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Tandem Lives: The Frontier Texas Diaries of Henrietta Baker Embree and Tennessee Keys Embree, 1856-1884

Amy L. Wink

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The mythology of the frontier Texas woman portrays her as fiercely independent, strong willed, and adventurous. This eye-opening book, however, offers a far more complex and intimate version of women's cultural experiences in mid-nineteenth-century Texas by publishing, for the first time, the diaries of Henrietta Baker Embree and Tennessee Keys Embree. Henrietta and Tennessee were the sequential wives of Dr. John W. Embree of Belton, Texas, a physician, slaveholder, farmer, merchant, and man of mercurial temperament. Their diaries reveal the social and personal challenges women experienced in a region beset first by the Civil War and then by Reconstruction and offer insights into the two women's struggles to survive as battered wives in a society that offered little support--and less chance of escape--for women bound by nineteenth-century ideas about gender roles. In the preface and other editorial matter that accompany the two diaries, Amy L. Wink draws on extensive primary research to fill in the blanks of Henrietta's and Tennessee's lives and place them in historical context. The diaries themselves richly illuminate how these women coped with such issues as domestic violence, childrearing, faith, frailty, and mortality. Most significantly, they show how Henrietta and Tennessee--and, by extension, countless other women like them--used their writing to construct their sense of personal identity and thereby to empower themselves in the face of debilitating external forces. An important contribution to the fields of history, women's studies, psychology, and literature, Tandem Lives reveals anew the rich insights offered by the autobiographical writings of ordinary women.

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