

1-1-1985

Eleanor Burnham Adams: Historian and Editor

Richard E. Greenleaf

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Greenleaf, Richard E.. "Eleanor Burnham Adams: Historian and Editor." *New Mexico Historical Review* 60, 1 (1985). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol60/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.



*ELEANOR BURNHAM ADAMS:
HISTORIAN AND EDITOR*

RICHARD E. GREENLEAF

BUILDING ON THE TRADITION of scholarship of editors Lansing Bloom and Frank D. Reeve, Eleanor B. Adams developed the *New Mexico Historical Review* during her tenure as editor, 1964–75, into the leading regional history journal in the West. Her knowledge of southwestern history was grounded in three decades of interdisciplinary research and publication on New Mexico, Yucatán, and Central Mexico. On 10 May 1984 Tulane University at its Newcomb College commencement recognized Miss Adams's role in developing historical studies in the United States and conferred upon her the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. President Eamon M. Kelly's citation read as follows:

Eleanor Burnham Adams: Researcher, Author, Scholar. It is with great respect and admiration for your lifelong devotion to learning that Tulane University and Newcomb College honor you today. Your meticulous research and lucid writing have shed light on the complexities of Colonial Mexican and Southwest American History, and your numerous published works have played a central role in the development of an entire academic specialty. Your work in the arcane field of Paleography has been invaluable in furthering our understanding of ancient manuscripts, the people who wrote them, and—ultimately—ourselves.

Because you chose a life of the mind and a life dedicated to sharing what you have learned, your wealth of knowledge, keen curiosity, and love of your subject have benefited generations of historians. Indeed, we owe you a debt of gratitude for the rich legacy you have provided American scholarship.

We seek, too, to recognize and commend the humane values that inform your work; you demonstrate that the true scholar is committed equally to increasing our storehouse of knowledge and to transmitting that knowledge so that others may develop their own insights from it. It is a privilege for me to exercise the authority vested in me by the Board of Administrators, and to confer upon you the Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.¹

Eleanor B. Adams was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1910, attended the Cambridge Latin School, and graduated from Radcliffe College cum laude in 1931. Her graduate studies were undertaken at the Centro de Estudios Históricos at the University of Madrid. Training in Romance Languages, especially sixteenth-century Italian and Spanish literature, was complemented by a developing interest in art, music, and modern dance. The famous Maya archaeologist Sir J. Eric S. Thompson's memories of Cambridge in the 1930s always included references to Eleanor's dancing.

Miss Adams returned to the United States at the bottom of the Great Depression, and in the autumn of 1934 she began her life's work as a historian. She was employed as an investigator and historian in the Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution and was domiciled in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. In 1939, members of the Division of Historical Research moved to the Carnegie headquarters in Washington, D.C. Before Pearl Harbor, Carnegie arranged for Miss Adams to continue her research at the University of New Mexico where she remained until 1949 when the Division of Historical Research was closed. After a year as curator of Hispanic manuscripts at the prestigious Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, she returned to Albuquerque in 1951 as research associate in history. During the next twenty-four years, until her retirement in 1975, she served as Research Professor-at-Large and as editor of the *New Mexico Historical Review* from 1965 to 1975.

The Carnegie years were formative ones in Miss Adams's career. She became involved in what Lewis Hanke characterized as:

The most sustained and important cooperative research project carried on by a United States institution in Latin America during the

twentieth century was probably the Yucatan program of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Its notable work has been made known to the world through a series of publications on the anthropology, archaeology, art, history, linguistics, and medicine of Yucatan. Another equally valuable contribution was the opportunity for scholars to study over a period of years, so that the Carnegie project made possible a remarkable cadre of researchers on a given region never before, or since, achieved.²

It was at Carnegie that Eleanor B. Adams began to forge her scholarly partnership with the distinguished historian France Vinton Scholes who, as head of the Post-Columbian History Section, was then completing his definitive works on seventeenth-century New Mexico as well as his pathfinding documentary studies on the Maya of Yucatán. Within three years Scholes and Adams began to issue their widely acclaimed Yucatán studies, and Miss Adams began her research on New Spain and colonial New Mexico. They were to publish fourteen volumes together, often with Miss Adams as senior author. During the years at New Mexico Miss Adams's volumes on the ecclesiastical and architectural history of eighteenth-century New Mexico were published, seminal studies crucial to our knowledge of the state's past.

