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Earth, Water, and Gender

Two great American writers tell parallel stories of conquest.

by Erin Nelson

The building of the Boise River framed the story of nature's conquest in a classic novel about engineering and gender in the pioneer West. Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* (published in 1971)—the title itself taken from the work of Mary Hallock Foote—fictionalized the lives of Boise settlers Arthur De Wint Foote and Mary Hallock Foote, who arrived in 1884 to begin the Boise River irrigation project. Mary Hallock Foote, a talented illustrator and writer, recorded their time spent on the Boise River in great detail through letters, drawings, and prose. Stegner appropriated letters from Mary Hallock Foote to write *Angle of Repose*, and this decision remains controversial among literary scholars today.

Stegner has been hailed as a “western humanist” and praised for his ability to encapsulate regional history and authentic life on the frontier. Much of this praise accumulated after the publication of *Angle of Repose*. Stegner claimed to have permission to use Hallock Foote's letters, which were published a year after Stegner's novel in a volume titled *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*. Members of the Foote family stipulated that Stegner hide the source of the letters, and so Stegner refrained from crediting Mary Hallock Foote as a source. Some descendants of the Foote family objected to the great liberties Stegner took with using Mary Hallock Foote's writing, but Stegner maintained that he was following the family's wishes. The story of Mary Hallock Foote still arises in literary discourse about the blurred lines between memoir and fiction. Arthur Foote and Mary Hallock Foote remain formative parts of Idaho history and the history of the Boise River to this day, with controversy circulating around Stegner's use of Mary Hallock Foote's letters and Arthur Foote's attempt to construct the Boise River irrigation project.

Arthur De Wint Foote was born in 1849 in Guilford, Connecticut. He was close to graduating from Yale College's Sheffield Scientific School when he left, in 1868, to begin his career in construction and business ventures. Foote's pursuits eventually led to his career in civil engineering. Foote was an advocate for the expansion of the New West,



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and this belief system motivated Arthur Foote and his wife, Mary, to move to Boise, Idaho, where they settled along the Boise River. Arthur Foote bought the water rights on the Boise River where he designed the Boise River irrigation project. The Footes stayed in Boise for 12 years while the project developed until it failed due to lack of funding. The family then moved to Grass Valley, California, where Arthur Foote worked as a general manager of the North Star Mine. There, he and his wife



MARY HALLOCK FOOTE

Illustration depicting the pioneer life of Mary and Arthur Foote.

built the North Star House in 1905, which is also known as Foote Mansion. Foote Mansion became an important setting in *Angle of Repose*, personifying the trend of “western elegance” that the Footes embraced and perpetuated in the West.

Wallace Stegner, Mary Hallock Foote, and a Literary Controversy

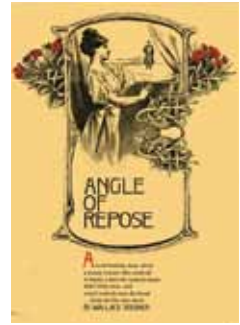
While Arthur Foote focused on his goals of westward expansion, his wife, Mary Hallock Foote, kept valuable documentation and meticulous recordings of her travels with Arthur. These documents comprise some of the most prized

encapsulations of life in Boise. Mary Hallock was born in 1847 in Milton, New York, to a Quaker family. She studied at the Female Collegiate Seminary in Poughkeepsie, New York, and attended the Cooper Institute School of Design for Women, one of the rare institutions dedicated to educating women at the time. By her early 20s, Hallock had established herself as a reputable illustrator and artist. After marrying Arthur Foote in 1876, Mary Hallock Foote was less than enthusiastic about leaving the East, but she became inspired by the philosophy of the New West. While traveling westward, and after having settled in the West, she recorded her impressions in writings and drawings, which were published in *Century Magazine* and other newspapers and literary journals of the time.

