The New York Review of Books

Working in the Dark

APRIL 26, 2012

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Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life
by Natalie Dykstra
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 318 pp., $26.00

Massachusetts Historical Society

Clover Adams's photograph of Miriam Choate Pratt, Alice Greenwood Howe, and Alice Pratt at Smith's Point on Boston's North Shore. Her biographer, Natalie Dykstra, sees in this photograph 'a mood not of friendship and connection, but of lost possibility.'

1.

Supreme achievement in the arts is such a rare thing that to try to explain why talented people fall short of it can seem as futile as identifying geological conditions that fail to produce diamonds. Impediments lie everywhere. Cyril Connolly worried that "enemies of promise" such as writing for the movies distracted authors from their "true function" of producing masterpieces. For Virginia Woolf, the barrier to women writers in particular was the lack of "money and a room of her own," those indispensable buffers from the intrusions of husband, housekeeping, and clamoring children. Biography is the genre in which such impediments are triumphantly overcome. Only in the margins of the eminent lives does one glimpse the mute inglorious brother or the brilliant sister—Woolf imagined her as Judith Shakespeare—who, in Woolf's dire scenario of thwarted promise, "killed

herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside Elephant and Castle."

Natalie Dykstra invokes Woolf in her tautly conceived and concisely written account of the "gilded and heartbreaking life" of Marian Hooper Adams, a gifted photographer who presided over a brilliant salon in Washington, from a vantage point opposite the White House, during a wretched succession of American presidents following the Civil War. Her husband, Henry Adams, was writing at the time his commanding multivolume history of the heroic early years of the Republic, and comparing the lackluster incumbents in the White House, such as Rutherford Hayes (who displayed "not a ray of force or intellect in forehead, eye, or mouth," according to the sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued Mrs. Adams), to his own grandfather and great-grandfather. A biography of Mrs. Adams must in some sense also be a biography of her husband, who recognized, in his third-person biography of himself, *The Education of Henry Adams*, that his own failure to become president did not necessarily mean that he had wasted his life.

Marian Hooper, born in Boston in 1843, was so blessed with what used to be called advantages that her childhood nickname of Clover, as in lucky four-leaf clovers, seemed fitting from the start. Her father was a respected ophthalmologist, "rich enough," as Lincoln Kirstein once wrote, "to evade formal practice"; he came out of retirement to treat the wounded at Gettysburg. Her mother was one of the Sturgis sisters, five striking and accomplished women who variously beguiled Emerson, befriended their beloved teacher Margaret Fuller, and published poetry in the *Dial*. Clover herself excelled in Elizabeth Agassiz's innovative school, the forerunner of Radcliffe College, acquiring French and German easily and embarking on a lifelong study of Greek. Among her childhood friends were young men destined for great things: Henry James and his brother William and her second cousin Robert Gould Shaw, also of the Sturgis clan, who later led his regiment of African-American recruits in the doomed charge at Fort Wagner, in South Carolina.

Like other women in Boston, Clover joined in the war effort by sewing and sorting and mailing supplies to the front. One glimpses her at a wartime dinner party at a military barracks outside Cambridge sitting next to Henry James's younger brother Wilky, a lieutenant in Shaw's regiment. The black soldiers of "every shade of color from café au lait to ebony" sang "John Brown's Hymn" for the guests. After Lee's surrender, she attended the victory parade in Washington and observed columns of soldiers "for six hours marching past, eighteen or twenty miles long, their colours telling their sad history." Later that night, she visited the small room in which Lincoln had died. The pillow, she noted, was "soaked with blood."

Her father took her to Europe in 1866, on the obligatory Grand Tour postponed by the war, and she was introduced to the American minister at the Court of St. James, Charles Francis Adams, who had successfully maneuvered to prevent Britain, with its voracious cotton mills, from recognizing the cotton-rich Confederacy. She also met in passing his unimposing private secretary and son, Henry, who, at five feet three inches, was barely an inch taller than Clover and had viewed the war from a greater remove than she had. Back in Boston, she joined the ranks of unmarried women seemingly doomed to spinsterhood by the winnowing of eligible men on the killing fields in Virginia and Georgia.

Henry Adams, still a bachelor at thirty, was heir to a banking fortune on his mother's side and heir to the presidency on his father's. "Never in his life," as T.S. Eliot noted, "would he have to explain who he was." He could afford to do whatever he chose to do. He chose to teach history at Harvard, where Clover's brother-in-law Whitman Gurney was dean of faculty. For seven years Henry adopted European methods of research, seeking to identify some law or logic in the seemingly random unfolding of history, and pushed the young men to ask questions and find answers. By all accounts he was a brilliant teacher, and his students, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, went on to great careers, but the chapter he devoted in the *Education* to this episode in his life is titled "Failure."

