Clover Adams grave in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, DC

Oh Make Me Real!

Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life

By Natalie Dykstra

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Reviewed by Judith Fetterley

I admit it. I am one of those persons Natalie Dykstra addresses who remembers Clover Adams, if they think of her at all, as "the wife of a famous man or a suicide"—though actually I connect the famous man with the suicide, so would say "and" rather than "or" a suicide. I had a notion that Clover Adams was somehow associated with horses and photography, and a clear recollection that the famous husband, Henry Adams, failed to mention his wife in his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1919). In other words, I had categorized Clover Adams as one of those nineteenth-century American women whose artistic potential was choked by sexism, but I had done so without really knowing much about her. Dykstra has set out to remedy this deficiency. Her avowed aim in *Clover Adams* is to solve the puzzle of her subject's life, to stand on the other side of her suicide, "the one she lived on," and "to give her back some measure of her full humanity." So the question is: has she succeeded? Is Clover Adams more present to me now than she was before I read Dykstra's biography? And if the answer to this question is "no," is this Dykstra's failure, or is absence itself the essence of Adams's character and life?

Dykstra's biography is meticulously researched. She has left no stone unturned in her effort to bring Adams back to life. *Clover Adams* is also immensely readable, written with grace and ease, compassion and enthusiasm. Dykstra's decision to divide her book into four parts—childhood and young adulthood; marriage; photography; depression and death—gives Adams's life a structure that helps us to make sense of it. And Dykstra's choice of photographs to supplement the biography is excellent, especially the set of those taken by Adams herself. Dykstra is careful to stay close to what is known and to avoid excessive speculation about events in Adams's life—even those that invite it, such as the death of her mother when Adams was five; the suicide of her aunt Susan, a mother surrogate, when Adams was nine; the hostility to her of Henry's parents; Henry's dictum that her trip to New York, when she visited a friend and became interested in photography, would not "*happen again*."

Dykstra is particularly careful in her treatment of Henry. She makes no excuses for him. She quotes a letter written shortly after his engagement to Clover in which he describes how he will "improve" her and paints a clear picture of his workaholic personality, his "pervasive solitariness," his "brooding insistence on failure," as well as his fascination with younger and more beautiful women. She notes his demand that if Clover was going to study Greek, she must "take pains with [her] dress" and his resistance to Clover's artistic ambitions. He refused to allow her photograph of the American historian George Bancroft to be used as the cover for *Century Magazine*, and he encoded Clover in his novel *Esther*, begun just as Clover took up photography, delivering through his protagonist the message that a woman "cannot both enjoy love and be truly herself in her creative ambition or beliefs." But though Henry's corrosive antifeminism clearly affected Clover, Dykstra does not blame Henry for Clover's death. She is careful to embed Clover's life in the context of a family with a history of mental illness and to imply that Clover's difficulties preceded her life with Henry. Hence her locution, "a wife *or* a suicide."

Though twentieth-century feminism is the engine driving the rescue mission of *Clover Adams*, Dykstra implies that Adams was unable to derive support from nineteenth-century feminism. She notes that Clover considered "women activists dreary and their luncheons worse," and that their drab appearance made her want to order another Paris dress. Yet Clover also wrote that if she had to talk at any length with a noted antifeminist—whose views, Dykstra notes, were remarkably similar to Henry's—she would "take the stump for female suffrage in a short time," a threat quite unlikely to be realized, given Henry's opposition.

Photography, however, was a different matter altogether. Dykstra connects improved photographic technology, which made it easier to take and develop pictures, with the art's growing accessibility to women. Photography's ability to capture and induce emotion, and to record relationships, particularly among family members, placed it firmly in women's sphere. Moreover, since photography was not considered high art, women could take pictures without threatening male prerogatives. But just as Emily Dickinson used poetic forms approved for women to create art that subverts the very conventions that so assigned them, so did Clover Adams use photography to document lack of connection, isolation, and a sense of restricted horizons and "lost

possibility." Contemplating the fact that Adams killed herself by drinking potassium cyanide, a chemical she kept on hand to develop her photographs, Dykstra allows herself a rare moment of speculation, to good effect:

> Creativity can be compensatory, redemptive, a release, a reach toward freedom and hope. But this is not always the case.... Creativity also undoes, overwhelms, gives power to hidden undertows. What's brought forward in expression is exposed and becomes irrefutable.

What Adams brought to light through her art and the chemicals it required did in fact kill her.

