



## Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life

*Natalie Dykstra*

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## **Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life** Natalie Dykstra

The hidden story of one of the most fascinating women of the Gilded Age

Clover Adams, a fiercely intelligent Boston Brahmin, married at twenty-eight the soon-to-be-eminent American historian Henry Adams. She thrived in her role as an intimate of power brokers in Gilded Age Washington, where she was admired for her wit and taste by such luminaries as Henry James, H. H. Richardson, and General William Tecumseh Sherman. Clover so clearly possessed, as one friend wrote, “all she wanted, all this world could give.”

Yet at the center of her story is a haunting mystery. Why did Clover, having begun in the spring of 1883 to capture her world vividly through photography, end her life less than three years later by drinking a chemical developer she used in the darkroom? The key to the mystery lies, as Natalie Dykstra’s searching account makes clear, in Clover’s photographs themselves.

The aftermath of Clover’s death is equally compelling. Dykstra probes Clover’s enduring reputation as a woman betrayed. And, most movingly, she untangles the complex, poignant — and universal — truths of her shining and impossible marriage.

[www.nataliedykstra.com](http://www.nataliedykstra.com)

## **Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life Details**

Date : Published February 8th 2012 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780618873852

Author : Natalie Dykstra

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir, North American Hi..., American History



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## **From Reader Review Clover Adams: A Gilded and Heartbreaking Life for online ebook**

### **Charles Stephen says**

This biography builds to its conclusion quite powerfully. I only knew Clover Adams from her memorial, a landmark here in DC despite its out-of-the-beaten-path location. I wept during the last chapter and epilogue, and now I want to walk by the house on H Street, across from Lafayette Park, where Henry and Clover Adams spent their married life. I would also like to view her photographs. Kudos to Dykstra for taking on this project. No one could view the Adams Memorial and not wonder about the woman whose death inspired it.

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### **Erica says**

Beautifully written and sympathetic. I fell in love with Clover Adams and her family, sad and tragic as they were.

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### **Rah Rahrah says**

A very powerful story. Unfortunately Marian (Clover) was destined to fail. It was fascinating to learn of her life, of her photographic efforts, & of her relationship with her husband Henry. I have always loved the statue in Rock Creek Cemetery by Augustus Saint-Gaudens memorializing Clover- so Even though I KNEW what was going to happen the ending made me sad.

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### **Angela says**

As the first two-star reviewer, I guess I need to explain myself.

Firstly, biography is not my favorite genre. So there's that. I probably wouldn't have read this book if I hadn't gotten an ARC at the ALA Midwinter Conference. The writing itself was pretty good, at least on par with other biographies I've read. However, it almost seemed as though there wasn't enough source material to support the narrative Dykstra wants to present--happiness, after initial panic after her marriage, followed by slowly encroaching isolation and jealousy, leading to her eventual depression after her father's death, and then her own suicide. Dykstra seemed to rely a lot more on speculation than the other biographers I've read--or maybe she was just the only one being honest about theorizing, while other biographers present their suppositions as fact. Or maybe I just haven't read enough biographies. I'm not sure which option is more likely. I just found it odd that for someone as prolific and quotable as Clover is set up to be (and apparently is, from the quotes the author chose to include), she isn't quoted very much. I'd have liked to hear a lot more of her own voice, and especially as written to a slightly wider range of correspondents. Dykstra also draws a lot of conclusions about Henry and Clover's feelings from their art, which is always a slightly iffy proposition. Just from the textual evidence, I'm not convinced that Clover did know how much Henry liked Lizzie. Clover seems to be unafraid of snubbing those that offend her, but she apparently writes to Lizzie, even at a very personal level. I'm not convinced that that was really a factor in her decision to kill herself,

even though the copy-writer for the back cover seems to think that this is the primary factor (while I think it's pretty clearly the death of her father triggering her genetic melancholia--you don't really need to look much further than that, especially considering her family history).

On top of that, (at risk of sounding superficial) Clover Adams isn't exactly a household name. I never fully understood why the author would choose to cover such an obscure historical figure, especially with so little evidence (as far as I can tell) to support the choice. Clover's experience just doesn't seem that unique.

So this was okay, but I didn't love it. Perhaps it's a biography only for lovers of biography. If that's you, you should absolutely give this a go. Otherwise, I wouldn't really recommend it.

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### **Sally says**

An interesting story about a person we never hear about! She was the wife of the American historian, Henry Adams who was the grandson of John Quincy Adams and the great-grandson of John Adams. She led a very privileged and exciting life and yet, she committed suicide by drinking a chemical developer from the darkroom where she processed her photos of her contemporaries of the day.