He liked Clover's wicked sense of humor and was not put off by what he called her "much too prominent" features—she thought her nose was too long and was reluctant to be photographed or painted—but he worried that with all her erudition she might be a "blue," a *femme savante* or bluestocking. His brother Charles warned him that the Sturgis family were "all crazy as coots." During their yearlong honeymoon, the high point of which was a riverboat journey down the Nile, documented with photographs taken by Henry with the unwieldy camera, glass plates, and chemicals he had purchased in London, Clover descended into a prolonged depression. Her spirits lifted when the couple returned to America and established a fashionable household in Washington where they could show off the watercolors by Turner and Blake, and Clover's Worth gowns, that they had acquired in England and Paris. "People who study Greek," Henry remarked, "must take pains with their dress."

For twelve years, Clover and Henry Adams lived in Washington in apparent tranquility, riding their horses in Rock Creek Park and raising Skye terriers instead of children. Adams worked on his history and Clover assembled a salon of writers and artists and an occasional senator who gathered for her select five-o'clock teas. A more intimate circle was the self-styled and obscurely named Five of Hearts, which included Secretary of State John Hay, Henry Adams's closest friend, his wife, Clara, and the adventurous geologist Clarence King. At one of Clover's dinner parties, General Sherman enacted his March to

the Sea "with knives and forks on the tablecloth," then swept "the rebel army off the table with a pudding knife." Henry James, a frequent visitor, portrayed the Adamses in his incisive short story "Pandora," in which Mrs. Bonnycastle reigns over an exclusive salon that "left out, on the whole, more people than it took in."

Both Clover and James shied away, in Dykstra's nuanced view, from a full engagement with others, adopting a self-protective practice of "deflection":

> But if these two Bostonians had a close friendship, and they did, a kind of coolness defined its center, with each observing the other, each taking notes. James's attention flattered and entertained Clover, but nothing more. She resisted the magnetic pull of his all-consuming imagination. Her self-containment demanded little from him. They both managed life by deflection—she with her fierce humor, he with a distancing charm—a tactic each must have understood in the other.
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> "He comes in every day at dusk and sits chatting by the fire," Clover wrote her father, but added that she thought him "a frivolous being" for dining out as much as he did. After reading *A Portrait of a Lady* [*sic*], which James would later send to her, she wrote to her father, "It's very nice, and [there are] charming things in it, but I'm aging faster and prefer what Sir Walter [Scott] called the 'big bow-wow style.'" It wasn't that her friend "bites off more than he can chaw," she concluded, "but he chaws more than he bites off."

The cutting quip confirms another aspect of James's portrait of Clover in "Pandora," however: her magisterial scorn for others, which eventually and perhaps inevitably was turned against herself, in the escalating self-loathing that Dykstra identifies as the principal affliction of her later years.

Dykstra believes that serving as hostess to a prominent historian and his friends was not sufficiently engrossing for a woman of Clover's intellect and drive. Her career as a photographer, initiated in 1883 with her purchase of one of the newer and lighter cameras equipped with convenient dry-plate negatives, was her partial answer to what Dykstra calls Clover's "predicament as a woman." The puzzle for a biographer is that Clover's intense engagement with photography coincided with her psychological decline. "Just when Clover discovered a powerful way to express herself, her life started to unravel." Creativity, Dykstra suggests, can provide relief from emotional pain but it can also "go the other way," giving "power to hidden undertows." The symptoms of depression from the journey on the Nile resurfaced, in a more dire form, during the early 1880s, as Clover's spirits rapidly deteriorated from "restlessness" to despondency. She couldn't sleep and she wouldn't eat. "I'm not real—" she complained to one of her sisters. "Oh make me

real—you are all of you real!"

