of the hunter who kills for food and gain, and the sportsman who kills and marauds for pastime!” (Life

104). Bird believes that animals have a right to remain unmolested in this wilderness, and even defends that right against those who hunt to feed themselves.

The wilderness landscape has other possible links to Bird's psychology. She may be falling under what Jane Tompkins in West of Everything calls the "code of asceticism:" "The negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime" (Tompkins 71). Isabella does see herself, when her usually modest guard slips, as a strong woman, an unusual woman, and as an ascetic woman in the lifestyle that she adopts in the Rockies and in the chances that she takes in the environment. "Grandeur and sublimity, not softness, are the features of Estes Park" (Life 106), Bird writes, and she knows that helping drive cattle on the ranch there sets her apart from all other women and many men as able to endure the environment and to do difficult work within it. "Evans flatters me by saying that I am 'as much use as another man'" (Life 122), she asserts. So often in her narrative she braves either the elements or the extremes of a rugged landscape. She rides through snowstorms, and describes the cold and the difficulties both she and her horse experience, and then she goes back out and rides into the next dangerous storm.

In one of the most daring feats she accomplishes in the Rockies, Bird climbs Long's Peak in winter conditions without equipment other than a rope—wearing borrowed boots that are too large for her, and only her thin Hawaiian riding dress. Even today, Long's Peak is one of the most difficult climbs accessible to amateurs, and has cost more than 50 hikers their lives since the 1880s, including one young man in the late 1990s who was blown off the ledge-like trail by a strong gust of wind. Climbers unused

to the altitude of 14,256 feet may experience debilitating altitude sickness and most hikers try to climb Long's in July or August, not in October, as Bird did, although the weather on Long's can turn deadly at any season (Fry). After reaching the summit of Long's Peak, she downplays her feat, saying, "Truly terrible as it was to me, to a member of the Alpine club it would not be a feat worth performing" (Life 97). Never in her narrative does she make an issue of her sex, her age, or any of her presumed frailties, all of which might "excuse" her, at home in England, from battling with the vicissitudes of wilderness at all.

Suffering from a bad fall from a mare early in her narrative, she shrugs the fall and her injuries off, even though, as she says, "I fell over her tail from a good height upon the hard gravel, receiving a parting kick on my knee." Matter-of-factly, and almost jauntily, she reflects:

no bones were broken. The flesh of my left arm looks crushed into a jelly, but cold-water dressings will soon bring it right; and a cut on my back bled profusely; and the bleeding, with many bruises and the general shake, have made me feel weak, but circumstances do not admit of "making a fuss," and I really think that the rents in my riding dress will prove the most important part of the accident. (Life 64)

It's hard to imagine how much of a fuss would have been made over this incident had it occurred at home in England, but in the American West, Bird can dispense with "fussing" while she revels in the challenges provided by the rugged setting she has reached.

As Tompkins advises, the appeal of such a difficult landscape, with its inherent dangers and its "promise of pain," sometimes awakens an urge to imitate nature in its

“hardness” (Tompkins 72-73), and at times it does seem as if Bird strives to be as invulnerable as this austere land she has come to love. Tompkins warns, however, that, “The landscape’s final invitation—merger—promises complete materialization. Meanwhile, the qualities that nature implicitly possesses—power, endurance, rugged majesty—are the ones men desire while they live” (72). So if Isabella does take too many chances, perhaps in her mind the worst thing that can happen to her is to die and become a material part of the landscape that thrills her so. She may have a compelling death instinct, but it cannot beckon her to an untimely end in the Rockies. Her will to live is strong, and she does apparently have “luck” on her side—she cheats death many times riding through blizzards, on steep rocky trails, and through bear and mountain lion habitat.

Additionally, Bird does clearly violate an implied law of Tompkins’s “cult of asceticism” by being a woman. As female, she was supposed to be forever barred from the heroic experiences with landscape that Tompkins describes as only for strong, white, Anglo-Saxon men “in the prime of life” and who “are expert at certain skills” such as “riding, tracking, roping, fistfighting, [and] shooting” (73). Bird is indeed a skilled horsewoman and she picks up some tracking and roping skills, but she hardly qualifies as an expert in the other skills considered essential to survival in the Western landscape.

Another gender barrier scaled by Isabella involves her appreciation of the many animals, wild and domesticated, that she encounters on what she calls her Rocky Mountain “ravage,” although no animal is as dear to her heart as her mare, Birdie. After searching for weeks in order to find a horse she can engage for extended rides, Isabella finally finds Birdie among Griff Evans’ herd in Estes Park, but not before she has tested

“five or six a day to find one to [her] liking” (Life 122). Apparently named after Isabella, the horse becomes an integral part of her travels and enables her to explore the sometimes trackless wilderness with relative ease and security. Isabella observes how well-treated horses are in the American West, and is pleased that generally they are “brought up without curb, whip, or spur, trained by the voice, and used only to kindness” and she perceives of the horses that “unless they are broncos, they exercise their intelligence for your advantage, and do their work rather as friends than as machines” (Life 75).

Her first description of Birdie, though pleasant, is prosaic: “I have a bay Indian pony, ‘Birdie,’ a little beauty, with legs of iron, fast, enduring, gentle, and wise” (Life 134). Later, after a short stay in Denver, when a groom brings Birdie to her, she relates, “He said she was a little demon, she had done nothing but buck, and had bucked him off a bridge! I found that he had put a curb on her, and whenever she dislikes anything she resents it by bucking” (140). She is protective of Birdie, seeing that she is fed and groomed before Isabella herself sits down to eat, for “she is quite a companion, and bathing her back, sponging her nostrils, and seeing her fed after my day’s ride, is always my first care.” Her regard for Birdie is apparent when she comments that the mare is “always cheerful and hungry, never tired, looks intelligently at everything, and her legs are like rocks” (150). Human and horse have bonded, and yet their relationship may have significant meaning. What is Birdie to Isabella?