A formal yet sociable person, Hallock Foote befriended her neighbors who had settled along the Boise River. These people often became characters in her stories, which she sold to newspapers and early Boise settlers. In so doing, she became the primary breadwinner of the household while Arthur tried tirelessly to fund his irrigation project. This gender role reversal was unusual for the time. Because Arthur's irrigation project had drained the family's savings—so much so that the Footes were unable to afford their rent in town—the family settled along the Boise River in a small log cabin built by Arthur.

Hallock Foote wrote novels and nonfiction stories about the West, articulating her own narrative of an eastern immigrant to the West. Although she wrote her memoir, *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote*, in 1924, 14 years before her death, it wasn't published until 1972. Stegner had access to the memoir long before its publication and stated that he was attracted to the manuscript, referring to Hallock Foote as one of the best storytellers and chroniclers of life in the western coal mines. Stegner even taught some of Hallock Foote's short stories in his class "The Rise of Realism" at Stanford University.

About 10% of *Angle of Repose* comes verbatim from *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*, and several passages are multiple paragraphs long. Stegner biographer Jackson



Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972.

Benson cites and forgives the “38 instances of letter quotation for a total of 61 pages in a book of 555 pages.” Stegner also used small quotations from Hallock Foote’s writings, as well as thousands of small phrases and details found in her journals. When questioned about the liberties he took with her letters and stories, Stegner responded, “To be frank, she did not strike me as important enough historically to make her more than modestly interesting—a talented woman on the frontier. By converting her to fiction I at least had the chance to make her immortal.”

Beyond this appropriation, Hallock Foote’s family objected to the framing of Stegner’s character Susan Ward, who was largely based on Mary Hallock Foote. Stegner bent the facts of Hallock Foote’s life to fit with his fiction, portraying Susan as an unhappy wife who possibly has an affair with her husband’s assistant. During the affair, Susan’s young daughter drowns in the nearby river. Susan is conceited and wary of the West, which is disconcerting to the Foote family and fans of Mary Hallock Foote. As they understand it, Stegner used Hallock Foote’s writing to ultimately criticize and slander the real woman. Stegner’s use of her work spurs further questions: If Hallock Foote’s work had been as well known as it is today, would Stegner have been forced to credit her with his use of her life and words? If Hallock Foote had been a man, would her relatives and fans have taken her life more seriously and, as a result, taken more ownership of her work? If Stegner wasn’t such an established literary figure, would he have been challenged more to divulge the source of his “inspiration”?

Susan’s strained marriage with her husband, Lyman Ward, is a major conflict in *Angle of Repose*, and much of this tension was based on Mary Hallock Foote’s difficult marriage to Arthur Foote. Mary’s experiences with her troubled marriage to Arthur and her adjustments to life in the West became meaningful examples of imperfect unions that emerge in the novel. In her article “A Sympathetic Misunderstanding? Mary Hallock Foote’s Mining West,” Janet Floyd wrote, “It is ... probable to argue that Foote’s class and gender allowed her a particular kind of experience in the West—one characterized

by detachment, perhaps, but not one wholly organized by oppositions of East and West, or by positions of alienation and tentative assimilation.”

This unique experience of the West helped Mary Hallock Foote crystallize her mixed emotions about Boise in her fiction and nonfiction. She was far enough removed from western culture to be an acute observer, yet she was fascinated with the people and used her artistic talents to portray life on the Boise River. Hallock Foote wrote some of her most significant fiction during her time in Boise from 1884 to 1895, despite her sense of loneliness and isolation. In addition, she completed some of her most famous illustrations, including “The Irrigation Ditch” and “Afternoon at a Ranch,” while in Boise. These illustrations depict life on the Boise River in ways that suggest that Hallock Foote felt a strange mixture of isolation and fascination with the area, noting that the men who populated the area did not have families and merely inhabited the land to work.

