

*American Grit: A Woman's Letters from the Ohio Frontier*. Edited by Emily Foster. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002. vii, 368pp. Cloth, \$45.00, ISBN: 978-0-8131-2265-6.)

In 1826, Anna Briggs Bentley, her husband Joseph, and their six children left their home in Maryland for the frontier of Columbiana County, Ohio. Anna Bentley was from a wealthy and well-connected Quaker family, her father was closely associated with President Thomas Jefferson, and when President James Madison fled Washington D.C. just ahead of the British army he took refuge with members of the Briggs family. However, with the death of Isaac Briggs, the family patriarch in 1825, the family fell upon difficult times. In the hope of making a better life for themselves and their family Anna and Joseph Bentley joined countless other pioneers in moving west, eventually settling on a farm they named Green Hill in the wilderness of Ohio. From her new home, Anna Bentley wrote long letters to her family back in Maryland. These letters detail farm life on the frontier, her struggles to raise her growing family, the generosity of her neighbors, and her desire not to be forgotten by her Maryland family.

Emily Foster's *American Grit* is a collection of those letters, written from 1826 to 1858. Foster, a director of research and writing services specializing in public affairs communications, allows Bentley's natural storytelling ability to shine. Throughout her letters, Bentley gives the reader an intimate look at the life of a pioneer wife and mother. Determined to keep in contact with her family in the east, Bentley details the everyday details of her life. She shares stories of the generosity of her neighbors, how they helped her to adjust to frontier life through gifts of food, shared labor, such as sending their older daughters to help Bentley with the laundry and other housework, and most importantly giving her a sense of extended family in her new community. She often writes of neighbor women that she considers like sisters, or like the mother she left behind and how instrumental these women were in helping her in spite of the fact that they were of a much lower social status than those whose company she had preciously enjoyed.

Bentley also writes about her growing family that eventually amounted to thirteen children, and the difficulties she faced trying to supply their needs. Throughout her letters home Bentley drops hints as to ways in which her family could help them by sending new needles since she had no place to buy them herself, how she wished she had some of her eastern family's cast off clothing that she could remake for her children who were dressed in "rags," and how she craved a cup of coffee as they had not had any in a very long time. Her purpose in doing so was twofold. Her family really did have a need for the things that she hinted at because while they were well fed and sheltered there was very little cash money on the frontier. This made it extremely difficult to supply the other needs of her family. Yet her greatest motivation appeared to be for her eastern family to remember her children and to keep letters and information flowing between the families.

Anna Briggs Bentley's letters are an incredible source of information about everyday life on the Ohio frontier and how life changed as the frontier gave way to towns and cities. While not focused on political events of the time, Bentley was very aware of many of the issues of the day – from detailing the plans to build a new canal, to the wave of anti-slavery sentiment that swept through Ohio and her own experience at an anti-slavery rally where she heard William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass speak, and even the divisions that were taking place within the Quaker community. However, the greatest strength of the Bentley letters is their ability to detail everyday life of an anonymous frontier family, their struggles and their triumphs.

Anna Bentley shares a wealth of information about the medical practices of the time, the difficulties of living in a society where cash was scarce, and the challenges facing a woman living on the frontier.

*American Grit: A Woman's Letters from the Ohio Frontier* is an intimate look at everyday life on the Ohio frontier and is an incredible source of information about the work of women on the frontier which is often overlooked in accounts of western settlement. However, there are a few minor detractions in the account that provide challenges to the reader. The first is the sheer number of players in these letters, from the fifteen members of the immediate Bentley family to the numerous relatives mentioned and the neighbors that play a vital role in the family's life. It is a challenge for the reader to keep everyone straight. The difficulty is compounded by numerous people with the same name and the addition of new family members as the Bentley children marry, begin their own families and start writing their own letters back east (several of which are included in this volume). Foster has admitted the challenge of identifying all the people mentioned in the letters and does her best to help the reader through footnotes and appendixes, which include multiple family trees.

The other minor problem, especially for students of the period, is the lack of historical context for the letters. Foster does introduce each section of letters with a paragraph or two about what was happening at the time in the family, and introduces a few key historical events that are mentioned in the letters, such as divisions within the Quaker community, alternate medical beliefs, and the failed canal. However, this historical context is done primarily on the local level. It would benefit the book to expand the historical context to include the national level, perhaps in the footnotes. For example, there is mention made of the Panic of 1837, the lack of currency in circulation and that this caused problems for those on the frontier. There is no other explanation as to why this was a significant event, not only to those on the frontier but to the rest of the nation as well.

Other than these relatively minor criticisms, Emily Foster's *American Grit* is an incredibly engaging account of family life on the Ohio frontier that is rich in detail and should be considered for inclusion in any Ohio History course. In an effort to be remembered, Foster has made sure that the letters that Anna Briggs Bentley wrote to her family back east have been preserved and has guaranteed that Bentley and her struggles on the frontier will be known for generations to come.

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