Isabella comes to realize that “To be without a horse in these mountains is to be reduced to complete helplessness” (188) and of all things, Isabella wants to avoid helplessness. She has had enough of that feeling while lying ill at home in England. Jane Tompkins surmises that horses “symbolize the desire to recuperate some lost connection

to life” (Tompkins 94). The role that Birdie plays in Bird’s recovery and in her exploration of the Rocky Mountain landscape is pivotal.

As their companionship grows, Isabella delights in telling little anecdotes about Birdie, how she follows Isabella into the parlor of a home, how she “walks after me with her head laid on my shoulder, licking my face and teasing me for sugar.” And how she only likes to be handled by Isabella, so she “rears and kicks” should anyone else try to hold her, noting that then the “vicious bronco soul comes into her eyes” (Life 155). Her descriptions of Birdie take on the glow of real affection when Isabella explains that “her face is cunning and pretty, and she makes a funny, blarneying noise when I go up to her” (155-156). Tompkins ponders the meaning of such close relationships between man (Tompkins’ review of the Western genre abandons any attempt to include women) and horse, reflecting that, “The easygoing reciprocity between them, [was] communicated not through language but through relaxed and rhythmical movements as horse and rider, the right relation of creatures to one another. The relation the man and horse embody is [...] a relationship of mutual regard, mutual knowledge, and mutual acceptance” (95). Tompkins claims that this closeness between man and horse “represents the ideal version of the horse-human relationship (from the human point of view): men, animals, and landscape constituting a sort of peaceable kingdom” (95).

Tompkins pursues this line of reasoning even further, as she observes the bond between horse and the title character in Monte Walsh, a 1970 film. She maintains that the horse “winds up taking the place of friend and lover, a situation the character accepts with wry humor and a certain self-satisfied resignation. As helpmeet and companion, the horse evokes from the hero sociable and nurturing behavior, perhaps because he is a safe

repository for it” (96). Although not a reticent fictional cowboy, like Monte Walsh, Bird, as a single woman with few permissible outlets for her affection, is able to love Birdie with a ready affection and without guilt. She can express her own nurturing feelings without repercussion, or obligation, and has found a “friend and helpmeet, a pal through thick and thin” while she “fulfills a dream of companionship” (Tompkins 97). She can have close physical contact with Birdie, something that even a self-possessed, self-contained woman like Bird needs. She can touch Birdie, and she rides her astride—surely a more intimate kind of touching than the side saddle offers. Tompkins paints a vivid image of the physical connection between horse and rider, recognizing that the horse is “something that is alive, first of all, something big, powerful, and fast-moving. Something not human but not beyond human control, dangerous, even potentially lethal, but ductile to the human will (93). Birdie is all of these things to Bird; it’s no wonder woman and horse become nearly inseparable.

Often she and Birdie are alone together in a world of solitude, and she virtually trusts Birdie with her life. After a heavy snow storm, Isabella writes of how she ascends the Arkansas Divide:

Everything was buried under a glittering shroud of snow. The babble of the streams was bound by fetters of ice. No branches creaked in the still air. No birds sang. No one passed or met me. There were no cabins near or far. The only sound was the crunch of the snow under Birdie’s feet. We came to a river over which some logs were laid with some young trees across them. Birdie put one foot on this, then drew it back and put another on, then smelt the bridge noisily. Persuasions were useless; she only smelt,

snorted, held back, and turned her cunning head and looked at me. It was useless to argue the point with so sagacious a beast. (Life 150)

At this point in her narrative, Isabella even uses the pronoun “we.” Has her loneliness indeed been eased by the arrival of Birdie? Woman and mare seem to be more intimate companions than mere horse and rider. Learning afterward that the bridge was considered unsafe, Isabella gratefully praises Birdie’s judgment, observing, “She is the queen of ponies, and is very gentle, though she has not only wild horse blood, but is herself the wild horse” (Life 150).

The idea of a companion who is also “wild” points to another model of the horse raised by Tompkins, who acknowledges the “apocalyptic possibilities of nature.” She uses examples from Zane Grey’s texts, asserting, “he captures the perilous, ecstatic, and godlike eruptions of natural force”; she continues, “What men cannot do in Grey, horses and landscape will; the boundaries between his characters and their surroundings—animal, vegetable, and mineral—continually break down, and everything becomes part of a vortex of live energy coursing indiscriminately through the cosmos” (94). During Bird’s experiences in the Rockies, boundaries are shattered. Restrictions of social class and propriety are rent when Isabella becomes a confidante of Mountain Jim Nugent, riding out alone with him, not a chaperone in sight. They gallop together across the meadows of Estes Park, their horses more than a means of transportation. “The perilous, sexually charged, rapturous potentiality of horses which Grey so well understood” is apparent, yet is “kept in abeyance” in Bird’s narrative, which is not uncommon in the Western genre. As Tompkins explains, “Too apocalyptic, too threatening to our everyday categories of being and becoming, the volcanic force [of horses] is typically rationed and

controlled” since “most of the time, the Western prefers its horses in manageable form” (95). Bird prefers her horse manageable, at least on the surface, yet she still loves that inner “wild horse,” the “bronco” within sturdy, sensible Birdie. And as for “live energy,” Bird mentions several times throughout her text the breathless enjoyment she feels after a good, hard gallop either when alone or after a race with one of the men of Estes Park. Galloping is a physical release, a wild abandon, that is only possible for Bird through the “power, motion, size, [and] strength, brought under human control and in touch with the human body” (Tompkins 93) that her horse provides.