Hallock Foote wrote five novels while in Boise, titled *John Bodewin’s Testimony* (1886), *The Last Assembly Ball* (1889), *The Chosen Valley* (1892), *Coeur d’Alene* (1894), and *In Exile and Other Stories* (1894). *The Chosen Valley*, notably, told the story of the building of a dam in the Snake River Valley, and *Coeur d’Alene* portrayed the struggle between miners and mine owners in northern Idaho. Many of these stories were inspired by her real-life knowledge of Arthur’s involvement with expanding mining in the West. Mary often incorporated the people she met through Arthur’s employment into her stories, basing her characters on the authentic experiences of her friends and community. This writing style has ironically been compared with Stegner’s style of using real stories as a scaffold for his fiction.

While Mary Foote adjusted to life in the West, Arthur Foote dedicated time to developing the Boise River irrigation project, which aimed to build dams and canals on the Boise River that would bring water to desert farms that struggled to obtain proper irrigation. Although Arthur was a good engineer, he was a poor businessman. Arthur was often naive



MARY HALLOCK FOOTE

“The Irrigation Ditch”

and optimistic with his investors, trusting men who would invest their money in the project and then suddenly withdraw their funds. Despite this struggle, he remained dedicated to his project for 12 years, putting his family in financial strain. The Boise River irrigation project eventually failed, and the Foote family left Boise to chase other civil engineering pursuits in California. Despite Arthur's failure, his work helped inspire the Arrowrock Dam project that developed 25 years after the Footes had left Boise. The Arrowrock Dam project was the most ambitious and significant canal project to date for the United States Reclamation Service.

Footes' Canyon House on the Boise River

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The Canyon House was designed and built by Arthur De Wint Foote in 1885, using funds from literary works by his wife, Mary Hallock Foote.

In 2015, the remnants of the Canyon House built by the Footes sit 12.5 miles east of the Boise city center at the confluence of Lydle Gulch and the Boise River, on top of a small knoll on the south band of the gulch. The curve of the Boise River rests just 40 meters from the rubble, and a fenced-off square of basalt stone foundation marks the spot where the Foote house once stood. A hand-built wooden fence, the vague outline of the Foote house's foundation, and a plaque dedicated to the Foote family are all that remain of the once-historic house on the hill.

Arthur and Mary Foote settled along the Boise River in 1885. Mary's novel, *John Bodewin's Testimony*, was the family's sole source of income after Arthur encountered financial problems with the Boise River irrigation project. The money Mary made from the sale of the novel paid for the construction of the Foote house. Arthur designed the house and began construction using organic materials from the site. Mary documented the process, writing that Arthur used "materials at hand, with walls two feet thick, of the rough basalt rock, using mud for mortar and for plastering the interior walls and partitions." She also wrote, "We began to realize that we should need a house if we spent the winter in the Canyon. ... A. was the architect and made his choice of material on the spot, those wasted rockslides only a short haul from the hill where we chalked out our ground plan."

Arthur wished to be close to the river so he could easily complete irrigation projects in the area. Mary, however, was hesitant to leave the city and considered the rural area desolate and remote. Mary wrote in a letter to her best friend Helena, "There is something terribly sobering about these solitudes, these waste places of earth. They belittle everything one is or tries to do. ... Very few things in art hold their own against it." She often longed for the culture and people back East, but she was drawn to the West and its rural landscape. Mary also revealed that an important reason for living outside Boise was to keep the Foote children "away from the commonness of the Boise atmosphere." Mary, a Victorian cosmopolitan lady of New York City, eventually fell in love with the western setting of the Boise River, adapting her experiences into much of the content that became Stegner's *Angle of Repose*.

The house was modest, but Arthur's careful planning and hard work resulted in a small but homey space for the Foote family to inhabit. In her poem, "Mary Hallock Foote at Stone House," she wrote, "With corner pillars rooted in the hill/And sloping roof extending its round crown,/Your home seems grown out of the knoll."