Though Clover became a photographer, she took no photographs of herself and evidently resisted being photographed by others. Dykstra includes in the book one of the few extant photographs of Adams, an undated tintype. It is haunting. She is holding a dog and looking down, her face obscured by a straw hat. Is anyone there? The book jacket echoes this motif of absence. It shows a seated woman dressed in white, with pearls around her neck; the image is cropped so that all we see of her face is chin and lips. So, we are back to the central question Dykstra's biography raises: do we know Clover Adams any better at the end of the book than we did before we started? Adams created albums of her photographs just as Dickinson created fascicles of her poetry. In the albums, we catch a glimpse of Clover's sense of humor in the photograph of her dogs seated in chairs having tea, and of her critical vision in her pairing of a photograph of Henry at his desk with one of a lone umbrella pine wind-whipped on a rocky promontory. Her careful notes about each photograph demonstrate her scientific temperament. But is there any detail that brings Clover to life the way Henry becomes shockingly present when we read that, after Clover's death, he kept a half-empty vial of potassium cyanide in his writing desk? Remembering Clover, her friend John Hays described her as "that bright, intrepid spirit, that keen intellect, that lofty scorn of all that was mean, that social charm which ... made hundreds of people love her as much as they admired her." Despite Dykstra's efforts, the Clover Adams John Hays knew is not the one I now know. I cannot apply his adjectives to the subject of Dykstra's biography.

Clover Adams on horseback at Beverly Farms, October 1869. The photo is the only known adult photograph of Clover; no close–up picture of her face exists. After her death, Henry Adams destroyed all of her photos in their home, and neither her father nor her family ever received a picture of Clover's face.

In her acknowledgment of sources, Dykstra pays tribute to Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James (1999), claiming that Strouse did the "impossible—she makes an invalid's life extraordinarily vivid and active, retrieving Alice's story from obscurity." Perhaps Dykstra, whether intentionally or not, has accomplished her own form of the "impossible." She has written the biography of someone who did not want to be known, who in a sense was never there. Clover kept none of the letters written to her; she is glimpsed, according to Dykstra, only occasionally in other people's diaries; there is almost no photographic record; she never had her portrait painted; Henry cut her out of his autobiography as if she'd never existed. At the end of her life, as she sank into suicidal depression, she cried out to her sister, "Ellen, I'm not real—Oh make me real." Dykstra's biography makes us realize that this cry began long before that moment.

Privilege, Dykstra notes, cannot protect one from despair, as Eleanor Roosevelt discovered during her own dark days in Washington. When Clover died, Henry commissioned the famous sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to design a memorial statue for her grave in Washington's Rock Creek cemetery. Though Henry once called the work *The Peace of God*, it became more commonly known as *Grief*. In its depiction of a seated figure whose face is half obscured by a draped mantle, it echoes a motif of Clover's life. Yet the figure is noble, imposing, stunningly beautiful, and deeply moving, even in a photograph. When Eleanor first discovered Franklin's affair with Lucy Mercer, she recalled, "I'd come here [to Clover Adams's grave], alone, and sit and look at that woman. And I'd always come away somehow feeling better. And stronger." This anecdote provides a note of redemption to the underlying sadness of Clover's life. So too does Dykstra's devotion to her subject and the respect she has shown her through the literary and scholarly quality of her biography.

Judith Fetterley is distinguished teaching professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Albany. She is the author of ***The Resisting Reader*** (1981) and ***Provisions*** (1985) and the co-author of ***Writing Out of Place*** (2003), as well as numerous articles on American women writers.

Poetry

Forgotten Paleontologist

Struck by a bolt of lightning as a baby,
Mary Anning developed a unique "eye"
for spotting prehistoric fossil skeletons
buried under the Lyme Regis English coast.
As a young woman in 1825, she walked the rugged,
windswept beaches with her basket and digging hammer.
With her laserlike vision, she spotted
fossil outlines as though they were phosphorescent.
Known as "lightning girl," she searched
for "Blue Lias": layers of shale with
bluish tint in striped patterns hinting
at a plesiosaur's vertebrae.

Narrowly escaping with her life when a landslip
fell and buried her, she was heralded in the
British Natural History Museum as the fossil hunter
who nearly became fossilized herself.

Lacework

Through the tattered doily
that was my face,
I watch sailboats on the bay
crisscrossing past the
same buoys I rounded
for so many years.
Today, after my thirteenth
face cancer surgery,
the sun's rays appear
in broken segments and the
sails look ragged and torn.

After five hours under the knife,
my left eye with its
missing lower lid leers at me
from a dockside window,
red rimmed and ghastly.
Oh, Mami Wata,
Goddess of water,
did I not honor you sufficiently?

Shirley Powers is the author of ***With No Slow Dance*** (1980). Her work has also appeared in the ***Rockhurst Review, Red Wheelbarrow, Earth's Daughters, Hurrican Alice, Iris, Out of Line, Iowa Woman, Wisconsin Review, Santa Clara Review, California Quarterly, The Lucid Stone***, and many other literary journals. She is a retired music teacher and sings with the Raging Grannies in Palo Alto, California.