Perhaps, after all, Isabella sees something of her own personality, her own rebelliousness in Birdie. If Birdie is “herself the wild horse,” then Isabella is herself the “wild woman,” who finds a kindred spirit in this bay bronco mare. Birdie is Isabella’s link to the wilderness; as a semi-domesticated animal, she is a bridge between the dreaded civilization and the desired yet feared unknown. Birdie may be a doppelganger to Isabella, just as the wilderness or “un-civilization” may also in some way be an alter ego for her. Birdie and the wild Rockies may represent the “monster” side that she hates/loves/fears within her. If realized only dimly through her conscious mind, Isabella’s unconscious may finally find in the “wild,” untrammelled mountains a part of herself, the part that desperately needs release from gendered Victorian expectations, the part of her that wants to scream but cannot. The “monster” inside her, which is so enraged that it makes her physically ill at home, seems appeased by the environment of the Rocky Mountains, by the cleansing purity of the Colorado landscape, whose “unprofaned freshness give[s] ... new life” (*Life* 54), and by the physical challenges and the potential danger of the American wilderness. Even Isabella, whose full awareness of

any of these possible explanations of her psychological condition is questionable, says after yet another glorious sunset over Estes Park's Mirror Lake, "Perhaps this scenery is not lovable, but, as if it were a strong stormy character, it has an intense fascination" (Life 118). Whether she is speaking of her "mad, bad bronco" (165) or of the landscape's "strong, stormy character," she could also be speaking of herself.

CHAPTER THREE

“Uneasily aware that, like Sylvia Plath, she is ‘inhabited by a cry,’ she secretly seeks to unify herself by coming to terms with her own fragmentation. [...] The story ‘no man may guess,’ therefore, is the story of her attempt to make herself whole by healing her own infections and diseases” (Gilbert and Gubar, 76).

While describing A Lady’s Life, Isabella Bird, and the direction of my proposed thesis to a fellow graduate student, I was stunned when he asked what proof there was, other than Isabella’s own word, that she had made this journey in the Rocky Mountains at all. “Was there corroborating evidence?” he interrupted, before he heard more than a few sentences about Bird’s experiences. At first only mildly perturbed by his skeptical stance, slowly I grew more and more angry as I reflected on his automatic questioning of Bird’s veracity. It dawned on me that the sole reason he questioned Bird’s narrative was because she was a woman.

That Bird might have been doubted during the Victorian era when she wrote is not surprising, but that a supposedly enlightened graduate student in the twenty-first century still had a knee-jerk reaction of disbelief was not only irritating, but was also a startling reminder of the work that feminists have before them. Now I am glad that this incident happened, because in a small way, I have experienced a fragment of the alienation that Bird must have felt as a woman and as a writer. I have come closer to understanding what forces were at work against her in her chosen life.

Bird’s alienation is often revealed in her interaction with the people of Colorado. During her travels, she met a wide variety of individuals, and at times she enjoyed meeting new people, although, as noted, she preferred to avoid upper-class English tourists. In 1873 in Colorado, it was common practice for families to take in travelers,

especially travelers with ready money and letters of introduction from the governor, like Bird. She asserts in A Lady's Life, "I am glad that there are so few inns. As it is, I get a good deal of insight into the homes and modes of living of the settlers" (157). Bird sets down her impressions of those she encounters during her journey. At times she sounds a bit anthropological, at other times like a moralist, and sometimes as though she feels like an "alien," in several senses of the word.

When she stays for over a week with the Chalmers family in a canyon near the approach to Estes Park, she cannot help but feel distant from and somewhat disapproving of them. "But oh! what a hard, narrow life it is which I am now in contact! A narrow and unattractive religion, which I still believe to be genuine, and an intense but narrow patriotism, are the only higher influences," she writes in A Lady's Life (39). The Chalmers, a family of Welsh origin, have lived for years in extremely primitive conditions with only minimal shelter from a cabin with a mud roof and walls on only three sides (39). She says, "There was no table, no bed, no basin, no towel, no glass, no window, no fastening on the door. The roof was in holes, the logs were unchinked, and one end of the cabin was partially removed!" (40). The condition the family lives in is not due entirely to poverty; although hardworking in the extreme, the family places little importance on what they see as the unnecessary niceties of life. With only one comb for the entire family and no convenient way to wash, grooming is clearly not valued, and sleeping under a roof is considered "effeminate" (48). Isabella stays with them because she has no other choice if she is ever to reach Estes Park: "Here the life was rough, rougher than any I had ever seen, and the people repelled me by their faces and manners; but if I could rough it for a few days, I might, I thought, get over canyons and other

difficulties into Estes Park, which has become the goal of my journey and hopes,” she determines (Life 39). She finds it difficult to form any real connection with the family, especially with the women. Upon her arrival Mrs. Chalmers says they will only take Bird in if she ““would make [herself] agreeable”” and Bird soon is chafing under the restrictions of ““a life in which nothing happens”” (Life 39-40).

Isabella is particularly stung by the dictate to “make herself agreeable,” mentioning it again and again throughout the account of her stay with the Chalmers and afterwards throughout her narrative. She quickly falls under a veil of disapproval that the Chalmers family takes little pains to conceal, again especially the women. The sullen daughter of the house disturbs Isabella; the girl is an enigma to her. She reports her “an awkward girl of sixteen, with uncombed hair, and a painful repulsiveness of face and air, [who] sat on a log for half an hour and stared at me. I tried to draw her into talk, but she twirled her fingers and replied snappishly in monosyllables. Could I by any effort ‘make myself agreeable’? I wondered” (40). The stress of making herself agreeable to the Chalmers family is akin to the strictures that Bird labored under in Victorian England. She is distressed when she tries to figure out what “being agreeable” means to them. Whether in a middle class house in England or in a mud roofed cabin in Colorado, this language that speaks of “agreeableness” is a code that she must try to decipher. Ultimately “being agreeable” means that she can’t be herself. Bird knows she must wear a mask, and what particular mask is called for by the culture in which she finds herself on any given day is what she must determine.