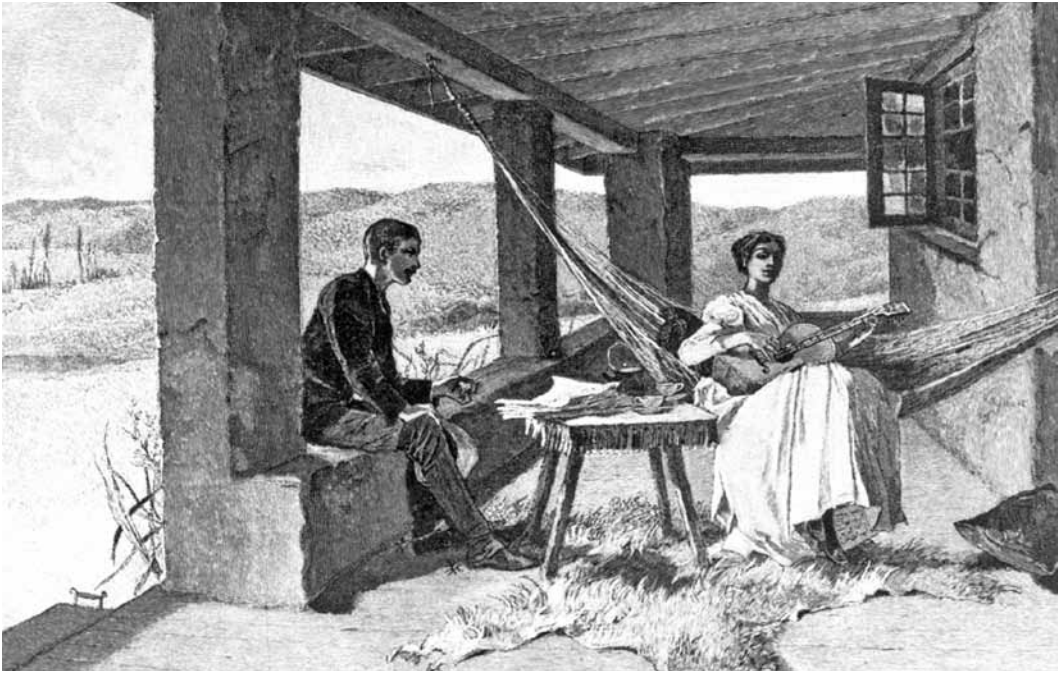
The site housed Mary and Arthur Foote, their three children, a governess, a cook, a nurse, and an engineer. Arthur



MARY HALLOCK FOOTE

"Engineer's Mate" depicts Mary Hallock Foote's arrival in Kuna en route to Boise.

modeled the house after the modern bungalow at the time, featuring built-in furniture that was unusual in design and Japanese prints installed on the walls of the dining room. The architecture and unique design signified that the Footes had



MARY HALLOCK FOOTE

Mary Hallock Foote drew scenes of pioneer life in Idaho. “A Pretty Girl in the West,” Canyon House veranda, circa 1890.

artistic and unusual taste for the region. Mary created several illustrations of the surrounding wilderness during the 10 years the family spent on the Boise River, and cartographers used the illustrations as references while mapping and studying the area years later.

Once settled along the Boise River, Hallock Foote continued to write and illustrate, creating pieces of fiction based on her neighbors and townspeople. She sketched people and landscapes along the river, publishing many of her articles in *Century Magazine*. About her home in the Boise Canyon, she wrote: “That V-shape in the notch where the river went out and the sunset looked in bounded our world toward the valley; the bend in the river above us where the hills interlocked shut us off in that direction.” When the family left the home to move

to California, she remarked, “Of all our wild nest building, this was the wildest and most improvident and hardest to leave.”

Stegner, Western Irrigation, and the Boise River

While Stegner is at the center of much controversy surrounding *Angle of Repose*, one thing he and Mary Hallock Foote had in common was their love of the American West. Stegner commented extensively in the novel about the influence of western life on the Boise River. As the land became more populated and irrigated, the landscape began to suffer. Urban growth created a demand for more water, and expansion in the West compounded the problem because of the land’s aridity. Westerners relied on a high-tech hydraulic society to supply water, which countered the philosophy of the New West that drove people to go west, claim their land, and live without limitations to freedom. The more the West expanded, the more citizens had to depend on governmentally or corporately supplied water from irrigation projects.

