

BOOK REVIEW

'Clover Adams' by Natalie Dykstra

Rethinking the artistic life and tragic death of Clover Adams

By Suzanne Koven | FEBRUARY 05, 2012



CLOVER ADAMS

Clover Adams composed a photo of three women, one facing away, which Natalie Dykstra saw as expressing Clover's sense of abandonment.

On a dreary Sunday morning in December 1885, Henry Adams, historian, novelist, grandson of John Quincy Adams, and great-grandson of John Adams, returned home from a dental appointment to find his wife dead. Marian Hooper Adams, known as Clover, had drunk a vial of potassium cyanide, which she'd used in photography, then a popular hobby among members of the upper classes.

For more than a century since her suicide, Clover Adams has been better known for her death than her life. Two questions, in particular, have preoccupied biographers of the Adamses and scholars studying the Gilded Age: What made lucky Clover, the beloved daughter of a Boston Brahmin, friend to countless notables from William Tecumseh Sherman to Henry James, and hostess of the most prestigious salon in late 19th century Washington, fall into such despair at the age of 42? And, even more curious, why did her husband never mention Clover or her suicide in "The Education of Henry Adams"?

In a beautifully written and immensely satisfying new biography, Natalie Dykstra demonstrates that these two mysteries surrounding Clover's death are, in fact, much less interesting than the woman herself. In "Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life," Dykstra compassionately and painstakingly portrays Clover as a daughter, friend, wife, reader, writer, and - most importantly - an artist. What emerges is a clear and nuanced image of Clover that makes previous accounts seem as vague and shadowy as photographic negatives.



MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Clover Adams, on horseback.

Dykstra, an associate professor of English at Hope College in Holland, Mich., opens the book in an unexpected way. Rather than taking the obvious tack of beginning with Clover's tragic death, Dykstra starts with a scene two years earlier, in the fall of 1883. Clover had started taking and developing photographs in spring and decided, one November day, to stage a picture of her three Skye terriers sitting at a table set as if for a tea party.

It would seem a silly scene, the frivolous occupation of a bored and wealthy woman, if not for the telling details Dykstra supplies: Clover was trying out a new lens; she made meticulous notes about her technique and her assessment of the result: "extremely good." A few hours later, armed with camera, tripod, and other equipment, Clover was at Arlington National Cemetery photographing graves of the Civil War dead.

Clover Adams, Dykstra argues, was no mere dilettante. In fact, she points out, the "dogs at tea" picture was likely a "send-up of the social convention [Clover] occasionally found tedious" - in other words, a satiric commentary on her own glamorous circle.

By opening her biography in this way, Dykstra reframes the central question of Clover Adams's life: What prevented her from fully realizing her ambition and potential as an artist?

Dykstra tackles this question implicitly, without allowing it to distract too much from the biographer's main task: to tell the story of her subject's life. We learn, in Dykstra's absorbing narrative, about Clover's privileged but sad childhood on Beacon Street, her sometimes difficult marriage to the bookish Adams, her family and personal history of depression, and her, at times, overwhelming social obligations. Clover interacted with many of the leading figures of her day: H.H. Richardson, architect of Boston's Trinity Church, designed her Washington home; Henry James used her as a model for strong female characters in his fiction; Sherman recreated his "March to the Sea" for Clover over dinner, using his silverware.

Dykstra contextualizes Clover's life by providing historical information: for example, about Boston's waning influence after the Civil War and about the evolution of photography and psychiatry in the late 1800s.

As much as possible, Dykstra uses Clover's own words to relay her story. She combed through the hundreds of letters Clover wrote to friends and family, especially to her father, physician and social reformer Robert Hooper (plus a cache of previously unpublished missives written by family members). Dykstra mostly resists imagining how Clover felt in facing her infertility and other disappointments, preferring instead to quote her, sometimes to chilling effect. "Ellen," Clover wrote to her sister, shortly before she took her own life, "I'm not real - Oh make me real."

Dykstra sometimes shows less restraint in interpreting Clover's photographs, many of which are reproduced in the book. Some of her critiques illuminate both Clover's art and her psyche. For example, Dykstra sees in a photograph Clover took of her in-laws - diplomat Charles Francis Adams and his hypochondriacal wife, Abigail - a brilliant visual depiction of their relationship to her: Clover had positioned her subjects such that they seem to be looking down disdainfully at the camera and barring the door to their home. But occasionally, as when Dykstra finds in a portrait of three women, one facing away from the other two, an expression of Clover's sense of abandonment by her mother (who died when Clover was six) and lack of a daughter, the posthumous psychoanalysis feels overreaching.

No matter. By drawing attention to Clover's photographs - some of which are quite

striking and pre-figure the works of 20th century masters Alfred Steiglitz and Dorothea Lange - Dykstra has done the legacy of Clover Hooper - and the modern reader - a great service.

Suzanne Koven is a primary care internist at Massachusetts General Hospital and writes the monthly "In Practice" column for the Globe. Her website is www.suzannekovenmd.com, and she can be reached at inpracticemd@gmail.com.