What had happened to Clover Adams? Was it the recent death of her father, a reliable source of support since her mother's death during Clover's childhood? Was it the entrance of Elizabeth Cameron, the dazzling niece of General Sherman and the wife of a dissipated and much older senator from Pennsylvania, into the social circle of the Adamses? "How could Clover not have been unnerved," Dykstra asks rhetorically, "as she saw Henry's eager attentions move away from her and toward a much younger woman?" Did her husband's industry, "working like a belated beaver," as Clover put it, on his own writing projects, make her own work in photography seem, by contrast, slight and amateurish? Or was it something more internal still, a bipolar condition that ran in the Sturgis family, reappearing in each generation, as George Santayana, another member of the clan, noted, and cruelly settling on Clover?[1]

On the morning of December 6, 1885, a Sunday, Henry Adams returned from a walk to find Clover sprawled on the floor of her studio upstairs. The bitter smell of almonds filled the air. She had swallowed potassium cyanide, a chemical she used to fix the images in her photographs. Dykstra observes, with a rare touch of melodrama, "the chemical that allowed Clover to bring to light in photographs what was too dangerous to put into words was the same one she used to kill herself." She was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery, under the ambiguous monument, neither male nor female, neither celebratory nor mournful, that Henry Adams commissioned Augustus Saint-Gaudens to make for their otherwise unmarked grave. Also ambiguous is the twenty-year gap in Adams's *Education*, a book in which Clover is never mentioned. It is a narrative void as poignantly resonant in its way as the "Time Passes" interlude of *To the Lighthouse*.

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Clover Adams on her horse at her family's summer house in Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, October 1869

2.

Was Henry Adams one of Clover's enemies of promise? Dykstra notes that he held conservative views of the rights of women and considered suffragists "a vile gang." Clover "was a superb writer," Dykstra accurately observes, while adding, with no evidence beyond the circumstantial, "but her marriage had room for only one author." It is true that Adams, who complained during the summer of 1883 that Clover did "nothing but photography," seems to have made little effort to promote her work. She was particularly pleased with her fine portrait of the eighty-three-year-old historian George Bancroft, where she achieved a technical finish suggestive of a silverpoint drawing. "His hair and beard," she proudly told her father, "came out silvery and soft in the print." The surrounding, almost enshrouding black background draws our attention to the aging historian, scalpel-like pen in hand, intent on his work as time was running out, with an absorption that matches the photographer's absorption in her craft.

When the editor of the *Century* magazine, prompted by John Hay, asked to publish the photograph, accompanied by a brief text by Adams, the couple refused on the grounds that it might look unseemly since Adams and Bancroft were known to be good friends. They wanted to escape the "ghastly fate of Harry James and Howells," who had praised each other in print. It should be noted that Adams published his own two novels anonymously and the *Education* privately; seeking publicity was considered bad form by these two highborn Bostonians.

Dykstra suggests that Henry Adams may have impeded Clover's growth as an artist. But one might also argue that he gave her the scope and freedom she needed, including a studio of her own, rescuing her from the constricted society of Boston and the stunted Sturgises of her generation. Didn't his industry convey to Clover what high achievement required? Henry Adams was not an unimaginative drudge, like Ibsen's Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*, as Dykstra tends to portray him. He was almost singlehandedly inventing American historiography. Simultaneously, he was creating one of the supreme American prose styles, an astringent blend of Gibbon and plainspoken Yankee tinged with irony, an indelible influence on such later masters as H.L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, and Richard Hofstadter. Such things are not easily accomplished. He too was working in the dark. "You can never tell what you want to do, till you see what you have done," he wrote.

A feminist interpretation of Clover's life and work is not new. Lincoln Kirstein, drawing on earlier biographies of Clover by Otto Friedrich and Eugenia Kaledin, analyzed the Adams marriage:

> But when she turned with deep, and even desperate, interest to photography as self-expression or self-vindication, aiming at a technical proficiency not less than professional, his class prejudice at owning a working wife was to her but the final proof of her inborn inadequacy to compete with the superior male. He possessively encouraged her strivings for the personal dignity she merited by virtue of her brains, breeding, and behavior, but he denied her the individual status she prized and deserved. [2]

What Dykstra brings to a fuller understanding of Clover's plight is a fresh and generous response to her work as a photographer. She opens her analysis with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf: "Isn't it odd how much more one sees in a photograph than in real life?" Dyk- stra discerns themes in the photographs that she believes reveal Clover's own moods at the time of exposure. A beguiling photograph of two women in enveloping dark dresses looking out to sea, with a young girl in white turned away from them, creates "a mood not of friendship and connection, but of lost possibility" (see illustration on page 29). The photograph, with its stepped-down diagonal array of subjects, recalls compositions of Winslow Homer, who painted the same coastline, but introduces a jarringly melancholy note to a scene of upscale holiday leisure.