As a result of his exposure to the American West in early childhood, Stegner was knowledgeable about the environment. Stegner was born in Iowa in 1909 and moved to North Dakota, Washington State, and then to Eastend, Saskatchewan. His father, George Stegner, was what Stegner later called a “boomer,” a man looking to find fortune in the West and who, not finding it in one place, moved to another. George relentlessly pursued this dream of American prosperity, moving his family to the Saskatchewan-Montana border.

Stegner’s fascination with the aridity of the West began in his early childhood on the homestead. The Stegners grew wheat, which required summer rain to grow, but the dryness of the land caused the crops to dust out. Stegner’s mother longed to stay in one place, and she was grateful the family moved to Eastend to farm for many years. The *Angle of Repose* character Susan Burling Ward is similar to Stegner’s mother in the sense that she attempted to find a home and community wherever she moved. Stegner’s mother, as he put it, was “always hopefully, hopelessly trying to nest” in all the places around the West the family moved during Stegner’s adolescence. This



Author Wallace Stegner

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA

period in Eastend was the only time in Stegner's life that his family was together in one place, and leaving Saskatchewan was difficult.

After failing to grow crops in Saskatchewan, Stegner's family moved to Great Falls, Salt Lake City, Hollywood, Reno, and various other places. This transient time was similar to the lives of the traveling Foote family, and in many ways, Stegner could relate to the Footes' conflicted feelings about western culture. "Between my twelfth and twenty-first years we must have lived in twenty different houses," Stegner admitted in his autobiographical collection of essays, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. He continued, "[We] tried to make country and climate over to fit our existing habits and desires. Instead of listening to the silence, we have shouted into the void."

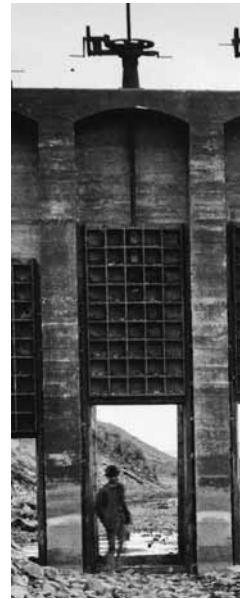
Stegner became fascinated by the aridity of the West, and much of his inner conflict about western expansion is channeled through the character Oliver Ward, who attempts to irrigate the Boise River in *Angle of Repose*. Oliver Ward is a bright, straightforward, and honest man who moves all over the West following different jobs. He is a mining engineer and has lived in Colorado, California, New Mexico, and Idaho, taking his family with him with nearly every move. This results in the family settling in some strange homes "in the wildest of places." Oliver's honesty often limits his ability to achieve his goals—like Arthur Foote, he is cheated out of investment deals with his irrigation projects and often places too much faith in sly businessmen who run the family into bankruptcy.

Oliver is determined to bring water to the West, assuming it is the "Eden" the New West myth proclaims it to be, by embarking on the Boise River irrigation project. Oliver's unsuccessful attempt to dominate the river is an example of Stegner's belief that landscape has the powerful ability to shape humanity, despite our wholehearted attempts to shape the land. Stegner states people in the West "have never stayed in one place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it." This idea is personified in Oliver, who naively fails to learn the land and then fails to alter it.

Stegner states in his part-memoir, part-fiction novel *Wolf Willow* that “short of living it out, no system of farming, no matter how strenuously applied, could produce crops in that country during one of the irregular and unpredictable periods of drought.” Much like Arthur Foote, Oliver Ward refused to give up his project because he believed that irrigation would be the next greatest movement of the West. He eventually drives the family into financial ruin, fighting to remake the landscape into one that can produce the crops Stegner argued can’t exist in the region.

