

2003

Book Review of *Letters from the Dust Bowl* by Caroline Henderson

Christina E. Dando

University of Nebraska at Omaha, cdando@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub>

 Part of the [Geography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dando, Christina E., "Book Review of *Letters from the Dust Bowl* by Caroline Henderson" (2003). *Geography and Geology Faculty Publications*. 25.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub/25>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Geography and Geology at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography and Geology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Book Review

Letters from the Dust Bowl by Caroline Henderson ALVIN O. TURNER (Ed.), 2001 Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press 320 pp., \$34.90 hardback ISBN 0-8061-33-3 hardback

The American 'Dust Bowl' landscape of the 1930s has been etched into the global imagination through powerful narratives: Farm Security Administration photography (1935–43), Per Loretz's film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In the last quarter of the twentieth century, historians such as Donald Worster (1979) have constructed their own narratives of this time and place. Caroline Henderson's *Letters from the Dust Bowl*, edited by Alvin O. Turner, provides a counterpoint, in the form of a first-hand account and a woman's voice, to the news stories, government propaganda, and historians' analyses that construct our understanding of the Dust Bowl. Henderson's letters reveal not only the 'real' experience of living in that place during a particularly difficult time, but also the 'before' and 'after'—what led these individuals to the Great Plains and what became of them afterward.

Educated at Mt Holyoke, Caroline Henderson ventured out onto the panhandle of Oklahoma to homestead in 1907 as a single woman, who 'hungered and thirsted for something away from it all and for the out-of-doors' (p. 33). She met her future husband Will when she hired a crew to dig a well on her land. *Letters from the Dust Bowl* captures Caroline's transformation from an idealistic young woman to a woman 'worn by years of struggle with land and life'. Caroline's 'letters' are an amalgamation of letters to family and friends, and letters and essays written for publications such as the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Letters begins with Henderson's optimism and delight in both life and landscape. Caroline's early writings capture the excitement of homesteading, of marriage, of being a young mother. Her writings eventually shift from purely personal letters to family and friends to being a source of additional income. Drought and failed crops led Caroline to begin writing for publication in 1913; her first published article was on her first years homesteading. She became a regular contributor to *Ladies' World* magazine, as their 'Homestead Lady', until its demise in 1918.

Little remains of her story from 1918 to 1930, but both personal and public writings resume with the Great Depression and Dust Bowl. Encouraged by a professor, Caroline began submitting pieces to *Atlantic Monthly*, and it was there that she published her accounts of the Dust Bowl, offering readers a literary, first-hand account of the hardships experienced by many Americans: the loss of crops and animals, the endless dust, the struggle not only to survive but to retain the land, and the shift from optimism to despair. Henderson's essays have long been utilized and quoted by scholars for their vivid first-hand portrayal of the dust storms that plagued the region. In addition to providing a graphic account of life in the Dust Bowl, Henderson's writings also capture her attitudes on US government relief programs, hers and her husband's attempts to preserve the soil, and their evolving agricultural practices.

While Henderson's work ostensibly centers on the Dust Bowl, it is a nearly complete life story of a woman on the American Great Plains in the first half of the twentieth century. We learn not only about the Dust Bowl but about her life, including her religious and political leanings, her attitudes on

education, the books she and Will enjoyed, and her sense of geographical and social isolation on the Plains. Caroline and Will grew increasingly isolated over their lifetimes as the region depopulated during and after the Dust Bowl. Caroline was further isolated from the local population by her education, her attitudes on educating her daughter, and her resistance to organized religion. Despite her isolation and struggles, she remained on the Plains, tied to the place by her love of the land and her dedication to Jeffersonian ideals.

Through *Letters*, we see the wearing down of Caroline's optimism and the results of prolonged struggle with her environment. Caroline and Will endured the Dust Bowl, remaining on their farm virtually until their deaths in 1966, but at a tremendous price. *Letters* is not a triumphant tale: Caroline's spirit is broken by her experiences, her hopes and dreams evaporated.

This book changed my perceptions of the Dust Bowl and the costs of surviving it. Drawing from scholarly work on Plains women, I had created my own 'women's landscape' of the Dust Bowl—populated by strong, proud women whose sale of butter and eggs enabled their families to survive economically. I had resisted the grim imagery provided by Farm Security Administration photographs, admiring them as art but questioning their representation of 'reality'. After reading Henderson's *Letters*, the worn expressions of women in Farm Security photographs now made more sense. Yes, Plains people survived the Dust Bowl and kept their land, but at a tremendous emotional expense. It was not just the butter and eggs that allowed them to stay on the land; it was the grit and determination of the Plains people not to be bested by their environment. It was also the sacrifice of their lives—enduring hardships, endless dust, and even the loss of their dreams.

Alvin Turner's selection and editing of Henderson's writing is well done. The volume is organized chronologically, with a brief synopsis of the major events in Henderson's life and her writings placed in historical and personal context. Between the unpublished letters, published letters, and essays, nearly the whole of her life is represented with only occasional lapses. These writings do not, however, represent the whole of Henderson's work but have been carefully selected to capture her life story. It is unfortunate that more of her writings from publications such as *Ladies' World* were not included, as they would have provided an interesting perspective on the early twentieth century.

My principal criticism of this book relates to its design. Henderson's writing crosses back and forth between private and public. Varying typefaces, for example, would have helped the reader maneuver through these different types of text. As it stands, all writings (Turner's commentaries, Henderson's letters, Henderson's published pieces) are in the same typeface in chronological order, with the volume reading as a virtually seamless narrative—which it is not. There is a marked difference between writing to friends and family and writing to an unknown audience. Henderson's writings embody these differences, with public writings tending to be more descriptive and eloquent but more detached, and private writings less descriptive but more revealing. Between the public and personal writings, the erosion of Caroline's spirit as time passed is disclosed, resulting in a much richer, more nuanced account of life on the Plains.

While this book enhances my appreciation of those that survived the Dust Bowl, it also offers a fresh view of this environmental experience, a popular topic in US geography and environmental studies. Henderson's easily accessible writings could be utilized in classrooms, compared and contrasted to government propaganda, films, and historical analyses. Public perception of the Dust Bowl is often of an enormous environmental catastrophe. *Letters* vividly communicates the lifelong struggle with the

environment on the Plains, showing that agriculture on the arid High Plains has always been a struggle—before, during, and after the Dust Bowl.

CHRISTINA DANDO, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

REFERENCE

WORSTER, DONALD (1979) *Dust Bowl: the Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).