Dykstra believes that Clover arranged her photographs in "deliberate sequences" in her three surviving albums, "as if to tell what she could not or did not say in her letters." Photographs of Henry Adams are twice paired with images of "desolate" trees, hinting at his "pervasive solitariness." The sequence in a final album, opening with an image of a

young girl standing in a cornfield and closing with the wreckage of the war in some blighted houses in Maryland, represents, in Dykstra's view, "youthful promise fallen into irreparable decline." Dykstra suggests some possible influences on Clover's photographs, such as Sargent's portraits or Caspar David Friedrich's figures looking out to sea, which Clover might have seen during a sojourn in Dresden. "By trying on ideas that were in wide circulation," she suggests hopefully and somewhat vaguely, Clover "let her private feelings and memories be poured, like clay slip, into the mold of high art."

The case Dykstra makes for the distinctiveness of Clover's photography might have been bolstered by comparisons with other photographers. In some ways, Clover had an English counterpart in Julia Margaret Cameron, Virginia Woolf's great-aunt, whose social circle resembled Clover's in cultural prominence, and who composed moody and much-collected portraits of the Victorian sages Carlyle, Darwin, and Tennyson. Closer to home, one might compare Clover's work with that of Frances Benjamin Johnston, a hardworking photographer active in Washington and best known for her remarkable series of images, dating from 1899 and 1900, of the Hampton Institute in Virginia, a vocational school for freed slaves and American Indians. Johnston's photographs of students absorbed in building staircases or laying bricks have a hieratic order and compositional clarity that anticipates WPA murals and documentary photography. Dykstra includes among her illustrations Johnston's arresting portrait of Elizabeth Cameron, around the time, after Clover's death, that Henry Adams was most enthralled with her, but doesn't discuss her other work.

In Clover's own work, at least in what has been published of it, one looks for the consistent authority, singleness of purpose, and immediate recognition for the viewer, of Julia Cameron's soft-focus Pre-Raphaelite nostalgia or Johnston's incisive utopian vision of a better future through industrious self-improvement. Was there something distinctively "spare" in the staging of Clover's two portraits of the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., which "lean toward the future in their complete lack of decoration" and their off-center composition, perhaps reminiscent, as Dykstra suggests, of Whistler's portrait of his mother? Was this spare aesthetic related to her pride, as she toured Europe, in the "freedom from sham" in "the average American household," echoed in the radically simple design adopted by the architect H.H. Richardson for the "Spartan little box" that the Adamses had built for themselves across from the White House, just before Clover's suicide? It is tempting to think so. But one would need more evidence than Dykstra offers to conclude that at the time of her death Clover, with all her technical sophistication, exacting standards, and poignant evocations of loneliness and lost time, had indeed established an unmistakable personal style.

When Ned Hooper, Clover's only surviving sibling, fell or jumped from a third-floor window to his death in 1901, his friend William James had some bracing words of consolation for Hooper's daughter:

> But anything and everything is possible for every mother's child of us—we are all in the same box, and not only death but all forms of decay knock at our gate and summon us to go out into their wilderness, and yet every ideal we dream of is realized in the same life of which these things are part, and we must house it and suffer it and take whatever it brings for the sake of the ends that are certainly being fulfilled by its means, behind the screen. The abruptness of your father's case shows well how purely extraneous and disconnected with the patients' general character these cerebral troubles may be. Probably an internally generated poison in the blood which "science" any day may learn how to eliminate or neutralize, and so make of all these afflictions so many nightmares of the past.

"Fulfilled by its means, behind the screen": it almost sounds as though James is writing about the mysterious processes of photography, bringing hidden things to light in a dark room. The story that Clover's photographs tell, if Natalie Dykstra is right, is a tale of constriction—"isolation, loss, and constraint"—of early promise and later heartbreak. Might she have been a happier woman without her afflictions and nightmares, eliminated or neutralized by lithium or psychotherapy? Undoubtedly. Could her husband have been more supportive of her efforts to make a mark with her photographs? Absolutely. Would she have been a greater or more fulfilled artist? She would have been a different one. Supreme achievement in the arts is rare, but other, lesser varieties are valuable in their own way. Perhaps, like Virginia Woolf's artist Lily Briscoe, Clover Adams had had her vision after all.

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1. 1
In the chapter called "The Sturgises" in *Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography* (MIT, 1986), Santayana writes, "Sound commonsense people, roseate optimists, as the Sturgises were, they were too Bostonian not to have at least one mad member, even in the Great Merchant generation" (p. 57). Elsewhere he writes of the "toll of madness" on each generation of Sturgises (p. 60). ↩

2. 2
Lincoln Kirstein, *Memorial to a Marriage*, with photographs by Jerry L. Thompson (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 41. ↩