

***Wildcat Women: Narratives of Women Breaking Ground in Alaska's Oil and Gas Industry.*** By Carla Williams. University of Alaska Press, 2018. 232 pages.

Reviewed by Natalie B. Pendergast

*Wildcat Women* is a profound example of testimonial literature. This 2018 memoir and collection of interviews not only bears witness to numerous individual women's experiences working on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System from 1975 and beyond, but also to North American women more generally, and the freedom and power brought to them by sustainable employment and equal pay. The stories told in this book are personal and specific, but evince the larger social context that provided just the right conditions for a second-wave, post-war liberation of women from homemaking (should they have so desired). These conditions included, primarily, a 1965 affirmative action executive order, the birth control pill, and a sudden high demand for workers—*any* workers.

Williams wisely gives value to women's increased freedom to work by making a clear and enlightening association with what exactly that means and has meant for women—the escape from an abusive relationship; the ability to raise children alone; options (so as not to remain in exploitative positions); health care (which is even more important for childbearing women considering the dismal historical mortality rate of women during childbirth); the provision of basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter as well as further education; and this list does not even touch the so-called secondary concerns of mental health, self-esteem, and a strong, empowered identity. To be gainfully employed as a woman in the 1970s was indeed groundbreaking, just as it still is today for most demographics.

The book is atypical in structure and includes a compilation of interviews with fourteen women workers of the Alaska North Slope. The interviews were conducted over eighteen years and only slightly edited for

improved readability. Although most women are newcomers, trailblazing their way to fulfilling employment in male-dominated industries, Williams also refreshingly includes the story of Debora Strutz, an Indigenous woman who experienced the word “minority” for the first time in her life working in Prudhoe Bay. These interviews also include brief introductions and follow-ups with each woman, provided by Williams. As paratext, *Wildcat Women* provides photography, a forward, preface, introduction, afterward, essay by Arctic environmental historian Julia Feuer-Cotter, glossary, endnotes, and index. It would make excellent reading material in a university humanities course and is also accessible to the general public.

The cold—Rosemary Carroll spoke of frostbitten fingers and “being cold for twenty years”—heavy equipment, men, wolves, and bears are some of the dangers the North Slope trailblazers faced. Working twelve to fourteen hours a day for eight weeks straight, and driving on pure ice with cracks as big as her boot, bus driver Strutz, for example, recalls calling a Canadian “ice doctor” to green light her continued drive, as she was constantly assuming responsibility for her crew’s safety. Despite a “Rule J”—regulating men’s contact with their women colleagues—enforced by Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), some women still reported sexual harassment at which point there was no official response from the employer (other than questioning the woman’s motivation for working among men). The uncannily familiar tune that these women were “stealing jobs away” from men who needed to support their families echoes throughout the book’s pages. Brushes with a male wolf and a grizzly bear that comes to scavenge the bones Robin Conolly puts out for the birds, are balanced by the sudden stark beauty of a polar bear a hundred yards away from Roxie (Hollingsworth) Majeske.

Despite these dangers, there is a common thread of women reporting overwhelming satisfaction gained from their working lives. They brought their children to the camps, and they bonded with the few other women around as well as with their male colleagues. Geographic isolation kept the workers closely-knit and, often being far away from their home states, they came to know their co-workers as family. They had code language, signifying intimacy, and they protected and took care of one another. As Kate Cotton describes, she felt bad for one man who desperately tried to show off for her, the only woman in a room full of men, and ended up putting his fork through his cheek.

The personal photography from the women provides visual accompaniment to their stories of the tundra; oil reserve land; and frigid, mechanical work environments. The older photos of smiling women dressed in hard hats, large coats, rolled up sleeves, work gloves, goggles, and steel-toe boots are artfully juxtaposed with the odd recent photo of the retiree in her present-day milieu, or of contemporary women workers. It becomes obvious that the book's careful and poetic assembly is deliberate: a dialogue between past and present, young and aging perspectives, individuals and the collective.

*Wildcat Women* as a sum of its components is much more than a series of interviews. It is an exploration into the ontologically real events of different women's lives while working in Alaska in the middle of second-wave feminism. This book is pertinent to current studies of feminism because it reveals that much of the equality work done by past women workers laid the foundation for women working today. The trailblazers interviewed represent women's necessary penetration into a predominantly White male workscape, which Feuer-Cotter discusses in her comprehensive essay on the American Adam and the industry's negotiations between the gendered frontier myth and the practical need for teamwork, no matter the genders involved. The book also demonstrates the power of oral history in capturing raw experiences, personality, and outlook with less mediation and fewer degrees of separation.

**Natalie B. Pendergast** obtained a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Toronto in 2015; she moved to the Yukon in 2017 with her two sons and works for the government while continuing post-PhD publishing pursuits.