Gilbert and Gubar speak of Victorian women laboring under “feminine virtues”:
“modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity,

affability, [and] politeness” (23). Such virtues are not all as valued in pioneer Colorado or in the same way as in Victorian England. The Chalmers family, as well as other settlers Isabella encounters, finds “English manners” to be “all bosh [...] when life is so short and busy” (Life 143). To say that someone is “fine,” or “polished,” Bird explains, is to “give him a very bad name” (Life 50-51). The rules are different in Colorado, and Isabella struggles at first to find a way to “be agreeable” when Mrs. Chalmers criticizes Bird’s hands as not work-worn enough to be capable of washing a few plates. Isabella defends her hands as “very brown and coarse;” quite an irony when the whiteness of a lady’s hands was considered a positive attribute in Victorian English society. Bird studies the Chalmers family and eventually makes headway with Mrs. Chalmers by teaching her and her married daughter how to knit and with Mr. Chalmers by showing that she can “catch and saddle a horse” (Life 45). Isabella, herself always a contradiction of a woman versed in many of the “feminine” arts, such as knitting, but also in the more “masculine” ones, such as horseback riding, must fine tune her image to find some kind of acceptance in this frontier family.

But even at its best, her relationship with the Chalmers never reaches anything resembling a mutual respect. The patriarch of the family is especially small-minded and Isabella must endure verbal “abuse of my own country, and [...] sweeping condemnation of all religionists outside of the brotherhood of ‘Psalm-singers’” to which the Chalmers belong (50). Isabella must hold her tongue; she cannot say: “that it was he and such as he, there or anywhere, with narrow hearts, bitter tongues, and harsh judgments, who [were responsible for] dwarfing individuality, checking lawful freedom of speech, and making men ‘offenders for a word [...]’” (52). Here at this remote frontier ranch, she falls prey

again to a new rendition of the rigid, puritanical thinking that disturbs her dreams of mental and physical health.

“Being agreeable” surfaces again later in the narrative. Riding through a ferocious snow storm, Isabella must take shelter in a kitchen with eleven

wretched travelers... with the snow melting on them and dripping on the floor. I had learned the art of “being agreeable” so well at the Chalmers’s, and practiced it so successfully during the two hours I was there, by paring potatoes and making scones, that when I left, though the hosts kept “an accommodation house for travelers,” they would take nothing for my entertainment, because they said I was such “good company!” (Life 142)

In this instance she approaches the role-playing involved in being agreeable as more of a game than she had with the Chalmers. Here she “gets it right.” She puts on the apron of domesticity, makes herself properly useful in the kitchen, and then when the storm lets up a bit, rides out into it alone again. Knowing that she only has to wear the mask for a little while seems to make her feel almost playful about what depressed her so when staying with the Chalmers for days on end. As long as she knows she can get back on Birdie and ride off into the Colorado wilds, putting on a show of “being agreeable” for an hour or two is endurable for her. Riding through the snowstorm, she says that “I can’t exactly say that I enjoyed the ride, yet there was the pleasant feeling of gaining health every hour” (Life 142). As long as she can leave the demands of “being agreeable” behind, and with them the alienation of having to wear the mask of domesticity, health is possible for her.

Bird meets several women during her travels in Colorado with whom she strikes up brief friendships, but more often than not, she can find no deep connection with these

women, especially if they are women of English descent. Later in her journey, while in Estes Park, she even goes so far as to write home to Henrietta, “I have almost forgotten that there are such things as women and for women in the abstract I never wish.” In the same letter she says it is “so strange never to hear dress mentioned” (Letters 192).

Isabella is palpably relieved to be free of the trivial demands of “dressing.”

The settlers from the British Isles, such as the Chalmers, Isabella observes, live a “moral, hard, unloving, unlovely, unrelieved, unbeautified, grinding life[...] in a discomfort and lack of ease and refinement which seems only possible to people of British stock” (Life 50). She remarks that the non-English settlers often find ways to make their cabins more “homey” through “ingenuities and elegancies” and she notes that a “Hawaiian or South Sea Islander makes his grass house both pretty and tasteful” (50). The almost vicious, puritanical austerity, backed by a kind of self-righteous pridefulness that she finds in homes like the Chalmers’ is anathema to Isabella and stands in contrast to rare homes like that of Dr. and Mrs. Hughes.

She encounters the Hughes homestead with delight, enraptured by the cabin which, with its second story, reminds her of a Swiss chalet. She is welcomed by the family, and says that the main room “though plain and poor, [...] looked like a home, not like a squatter’s cabin. Decorated with muslin curtains, flowering plants, and two shelves of books,” Bird calls the home an oasis (51-52). The notion that a home should be inviting, regardless of the income or social status of the owners, is important to Isabella. Her observations on what a home should be are all the more poignant since she herself did not own a home in her adult life and felt the need to travel away from “home” for years at a time. When Isabella looks at an appealing home, her wistfulness is palpable.

Surely she must wonder why she can't create such an environment for herself, a resting place where she is no longer the "foreigner," the forever wandering "alien." "Home" is something she can only observe from an outsider's point of view, something that only belongs to others, but never to her.

Once Bird reaches Estes Park and settles in, it appears for a time that she may have found that elusive concept of home. She gets along well with Mrs. Evans, the wife of her host, but sees that Mrs. Evans's life is a grind, and compares it to that of a "squaw," consumed with the "making and baking of bread" and other farm and kitchen chores to the point of exhaustion (Life 111). Bird's heart is with the men of Estes Park, and particularly with one man, Mountain Jim Nugent.

Mountain Jim lives in a "rude, black log cabin, and rough as it could be to be a shelter at all" in the pass that guards the entrance to Estes Park. He is the first resident of the park that she encounters, and nothing she has seen so far in the territory of Colorado has prepared her for what she finds. Isabella describes Jim's dwelling as:

a *den*—it looked like the den of a wild beast. [...] The mud roof was covered with lynx, beaver, and other furs laid out to dry, beaver paws were pinned out on the logs, a part of the carcass of a deer hung at one end of the cabin, a skinned beaver lay in front of a heap of peltry just within the door, and antlers of deer, old horseshoes and offal of many animals, lay about the den. (Life 78)

Images of death are everywhere in this passage, yet the scene does not repel Isabella, perhaps evidence of her "proclivity for morbidity" that Chubbuck notes (18). She seems

strangely stirred by the piles of dead animal pieces and offal, by the “black cabin” and most of all by the exceptional man who lives there.

