

## Botanizing Through Barriers

### BOOK REVIEW

Brave the Wild River: The Untold Story of Two Women Who Mapped the Botany of the Grand Canyon, by Melissa L. Sevigny. 2023. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 304 pp.

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*Brave the Wild River* is an enthralling chronicle of the 1938 Nevills Expedition down the Colorado River. Weaving together botanical findings, colorful landscape descriptions, and crewmember diary entries, Melissa L. Sevigny deftly guides the reader through this six-person adventure. Her work highlights the barriers faced by female scientists and provides critical insight into the historical and cultural shifts in US conservation that shape the ecology of the Grand Canyon region today.

In under 260 pages, supplemented by the occasional archival photograph, Sevigny recounts the saga of the Nevills Expedition from its ambitious conception to its excitement-filled execution and understated aftermath. The book reads like a novel, with native flora like Ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) and newfound cacti like beavertail prickly pear (*Opuntia longiareolata*) as supporting characters. Detailed landscape and flora descriptions accompany each shift in the plot, showcasing the region's varied ecology in a digestible style. All botanical discussion is simplified for general readers, including an explanation of the plant pressing process and the importance of herbaria. Sevigny's ability to balance botanical characterizations with overarching cultural and historical analysis is a testament to the interconnected reality of contemporary conservation.

Every chapter includes at least a brief discussion of the gender divides that permeated the voyage and ecological fields more broadly. The trip, officially led by entrepreneur Norman Nevills, made headlines nationwide for including two female botanists from the University of Michigan: Dr. Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter. Sevigny paints a thorough picture of how their gender shaped this research, from funding to media attention to the women's later publications. She analyzes the women's unseen burdens on the expedition (e.g., the expectation that they would wake up early to cook the crew breakfast every day), as well as gender roles within botany more generally (e.g., women "were not permitted to collect any plant that couldn't be reached on a leisurely afternoon stroll"). Although not explicitly contrasted with Clover and Jotter's work,

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Sevigny underlines the masculine ideal of “conquering” the untamed wilderness of the American West that shaped the region via her discussion of the Gold Rush, dam construction, and hunting.

*Brave the Wild River* also explores how these cultural notions attached to the landscape have shaped conservation. Sevigny covers extensive conservation issues including the National Park Service’s past perspectives on wildlife (“either a tourist attraction or a pest”) and the Bureau of Reclamation’s water management techniques. These analyses provide useful context on regional changes over the 85 years since the Nevills Expedition. For example, understanding that the Colorado River’s water supply was viewed as infinite and untamable helps explain both the fear and backlash surrounding the excursion at the time, and the overexploited state of the waterway today.

In her discussion of the topics, Sevigny underscores the inextricable linkages between land and water management and the region’s indigenous history. To begin, she explains how botany itself and the associated pressures to “discover” new species caused incalculable losses by overlooking indigenous knowledge and practices. Furthermore, she notes that the notion of national parks as pristine, preserved, and “untouched” wilderness was completely detached from the historical reality that native peoples had tended to these ecosystems for generations. Thus, Sevigny links colonization and the commodification of nature to ecological catastrophes like the Dust Bowl. With modern-day ecologists increasingly realizing the value of indigenous knowledge on topics from fire to community composition, this reminder is all too relevant.

While Sevigny delivers on her title, recounting the untold story of botanists Clover and Jotter, her final chapters feel condensed. Accounts of the women’s early lives and the expedition are highly detailed, as is the rich commentary on land and water management and exciting botanical descriptions. Sevigny also briefly summarizes the women’s post-voyage careers. Clover remained at the University of Michigan, travelling for research, and ultimately becoming curator of the university’s botanical gardens and Professor of Botany. Meanwhile, Jotter, after marrying, earned her PhD in 1943. Following her husband’s death, she became an assistant professor of biology at the University of North Carolina Greensboro in 1963.

However, while the reader learns the general trajectory of their lives, the culmination of their work from the Nevills Expedition is presented rather underwhelmingly. Such expansion isn’t critical to the book, particularly for readers more drawn to the adventure than the science, but it does leave the ecologically minded reader curious for a follow-up. Given that Sevigny discusses at length the disproportionate media interest in Clover and Jotter’s gender and lacking coverage of their botanical work, more than a few pages on the findings would have been apt. Nevertheless, she communicates their notable conclusions, namely that the Colorado River “wasn’t as important a corridor for plant migration” as had been assumed. Furthermore, Clover and Jotter noted “four previously unknown cacti species” and the final, published plant list totaled over 400 species with “at least one specimen for every cactus species observed.” While these impressive tidbits left me wanting more than a strung together collection of species and habitats, this lingering curiosity did not take away from my intrigue and engagement throughout the book.

Overall, *Brave the Wild River* is a fascinating piece of science writing that honors the invaluable botanical work of Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter on the 1938 Nevills Expedition. Melissa L. Sevigny highlights the women's resilience in the face of violent rapids and aggressive critics who played up the dangers of the journey as unladylike and consistently overlooked their scientific pursuits. The inquisitive reader may itch for more details of their discoveries and their present-day implications, but Sevigny provides plentiful biographical content, situating her storytelling amidst astute cultural critiques of historical Western conservation. This book is a must-read reminder of the importance of botanical field work, the dangers of water and wildlife mismanagement, and of the enduring influence of humans on their environment.