As a historian Eleanor B. Adams's hallmark has been painstaking research and textual criticism of documentary sources. The "adventure of spade work history" has never palled, both in archival research and in publication of important new documentation that often has revised the time-worn interpretations of the field. Her translations are works of art, literate and erudite, and annotated with precision. Basic to her scholarship has been superb abilities as a paleographer, and her aptitude in this difficult and specialized field is of course an extension of her training in Latin and Romance Languages. France V. Scholes, who gave Eleanor B. Adams early training in deciphering sixteenth-century Spanish, often remarked to his students that she was the finest paleographer in the profession and that he would take her reading of a document over his at any time.

Part of Miss Adams's scholarly genius is her ability to work as a collaborator in historical research. No doubt this rare ability sprang

from the Carnegie experience in interdisciplinary research when she published works with France V. Scholes, Ralph L. Roys, Robert Chamberlain, Albert M. Tozzer, and others. But it also manifested itself in New Mexico and southwestern history, particularly in collaborations with Fray Angelico Chavez and John Kessell.

It is obvious that Professor Adams's ability as an editor is closely related to her work in textual criticism. She has the ability to take a manuscript apart and put it back together again, sparkling in ways that the author never dreamed possible. She always believed that her editorial mission was to encourage sound scholarship both among neophytes and professionals. Uncompromising standards in editing, correction of proof, indexing, and design of the *New Mexico Historical Review* were transmitted to those whom she trained as assistant editors. Many established scholars owe professional debts to Editor Adams for what she did to improve their work. As one who often saw manuscripts before and after she worked on them I can attest to this fact! Fledgling authors learned much in the editorial process. She taught them how to write and how to organize their scholarly thoughts. The aura of influence Eleanor B. Adams has cast over generations of students at the University of New Mexico has not been properly recognized. Doctoral candidates of France V. Scholes, Frank D. Reeve, Donald Cutter, and other colleagues in Mexican and southwestern history and anthropology always found their way to her offices in the library or at the *Review*. A "prophet in her own land" she was like many prophets—more recognized outside of the university than on campus for her scholarship. The respect today accorded her by the international community of scholars and by the staffs of foreign archives is enormous and adds luster to the prestige of the university.

Since her retirement Miss Adams has been encouraged to continue her scholarly career. Currently she is at work on an aspect of the Vargas Project with Editor John L. Kessell; a translation of Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante's "Extracto de Noticias"; and a fascinating short work on the Martyr's Book, a volume that survived the ravages of the Pueblo Rebellion. Let us be grateful for her distinguished contributions to New Mexico and southwestern history and be thankful for the works yet to come.

When Fray Angelico Chavez sent me a "Brief Homage for a Lady Historian" for inclusion in this introduction, he said in part:

As for the terms Lady and Historian, they transcend mere distinctions of gender and academic degrees. The homage is not to her, that would cause her some uneasiness, but for her professional qualities. Her truly genteel and scholarly attributes which remain foremost in my memory come from far-off times when we labored together in translating and annotating the 1776 Domínguez Mission Report.

Fray Angelico thus described the essence of the Lady from Cambridge whose scholarly integrity, dedication, loyalty, and generosity to her colleagues and students is recognized by these essays in her honor.

NOTES

1. Eamon M. Kelly, "Eleanor Burnham Adams," a citation presented at Tulane University, New Orleans, La., 10 May 1984.
2. Lewis Hanke, *History of Latin American Civilization: Sources and Interpretations. The Colonial Experience* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 332.