Her physical description of Mountain Jim is the most carefully written of any character in her narrative, as if Isabella knows that her readers will scrutinize each word, watching for clues about what this man is “really” like, and what he may mean to her. She details his clothing and general physique:

a broad, thickset man, about the middle height, with an old cap on his head, and wearing a grey hunting suit much the worse for wear (almost falling to pieces, in fact), a digger’s [name of an Indian tribe] scarf knotted round his waist, a knife in his belt, and a “bosom friend,” a revolver, sticking out of the breast pocket of his coat; his feet, which were very small, were bare, except for some dilapidated moccasins made of horse hide. The marvel was how his clothes hung together, and on him. (Life 78-79)

Isabella takes notice of Jim’s body in a very suggestive way. She is intrigued by his clothing and even more by the fact that it stays “on him,” which denotes certain sexual connotations within the description. The “knife in his belt,” and the “bosom friend”-- a gun in his breast pocket -- are dangerous, phallic symbols that add to her excitement.

Mountain Jim makes an indelible impression upon Isabella, and she goes on to describe his face and manner in glowing language:

His face was remarkable. He is a man about forty-five, and must have been strikingly handsome. He has large grey-blue eyes, deeply set, with well-marked eyebrows, a handsome aquiline nose, and a very handsome

mouth. His face was smooth shaven except for a dense moustache and imperial [a goatee]. Tawny hair, in thin, uncared-for curls, fell from under his hunter's cap and over his collar. One eye was entirely gone, and the loss made one side of the face repulsive, while the other might have been modeled in marble. "Desperado" was written in large letters all over him. (Life 79)

As careful as she is in writing this passage, she is unable to refrain from using the word "handsome" three times, twice in one sentence! Even though she calls Jim a "desperado" and the damaged side of his face "repulsive," she is clearly attracted to him, perhaps because of the very dichotomy of his appearance.

Already awed with Mountain Jim's lair and physical appearance, Isabella is now enchanted by Jim's manner. He takes off his hat to her, the "lady," revealing "a magnificently formed brow and head." "In a cultured tone of voice [he] asked if there were anything he could do for me?" They converse, and Isabella forgets "both his reputation and appearance, for his manners were that of a chivalrous gentleman, his accent refined, and his language easy and elegant" (79). Jim makes a spontaneous gift of some beaver's paws to Isabella, merely because she asks about them; he even hangs them on the horn of her saddle in a gesture that conveys a certain forwardness and flirtatiousness for a first meeting with a Victorian lady. If Isabella feels she has met a kindred spirit, Jim has been moved as well by this initial meeting.

After devoting two full pages to her enthralled description of Jim and his "den," by far her longest and most detailed description of anyone other than Birdie in A Lady's Life, Isabella steps back for some commentary on Mountain Jim and his place in

Colorado history. She writes that he is a former scout and Indian fighter, who now lives by trapping in the area around his “squatter’s claim” at the entrance to Estes Park. She acknowledges, “Of his genius and chivalry to women there does not appear to be any doubt; but he is a desperate character, and is subject to ‘ugly fits,’ when people think it best to avoid him [...] he is dangerous with his pistols.” Almost reluctantly she reveals his “besetting sin”; she quotes Griff Evans, who claims “When he’s sober Jim’s a perfect gentleman; but when he’s had liquor he’s the most awful ruffian in Colorado” (80). Even though her initial impression of Jim most surely included shock, she downplays mention of this reaction in her first description of him. She sounds admiring and somewhat studied, for she must know that readers at home in England will be intensely interested in this mountain ruffian of the Wild West, and her reaction to him will have consequences to her reputation at home. Is there more behind the positive way she perceives Jim? Does she recognize something of herself in him from that first meeting at the entrance to Estes Park? Does she see in him a mirror of her own alienation, of her, some would say, “perverse” desire not always to “be agreeable,” of her painful difficulty in trying to “fit in,” of her own monstrosity? Mountain Jim, as Isabella will divulge through the remainder of her narrative, does not “fit in” and often cannot “be agreeable.” These qualities will cost him his life and yet he will always have a special place in her affections, remembered as “My poor, dear, erring Jim” (Checkland 52).

Most telling is Isabella’s statement in the midst of her commentary that Jim is a “man for whom there is now no room” (Life 80). Colorado is rapidly becoming “civilized” by rules and laws, and is evolving from a Wild West, frontier territory towards statehood. Men like Jim are becoming at best embarrassing reminders of the

recent lawless past and at worst threats to the economic development of Colorado and to the “new” social order. Tragically, Jim, in fact, is shot and killed by Griff Evans less than a year after Isabella’s departure, over a land dispute involving the planned development of Estes Park into a resort for the well-to-do (YMCA Rockies).

Her analysis of Jim begs a comparison to her own condition as a woman for whom there is apparently “no room” in her home country of England. These two, Mountain Jim and Isabella Bird, a ruffian and an English lady, would appear to have less than nothing in common on the surface. But they do share a bond in that they are both alienated people for whom “there is now no room” and from this bond they develop a relationship that eventually leads Isabella to consider making Estes Park her permanent home and to write of Jim to her sister Henrietta “Theres a man I could have married” (Letters 185 sic).