Stegner was most entrenched in commentary on western culture regarding the exploitation of water resources. In a place like Boise, we remake the landscapes we love, creating conflict between private and public spheres, the natural and the unnatural, and the idea that water is owned by the community and should be managed for the public’s welfare. He asserted that the arid environment of the West enabled the worst and most disastrous pillaging of local resources, with rivers and aquifers suffering the most. In *Where the Bluebird Sings*, he wrote that western settlers “came to pillage, or work for pillagers, rather than to settle for life. When the pillaging was done or the dream exploded, they moved on, to be replaced in the next boom by others just as hopeful and just as footloose.” Stegner asserted that westerners carve out canals and levees to prove they are the masters of nature, but western rivers eventually mute those dreams and reclaim their own paths.

Fredrik Christian Brøgger claims in his essay, “Wallace Stegner and the Western Environment: Hydraulics, Placelessness, and (Lack of) Identity,” that “Stegner’s ultimate point in *Where the Bluebird Sings* is that human societies and cultures will remain vigorous and dynamic only to the extent that they are able to adapt themselves to their environment.” This, in many senses, rings true throughout *Angle of Repose* as well. Susan Burling Ward struggles to adapt to the new harshness of her surroundings, instead finding solace in her writing, artwork, and possible affair. Her young daughter, Agnes, succumbs to the dangers of the West and tragically drowns in the river. Oliver attempts to dominate the Boise



HISTORICAL AMERICAN ENGINEERING SURVEY

A reclamation engineer stands beneath Arthur Foote’s ambition about a mile below the family homestead, 1907.

River and alter the landscape, only to find out that it ultimately shapes him. Mary Hallock Foote wrote about the real-life irrigation failure, “There it was finished—the last of our dreams in Idaho ... the small but mighty work of man and the vast overpowering Nature to be used and controlled. ... What insolence—what a gesture!”

Often, Mary Hallock Foote and Stegner complement and contrast each other in their works. Stegner, a noted conservationist, advocated for water preservation and remarked that “in the dry West, using water means using it *up*.” Hallock Foote, however, arrived in the West at a time when the West was still a mystery and conservation was second to western expansion. She wrote several passages about how excited she was for Arthur’s new business venture in Boise, not knowing the future ramifications of irrigation on the landscape.

A Complicated Narrative

The relationship between Wallace Stegner, the Footes, and the Boise River will always remain complicated. Their narratives both bleed into and contradict each other, much like the Boise River itself. History is always a narrative told from a specific perspective, and Stegner and Hallock Foote speak together, arguing with each other and shaping each other. What is clear is that both Stegner and Hallock Foote wrote about a beautiful land overcome by humanity’s desire to control and irrigate. Stegner clearly and vocally advocated preservation and environmentalism. Hallock Foote lived in an era before the West was fully explored. She and her husband Arthur were part of a generation that sought to harness and shape the land, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully. Today, Hallock Foote’s reflections on the Boise River, life in the West, and the arid landscape of Boise, Idaho, remain some of the most important encapsulations of life on the Boise frontier.

Some scholars believe that Hallock Foote was largely forgotten by the time of her death in 1938 and that Stegner revitalized her by incorporating her work into his novel *Angle*

of *Repose*. Hallock Foote's words, however, make it clear that she does not need Stegner to resuscitate, immortalize, or validate her work or to explain to readers the beauty of the Boise River Valley where she made her home. In *The Last Assembly Ball, and the Fate of a Voice*, she speaks forever for herself: "There are many loose pages of the earth's history scattered through the unpeopled regions of the Far West. ... An ancient lava stream once submerged the valley. Its hardening crust, bursting asunder in places, left great crooked rents through which the subsequent drainage from the mountain slopes found a way down to the desert plains. In one of these furrows, left by the fiery plowshare, a river, now called the Wallula, made its bed. Hurling itself from side to side scouring out its straitened boundaries with tons of sand torn from the mountains, it slowly widened and deepened, and wore its ancient channel into the canyon. ... Along the bluffs, the basalt walls are reared in tiers of columns with hexagonal cleavage. ... A column or a group of columns becomes dislocated from the mass, rests so slightly apart ... it topples down; the jointed columns fall apart, and their fragments go to increase the heap of debris which has found its angle of repose at the foot of the cliff."



COMPTON AND COMPANY

An engraved portrait of Mary Hallock Foote, about 1888



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