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### **Laurie says**

Born in 1843 to a well to do, respected, Boston family, Clover Hooper Adams grew up to be a popular and smart young woman, well educated and a brilliant conversationalist. When she and Henry Adams met, they found much to talk about. They grew to love each other dearly and married. They had enough money to do pretty much whatever they wanted. Henry became an author and historian; Clover, although possibly his intellectual equal, became his support system, attending to his physical comforts as well as helping with the research for his writing. Their parlor became a salon for the intellectuals, writers and artists of the day. She supported the SPCA. She developed a passionate interest in photography and had a talent for it. Clover, it seemed, had everything.

But Clover had a life filled with loss, starting with the loss of her mother to TB when Clover was five. Friends, cousins, aunts & uncles, siblings- people she loved just kept leaving her through death. It's true that in that era, death came earlier to many than it does now, but it still seemed like everyone kept leaving her alone. She felt she was not pretty – and her husband didn't think she was, either. There was a history of depression in her family, which she first showed symptoms of during her honeymoon. And Henry was not supportive of her when she stepped outside the limits of conventional female behavior – he did, after all, think women did not have 'whole minds'- and discouraged her when people started asking to publish some of her photographs. Henry was very much a conventional product of his time when it came to his attitudes towards women; when her beloved father fell ill, she was apparently discouraged from leaving to attend to him; Henry actually wrote a letter to a friend, feeling sorry for himself. In fact, Henry was showing signs of being attracted to a younger woman. And so when her father, who had been her sole parent since her early childhood, died, she fell into a depression, with no one to turn to for emotional support. Finally, she committed suicide by drinking some photography chemicals.

The author has created a marvelous picture of upper class life in the gilded age. Not the vulgar, new money upper class, but the old families; Henry Adams was grandson of one American president and great-grandson of another (and his parents despised Clover). Summers in the country, winters in town. Sparkling conversation. People who read to each other after dinner, and studied Greek and Latin. But there is an

uneven quality to the book; some parts drew me in and submerged me in the era and the people; others are dry, as if the author felt she needed to fill an area in but didn't really have the words or passion for it. I don't know if there wasn't enough source material to allow Dykstra to do these areas justice or if they were just lapses. But if you have interest in this era, it's definitely worth a read. It's sort of the other half of "The Education of Henry Adams".

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### **Kate says**

Clover Adams is probably best known today for the August Saint-Gaudens bronze that guards her grave in Washington, DC. I first heard a mention of this while reading *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan*, which mentions how the influence of Eastern traditions shaped Saint-Gaudens' work.

Overall, this biography was disappointing. It's well researched, but Dykstra constantly undercuts her own work by mentioning lack of resources on Clover's life. Certainly there will always be gaps in the historical record, but Dykstra doesn't budge from the sticture of her subject, and hardly gives pause to draw conclusions based on given material. The lack of material excuse pops up over and over until I began to wonder why it was worth reading this at all, if the material was so sparse.

The text is also very bland, making it dull to move through, something I find hard to do considering the amazing detail that survives about the period. While Dykstra lacked information about Clover specifically, there is lots to draw upon to talk about the society they moved in, or what a typical experience of the era was.

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### **Kathy says**

I think the author tried to read too much into Clover's writings and photos.

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### **Susan says**

Born Marian Hooper in 1843, she was nicknamed Clover by her besotted mother, who considered her lucky and adored her. Sadly, she died when Clover was only five and such tragedy followed Clover in her life. She was a young, privileged woman, educated and interested in current events, who had a front row seat to the American Civil War, before embarking on a European Tour. Heading towards her thirties, she married Henry Adams, journalist, author and historian and the grandson and great-grandson of Presidents. She moved with him to Washington, where young, rich and successful, they moved in the centre of the political and social world. They embarked on a tour to Europe and Egypt, returning to Washington for most of their married life. Yet, there was sadness too. The couple remained childless, Henry was distant and became besotted with a younger woman and he was also concerned about Clover's obsession with photography. This leads to the interesting question of how limited Clover was as a woman and whether Henry, effectively, limited her success and refused to allow her public applause for something he saw as a hobby. Clover committed suicide and the book looks at Henry's life after her death and the further tragedies of her family. Interesting book and fascinating woman.