A modern Hollywood screenwriter could scarcely have created a character who more closely symbolizes Isabella’s own confusion and alienation than Mountain Jim. His bizarre clothing is ragged, yet he has an aristocratic bearing. His face is fabulously handsome on one side yet ravaged on the other. His personality is sometimes that of a well-read, “gentle” man who composes and recites poetry, yet he is also subject to depression and fits of violence. He is a tortured soul, and his duality is instantly evident to Isabella. Also a tortured soul, Isabella generally tries to conceal her own conflicting emotions, needs, and desires, to act the part of a lady as best she can, although her ladylike façade is thin and cracks constantly under duress. When her veneer of ladylike behavior cracks, she is distressed because of her complex, split emotions; guilt plagues her because she also enjoys those moments when her façade has cracked radically enough

to let her escape--to let her gallop with unrestrained ecstasy across a frosty mountain park. Part of her wants to “fit” as a “lady/angel” within the English Victorian society in which she was raised, but part of her is the “monster” that cannot accept the proscribed role that she is expected to play. Isabella cannot help but be enthralled by Jim, a living image of conflict. He brings to life in his visible body her own interior struggles in a more open, more obvious, and more externalized way than anyone else in her life ever can or will.

Is it coincidence that after meeting Jim, Isabella describes her descent from the pass into Estes Park in vividly sensual language, rich with phallic and vaginal imagery?

“[...] lying 1,500 feet below in the glory of the setting sun, an irregular basin, lighted up by the bright waters of the rushing Thompson, guarded by sentinel mountains of fantastic shape and monstrous size, with Long’s Peak rising above them all in unapproachable grandeur, while the Snowy Range, with its outlying spurs heavily timbered, come down upon the park slashed by stupendous canyons lying deep in purple gloom. The rushing river was blood red, Long’s Peak was aflame, the glory of the glowing heaven was given back from earth. Never, nowhere, have I seen anything to equal the view into Estes Park. [...] The near is more glorious than the far, and reality than dreamland. (Life 81)

Surely all of Isabella’s stars are in alignment at this moment. Reality is more “glorious” than “dreamland”; this is one of the paramount experiences of her life on several levels. She meets Mountain Jim, she finally gains Estes Park at sunset, and “mountain fever

seized me,” she declares, as she gallops at full “delirious” speed (81) over the last mile to the cluster of cabins that will become her mountain home for all too brief a time.

After their auspicious meeting, perhaps the high point of Isabella and Jim’s relationship comes when the two climb Long’s Peak together. Despite warnings from many people, Isabella has set her mind on achieving the summit of Long’s. Never one to be a slave to others’ advice, Isabella earlier asserted, “In traveling there is nothing like dissecting people’s statements, which are usually colored by their estimate of the powers or likings of the person spoken to, making all reasonable inquiries, and then pertinaciously but quietly carrying out one’s own plans” (Life 74). Although it may be obvious to readers by now that this is one of her philosophies of travel, she is bold to state her view so forthrightly and in the context of ignoring advice from supposedly knowledgeable male figures. Isabella is learning to do what she wants to do as often as she can, and in Jim she finds a supporter.

Isabella, Jim, and two young men set out to climb Long’s Peak in early October of 1873. Even today, few hikers attempt this climb outside of the months of July and August due to the weather. Not just a casual family hike, conditions on Long’s Peak are dangerous, and given unreliable weather, they can turn deadly at a moment’s notice in any season. Snow and ice are a problem year round, as are high winds and lightning, putting the climb in the “technical” category. Altitude sickness can affect the hardiest individual and make the climb sheer misery (Fry).

As amazing as Isabella’s achievement is in reaching the summit of Long’s, the trip is even more startling when I imagine the physical closeness that the climb makes possible between Isabella and Jim. I would guess that during this ascent of Long’s Peak,

Isabella has the most extended, close physical contact with a man that she has ever had as an adult woman. Petite and although probably in fairly good physical condition for a forty-one year old who had recovered much of her health after months of riding in Hawaii and Colorado, Isabella is not used to the altitude. Also, she is wearing a pair of boots borrowed from Griff Evans that are much too large for her and which give her no “foothold” (Life 93). Consequently, she has great difficulties during the climb, but Jim will not let her give up. Fearing that her “incompetence would detain the party,” she offers to return to a lower point of the trail and wait for the others to return, but Jim will not hear of it. She says, “My fatigue, giddiness, and pain from bruised ankles, and arms half pulled out of their sockets, were so great that I should never have gone half-way had not ‘Jim,’ *nolens volens*, dragged me along with a patience and skill, and with a determination that I should ascend the Peak, which never failed” (Life 95).

After they reach the peak and begin the descent, the party separates and Jim and Isabella are alone together for many hours. He helps Isabella any way he can, and the physical contact between them must have been frequent and by this time almost familiar. “[...] Sometimes ‘Jim’ pulled me up by my arms or a lariat, and sometimes I stood on his shoulders, or he made steps for me of his feet and hands” she explains, and recounts that “I had various falls, and once hung by my frock, which caught on a rock, and ‘Jim’ severed it with his hunting knife, upon which I fell into a crevice of soft snow” (Life 99). Isabella is a long way from the drawing rooms of England when she can pen a line like that without batting an eyelash. She is comfortable enough with Jim that he can rend her dress with a hunting knife, surely a phallically-charged symbol; the “soft snow” is remarkably suggestive of a soft feather bed, and adds an intimate, sexually suggestive

note to the passage. Of this time alone with him she writes “‘Jim’ had parted with his *brusquerie* when we parted from the students, and was gentle and considerate beyond anything, though I knew that he must be grievously disappointed, both in my courage and strength” (99). Towards the end of the descent, Isabella is so exhausted and dehydrated that Jim carries her in his arms, and upon reaching their base camp, wraps her in blankets. Isabella downplays the physical nature and possible tenderness of Jim’s consideration by taking an impersonal tone, calling it “a humiliating termination of a great exploit” (100).

