

BOOK REVIEW



Matilda Coxe Stevenson: Pioneering Anthropologist by Darlis A. Miller. 304 pp., 14 halftones, 2 maps, Foreword, Index, References Cited. University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. \$29.95 (Cloth). ISBN 978-8061-3832-9.

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Matilda Coxe Stevenson (1849–1915) was a pioneering and legendary American anthropologist. Some legends about her were pejorative, promulgated by male peers, particularly the narcissistic and paranoid Frank Hamilton Cushing and the anal-retentive ethno-linguist John Peabody Harrington. Darlis Miller has done the history of American anthropology a great service. Her painstaking archival research and rich narrative have provided a balanced biography of Stevenson as a person forced to work, often against great odds, in a male-chauvinist milieu.

Matilda was the oldest daughter of Marie Coxe and Alexander Evans, a lawyer and journalist. Before and after the Civil War they lived in Washington, D.C. Evans was close friends with leading politicians and scientists of the day and sometimes clerked for important Congressional committees. Matilda grew up with important political and social connections that increased in later years. The family spent the Civil War years in Philadelphia where Matilda attended the fashionable Miss [Anna] Anable's School. They returned to Washington in 1868. There Matilda read law with her father and studied with a local chemist. Her family encouraged her interests in the sciences and she aspired to be a mineralogist.

The period 1867 to 1879 was the time of the "Great Surveys," the four geographical and geological surveys—best known by the names of their directors, Clarence King, George Wheeler, John Wesley Powell, and F. V. Hayden—dedicated to mapping and studying the American West. Hayden had worked for geological surveys before the Civil War and early on had hired young James Stevenson (1840–1888). James became, as Miller writes, a "crack administrator of day-to-day operations" and an excellent lobbyist on Capitol Hill (p. 17)—a most valuable staff person since the surveys depended on annual Congressional appropriations. Matilda and James met in 1870 and were married in 1872. Matilda was able to travel west with James during some summers and had a brief but important ethnographic experience with some Colorado Ute Indians in 1878.

In 1879 the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) was created, abolishing by merger the four surveys. John Wesley Powell managed to get legislation passed to “complete” an ethnological publication series started in 1876. He took this as a mandate to create a Bureau of Ethnology under the auspices of the Smithsonian, with himself as director. He hired James Stevenson as executive officer and sent James (with Matilda as unpaid “coadjudicator”), the photographer Jack Hillers, and the nascent ethnologist Frank Hamilton Cushing to the Southwest. James was to make collections for the National Museum, Hillers to photograph the Indians, and Cushing to pick a tribe and study it. The party arrived at Zuni Pueblo in September, 1879. Matilda helped James collect artifacts but quickly became interested in the people. She had found her calling. Cushing stayed on at Zuni for five years. Matilda came back yearly, much to his annoyance. The Zuni were “his” people—he learned the language, was initiated into a men’s religious society, and wore long hair and a silly-looking “Zuni” costume.

In time, Cushing parleyed his Zuni connections into a major anthropology expedition funded by wealthy Bostonian Mary Hemenway. He generated much glitter but few results. Meanwhile, Matilda organized the Women’s Anthropological Society of Washington (women were excluded from the Anthropological Society of Washington). The Women’s Society became one of several important scientific forums for women scientists, physicians, and intellectuals in the 1880s–1890s.

In 1881 Powell became director of the USGS, keeping his directorship of the Bureau of Ethnology. He moved Stevenson to the Survey, then “detailed” him to do ethnographic research and collecting in the summers. From 1881 through 1887 James and Matilda were in the Southwest for several months each year, collecting artifacts, studying Zia (Sia) Pueblo, and returning frequently to Zuni where Matilda continued her studies. In 1885 the two were able to observe and record a complete nine-night Navajo Nightway healing ceremony, the first ethnographers to witness the full ceremony.

James died of Rocky Mountain spotted fever in 1888. In 1889 Powell hired Matilda as a temporary employee to write up the Zia and Nightway reports, the latter published under James’s name (J. Stevenson 1891, M. Stevenson 1894). In 1890 she was made a permanent employee.

From 1891 through 1897 Matilda returned to Zuni for several months each year. From 1897 through 1902 she was frequently ill, said to be nervous exhaustion, but worked sporadically on her Zuni monograph. In 1901, in an attempt to force her to finish the monograph, Powell “furloughed” her and used the funds to hire someone else. Matilda, using all her political connections, fought back, and won. She was reinstated in 1902 and continued as a Bureau ethnologist until her death. The monograph appeared in 1904 (M. Stevenson 1904).

In her remaining years, Matilda worked assiduously on Zuni ethnobotany and a comparative ethnographic study of Rio Grande pueblos. By the time of her

death she had largely completed the comparative study, but it was never published. She purchased a small ranch on the Rio Grande north of Santa Fe but wound up in financially draining and enervating lawsuits against Clara True, a neighbor who had befriended Matilda and then turned savagely against her.

Matilda Coxe Stevenson was indeed a pioneer. She was the first woman employed anywhere as a professional anthropologist. She founded the Women's Anthropological Society of Washington, participated in other women's scholarly groups, and contributed much to the intellectual ambiance of Washington in the 1880s and 1890s. Her monograph on Zuni is the foundation document on which all subsequent studies have been based. The Navajo Nightway report, which she wrote but listed husband James as author, is regarded as the most complete description of the ceremony ever made. Her report on Zia (Sia) was the first major ethnography of a Rio Grande pueblo ever published. Darlis Miller has given us a thorough, balanced, lively, and sympathetic portrait of a remarkable individual who made significant and important contributions to American anthropology.

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