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### **Architeacher says**

Clover Adams is known, if at all, for two reasons: 1) she was the wife of Henry Adams; 2) she was a suicide. Using three albums of photographs taken by Mrs Adams, Dykstra illuminates a woman at the center of American literary life during the second half of the 19th century. I read this book quickly and I will read it again to absorb more detail and to analyze the author's structure in presenting such a well organized story.

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### **Ann says**

In the prologue of this well-researched and fascinating book, readers learn this about Clover Adams:

- \*her good friend, Henry James, said she was “a perfect Voltaire in petticoats”
- \*she was intellectual and well-read
- \*her husband, Henry Adams, was the grandson of John Quincy Adams, the great-grandson of John Adams
- \*she had traveled the world
- \*she was well-known for her salons, where the brightest and best of American politics, literature, academics and art came together to share ideas
- \*she was a talented photographer, and
- \*when she was forty-two years old, Clover Adams swallowed cyanide to commit suicide

Dykstra probes this unusual woman's life during the Gilded Age, and in the process, sheds light on the role of woman in that era, how depression was viewed and treated, and how no one can know the depths of another's heart.

As her friend, John Hay wrote to Henry Adams after her death, "Is it any consolation to remember her as she was? That bright, intrepid spirit, that keen, fine intellect, that lofty scorn for all that was mean, that social charm which made your house such a one as Washington never knew before and made hundreds of people love her as much as they admired her."

I am not done thinking about/remembering Clover Adams' haunted and haunting life.

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### **Zaiga says**

Interesting by sad story that reveals how difficult it was to be an intelligent, creative woman during late 19th century America. Style was not particularly gripping, but the story of Clover's life is interesting.

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### **Tam May says**

3.5 stars

If you're interested in Clover or Henry Adams, this is definitely a book to read. It's very comprehensive and

well written about their lives. For myself, I picked up the book because I'm doing research on the Gilded Age and in this respect, I found the book a little disappointing. I expected the life of Clover Adams to be told with much more context into the Gilded Age. But this is mostly a straight-forward biography of Clover Adams. That's fine, but the "Gilded... Life" in the subtitle sort of hinted that there would be more about the Gilded Age and this wasn't really the case. Plus, Clover Adams comes off as pampered and Henry Adams as self-centered - not much to recommend them as subjects for a biography. Overall, I personally was disappointed by this book but that doesn't mean that other readers who are interested in the Gilded Age would be and certainly those interested in Clover Adams and Henry Adams will find this book very informative.

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## **Mary says**

Natalie Dykstra writes a well-written detailed biography of Marion (Clover) Adams. She was Henry Adams wife. Henry was President John Adams great-grandson and President John Quincy Adams grandson. The book is an enjoyable read rich in facts about the mysterious life of Clover Adams. The author includes the works of Henry Adams and the history of The Gilded Age.

For the time period, one would surmise Clover and Henry's marriage and life were appropriate. Both were educated coming from influential families. Although they married later in life than most for the era, they were able to share their love for the good things in life. Both were intelligent and good companions to one another. They never had children.

However, as time went on, Clover felt unrest in her life and her marriage. She became desperate in many ways trying to figure out why she was unhappy. Henry was no help, as most men were not nurturing during that time, so Clover felt isolated in her depression. Clover only knew she felt sad, lonely, and unfulfilled. She tried to find something to make her happy and feel worthwhile so she took up photography. This was a double edged sword because it did help Clover feel better; however, it wasn't highly regarded as art. She took many photos and had her ups and downs during this time. She had a complicated family which at times added to her sadness, other times brought her happiness. She had a close relationship with her father. When he died, this was the beginning of the worst depression for Clover. She truly did not recover from his loss.

So while Clover was suffering, Henry was also depressed. At the same time she was losing members of her family and it all became too much for Clover. She committed suicide on December 6, 1885. She was 42 years old. What gave her hope was what ended up killing her. She drank the chemicals she used to develop her photographs.

Natalie Dykstra suggests the answers to why Clover took her life may be seen in her photographs. Natalie's extensive research includes Clover's notebook, letters, and family papers. From this research Natalie was able to describe to her readers Clover's daily life, her thoughts and feelings. It describes life in the 19th century.

The book contains 31 extraordinary photos. One is a photo of an untitled bronze statue named, "Grief" that marks the graves of Clover and Henry. It is located in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C. It's sad, but people only know she was the wife of Henry Adams and that she killed herself.

Thanks to Natalie Dykstra, we know there was much more to Clover Adams.

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**Kelly Roberson says**

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Cultured and rich, Brahmin and boring.

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