After they return to their base camp, Jim decides for Isabella’s benefit that the group will spend the night there and rest before returning to Estes Park. Isabella sleeps for a few hours, and then joins Jim, who is by the fire. They talk for hours by the warmth of the blaze. Through the experience of climbing Long’s Peak, the two have at the very least become friends and confidantes. Jim has shown Isabella his softer side; he has recited poetry to her and regaled her with his “singular falsetto” (Life 90). Now, Jim’s dog, Ring, lies next to Isabella, keeping her warm, his “fine head” on her arm. She is intensely aware of her surroundings, her perceptions heightened; she writes that Jim

[...] sat smoking, with the fire lighting up the handsome side of his face, and except for the tones of our voices, and an occasional crackle and sputter as a pine knot blazed up, there was no sound on the mountain side. The beloved stars of my far-off home were overhead, the Plough and the Pole Star, with their steady light [...] and ‘Orion’s studded belt’ shining gloriously. (Life 101)

For a moment, Isabella seems at peace. England is far away, yet she feels at home sitting by the fire in this mountain camp, with a man known as a desperado at her side. The idyll is soon broken as Jim tells her the story of his life:

‘Jim’ or Mr. Nugent, as I always scrupulously called him, told stories of his early youth, and of a great sorrow which had led him to embark on a lawless and desperate life. His voice trembled, and tears rolled down his cheek. Was it semi-conscious acting, I wondered, or was his dark soul really stirred to its depths by the silence, the beauty, and the memories of youth? (Life 101)

Isabella makes a point of telling her readers that she always called Jim “Mr. Nugent” and that she doesn’t necessarily take his stories at face value. She wants to give the impression that she has kept a proper distance from him, that the proprieties have been observed even in this wild setting, and yet a few hours earlier on their climb he would have by necessity been touching her body unreservedly, in ways that would surely have shocked many readers. Isabella’s struggle between wanting to live more freely from convention and her longing to appear respectable has reappeared in how she describes this scene. She also doesn’t want to appear a naïve spinster or a gullible tourist, taken in by the tales of a man some call a liar, and so she adds the question of Jim’s veracity to her narrative. Ironically she feels she must question Jim’s truthfulness to be thought a reliable witness to the events of her travels, as her own truthfulness is to be questioned by her publisher, and even by my fellow graduate student.

The issue of Jim’s veracity has been raised by others, although historically little is known about him other than what Isabella records. As Checkland reports, George Henry

Kingsley, “brother of Charles and father of Mary, the African explorer” (Checkland 51), spent some time in Estes Park and branded Jim a ““humbug and scoundrel”” (qtd. in Checkland 51). Kingsley said Jim “astonished everyone with the ‘extraordinary altitude of his lies’” and that he was ““a great ruffian but he certainly was an educated man. Some said that he was a defrocked Canadian priest, others that he was an expelled Canadian Schoolmaster. Others that he was both”” (qtd. in Checkland 51). Kingsley, however, was an associate of the man, Lord Dunraven, who may have been behind Griff Evan’s shooting of Jim less than a year after Isabella left Colorado. Dunraven profited richly from the development of Estes Park, eventually building a hotel there (Rocky Mountain National Park) and Jim, living at the gateway to the park, was undoubtedly a hindrance to dubious “progress.”

No record of Jim remains other than Kingsley’s terse comments and Isabella’s travel books and letters. Jim’s life, much as Isabella’s, will always be known only as “hints of a story that can never be fully recovered” (Mills 6). No one will ever discern the “truth” about Jim Nugent, but Isabella listens to this tormented man in a sympathetic way that apparently causes him to fall in love with her. ““You’re the first man or woman who’s treated me like a human being for many a year”” he tells her after she returns to Estes Park for the second time (Life 204). Even though Jim dreads her departure, he offers to see her as far as the Greeley stage wagon in Namaqua, a hamlet on the plains. They spend the last days together in harmony, with Jim making a good impression on the landlady where they lodge the night before the stage is due, her children even climbing on Jim’s lap to play with his blond curls.

Their final evening together is spent in the kitchen of the lodging house, while a dance takes place in the parlor. She writes to Henrietta, and Isabella records that Jim copies the poems “‘In the Glen’ and the latter half of ‘The River Without a Bridge,’ which he recited with deep feeling. [...] He repeated to me several poems of great merit which he had composed, and told me much more about his life. I knew that no one else could or would speak to him as I could” she explains, and so she takes a last opportunity to urge Jim to change, to give up whiskey. He answers her, with tears, that it is “Too late” and “It might have been once”; then, a moment later “hope itself, entered his dark life; and he said, suddenly, that he had made up his mind to give up whisky and his reputation as a desperado” (247-248). However, by the time Isabella writes A Lady’s Life, she knows that it was indeed too late. Jim is dead.

Among Bird’s biographers, there is no consensus on what Jim Nugent meant to Isabella, although all of them agree that there was probably not a physical affair between the two. The climb up Long’s Peak was when Jim first realized his affection for Isabella, although it was not until some weeks later that he revealed this to her on a snowy ride. Here the account in A Lady’s Life differs from the one in her Letters to Henrietta. In A Lady’s Life, Bird never reveals that Jim confesses his love for her and that he wants her to stay and even to bring Henrietta out to join them in Estes Park. “I told him that if all circumstances on both sides had been favorable and I had loved him with my whole heart I would not dare to trust my happiness to him because of whisky” (Letters 182) she admits to her sister. In A Lady’s Life, she turns this long talk into a confession by Jim of his life’s misdeeds (204-206) and only admits, “Of course I cannot give details” (206).

Apparently Bird feared what readers would think should the truth of Jim's feelings for her be known. Even to her dear friend Mrs. Eliza Blackie, Isabella denies feelings for Jim in a way that appears to "protest too much" when she writes, "Don't let anybody think that I was in love with Mountain Jim, for I have never alas been in love but once [...]" (Checkland 54). Isabella seems to be engaging in "damage control." As Checkland points out, she was "extremely nervous when A Lady's Life ... appeared, writing to Mrs. Blackie, 'The Critics have not scented out impropriety in the letters. Dr. J. Brown [one of the reviewers] was prudish. Travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety – that is one charm of travelling'" (sic 54).

Jim's death at Griff Evans's hand distresses Isabella in the extreme. Writing again to Mrs. Blackie:

[...] I would have given anything to have been with him. "My poor dear erring Jim!" I often feel "would to God I had died for him." It is conceivably horrible, I heard the news the night before I left England and have not been able to sleep since. He never got my last letter, and perhaps even, no tender image of me, in dying, soothed his last hours. May He who for our sakes consented to be numbered with the transgressors have mercy on this sinful man's soul. I do not feel able to write on any other subject. (Checkland 52-53)

Checkland allows that Isabella was obviously "more than half in love with Jim Nugent" (54) and the preponderance of information in Isabella's letters supports this claim. If she ever admitted as much to herself, that will never be known. None of the letters that Jim and Isabella exchanged survive. She destroyed many of her letters and cut questionable

pieces out of others before she died, and even her friend Mrs. Blackie “upheld Victorian convention by crossing out passages with a thick black pen” (Chubbuck 2). Yet would this careful editing have been necessary if there was nothing “suspect” by Victorian standards?

The special relationship Isabella shared with Jim Nugent was not replicated in her lifetime. After her sister’s death, she did marry, for the first and only time at age forty-nine, her sister’s doctor, John Bishop, who died himself only six years later. She met other men in her travels, some of them dashing enough, but never another Jim. Whatever one believes Jim was—a liar, a desperado, or a simple “child of the mountains” (Life 245) as Isabella called him—he was a man that Isabella never forgot. He was, in spite of their obvious differences, her mirror in many ways. His struggles between lies and truth, lawbreaker and law-abider, and wilderness and civilization were also her struggles. Looking at Jim’s handsome and ravaged face, Isabella recognized herself.

CONCLUSION

“[...] the one plot that seems to be concealed in most of the nineteenth-century literature by women [...] is in some sense a story of the woman writer’s quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition” (Gilbert and Gubar 76).

Isabella Bird found that she could not live the life a middle class Victorian lady was expected to live. She tried to do so for forty years, but had only mental and physical illness to show for her efforts to “fit in,” and to live the confined life by the hearthside. Like other women of her day, she chafed under the restrictions of her era. In some ways, she was not so unlike her many Victorian sisters who suffered from sometimes vague, lingering ailments, ailments psychiatrists would later dismissively label “psychosomatic.” She was like those women; she wanted to “fit in,” but the frustration of trying to do so was very nearly deadly for her.

Unlike most women of her era, she found a means of escape. She broke free by traveling to far-flung, exotic, remote places and through writing about her travels. As Gilbert and Gubar recognize, women like Isabella are “linked by the ingenuity with which [they], while no one was really looking, danced out of the debilitating looking glass of the male text into the health of female authority” (82). Sometimes, her status as a travel writer even granted her a political authority denied to most women, as when the special committee of the House of Commons asked her about the Armenian Christian situation. Isabella, Gilbert and Gubar might conclude, “Unlearn[ed] to not speak” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 83), although as they point out, “Unlearning not to speak” is still necessarily hidden and confined, if a woman must “hide behind the façade of art” (82).

Did Isabella hide? Yes, she did, in many respects, even though her bravery in traveling alone to distant, sometimes dangerous places contrasts distinctly with her

instinct to hide. Isabella hid behind her illness in order to justify her travel, to make her travel seem important, necessary, and not frivolous. She hid behind her profession, travel writing, which was not considered “art” in her day, and even now is only marginally accepted in the literary canon, but which was a profession useful to her. As a travel writer she was especially privileged: to travel alone to remote places, to ask distinctly “unladylike” questions as the roving reporter she was, and to break some of the stifling conventions she had to abide by at home, as she did by riding astride. She also hid some of the authentic Isabella behind her travel books, altering her words from her original letters to Henrietta to fit the mores of her travel texts’ mass readership. Isabella did not feel she could reveal as much to her readers as she could to her understanding sister, and what she could not reveal even to her sister, what she kept forever sacrosanct within herself, we will never know.

As much as she might have enjoyed her eventually considerable fame, Isabella was also a private woman, conscious of her public image. She hand-picked her first biographer and she destroyed or censored many of her letters from her considerable collection before she died. Isabella knew that there would always be people who considered her a “monster.” She wanted to have some small control over what kind of a “monster” she revealed herself to be. She did “domesticize” some of her adventures at times, but at others, she could not help but let her “wild ways” speak for themselves. Nervously she waited for the public reaction to the release of A Lady’s Life, and breathed a sigh of relief that the “prudes” did not find fault with it (Checkland 54).

During her sojourn in the Rockies, Isabella made discoveries about herself, discoveries that she may have only fully realized and understood years later. She sought

out remote wilderness settings, where she experienced conflicting emotions of elation and fear, but where she also found solace and physical healing. She made friends with a bay bronco mare who was often her sole companion for her solitary journey of five hundred miles in her mountain “ravage.” In the sometimes fiery eyes of Birdie, that “wild horse,” Isabella admired a reflection of her own wildness.

In the unlikely person of ruffian Mountain Jim, she found a man who was a tangled web of contradictions but who was often a delightful escort. Cultured, poetic, gentle, violent, alcoholic and rebellious against the encroaching civilization that threatened the serenity of Estes Park, Jim, even more so than Birdie, was a mirror of the conflicting sides of Isabella’s own struggles. He made her time in Estes Park more of an adventure, but perhaps also hastened her departure from the place she had come to love.

Isabella’s life, like the lives of other Victorian women, was a “rebellious escape” from “claustrophobic rage” (Gilbert and Gubar 85). Escape from the confines of home was sweet, at least for these glorious few months, into the “land which is very far off,” Estes Park:

So in this glorious upper world, with the mountain pines behind and the clear lake in front, in the “blue hollow at the foot of Long’s Peak,” at a height of 7,500 feet, where the hoar frost crisps the grass every night of the year, I have found more than I ever dared to hope for. (Life 82)

Isabella at last created for herself a life worth living.

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