



IN THE
SHADOW
OF
QUETZALCOATL



Zelia Nuttall
& the Search for Mexico's
Ancient Civilizations



MERILEE
GRINDLE





ZELIA MARÍA MAGDALENA NUTTALL

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For Liam and Eli,
In the hope that you will come to know and value Mexico as I do.

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Preface

“Don’t forget Zelia María Magdalena Nuttall!” I knew very little about Zelia Nuttall when I opened my inbox to find this unexpected email from my colleague Bill Fash, an archaeologist who had spent his life exploring the mysteries of ancient Mesoamerica.¹ I knew that Nuttall had collected important objects for Harvard University’s celebrated Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology. I knew she had lived for many years in Mexico at a tumultuous time in that country’s history. I knew she was a friend to famous people and that she had been cruelly caricatured by D. H. Lawrence. That was it. I certainly didn’t anticipate that this friendly email would spur me on a seven-year journey into her life and the world in which she lived.

From the outset, however, I was captivated by this intrepid woman who was so determined to understand the customs and beliefs of those who had lived in Mexico long ago. She learned the language of the Aztecs and their predecessors, Nahuatl; decoded their calendar; and taught herself how to decipher their pictographic histories and legends. She scoured libraries in England, Germany, Italy, and Spain and recovered one of the few Indigenous histories to have escaped destruction at the hands of the conquistadores.

The hunt for her story took me back to a time of exuberance and possibility, when the promise of scientific discovery coincided with a clash of national ambitions, a dynamic moment that sparked the creation of many famous cultural institutions in the United States and witnessed Mexico’s efforts to reclaim its own past. I was hooked.

I began my search for Zelia Nuttall by consulting the articles and books she wrote. She was a prolific writer, but her scholarly publications proved to be an imperfect guide to her life. They were densely written, and their small print, technical language, and bewildering charts and symbols gave little

insight into the person who had written them. I then turned to the testimonies of those who had known her. Alfred Tozzer, a leading archaeologist of Mesoamerica, met her when he was a field researcher in the Yucatán. He recalled how her “keen and experienced eyes” had led to important discoveries.² Philip Means, a young anthropologist who spent the winter of 1925–1926 at Nuttall’s home in Mexico, remembered her as a “distinguished chatelaine” living in a house “becomingly crowded with artistic treasures.” He admired how she had resolutely insisted on the rightness of her interpretations, “her weapons being the bludgeon of authentic fact and the rapier of valid argument.”³

I consulted Nuttall’s letters, finding some at Harvard University, the University of California, and the University of Pennsylvania; others were tucked away at Smith College, the Smithsonian Institution, and the University of New Mexico. Because she had corresponded widely, archives dedicated to philanthropists Charles Bowditch, the Duc de Loubat, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, and Sara Yorke Stevenson; academic leaders such as Franz Boas, Edgar Lee Hewett, Alfred Kroeber, Frederic Ward Putnam, and Edward Seler; and remarkable contemporaries such as Adela Breton and Alice Cunningham Fletcher contained letters from Nuttall.

Ross Parmenter, for many years the music editor of the *New York Times*, developed something of an obsession with Nuttall beginning in the 1960s. He spent more than thirty years immersing himself in everything that could be learned about her, traveling widely in an effort to understand her life. He interviewed those who had attended Sunday teas at her home in Mexico. He tried to untangle her convoluted finances and he collected photographs of her and of the places where she had lived or visited. He studied her publications and interviewed botanists to learn more about the plants grown in her garden. He even tried to trace the destiny of the white bear rug seen in a photograph of the drawing room of her apartment in Dresden, Germany. In correspondence, he referred to her as “my girlfriend.”⁴

Only three copies of his sixteen-hundred-page manuscript survive—one at the University of California–Berkeley, one at Harvard University, and one at Tulane University. As I read through these unpublished pages, I discovered that Parmenter had been something of a pack rat: when he died in 1999, his family donated 112 boxes of his papers and manuscripts to the Latin American Library at Tulane University. Sixteen of those boxes held materials

related to the life of Zelia Nuttall; five others contained drafts of Parmenter's manuscript.

Correspondence in his files indicate that Parmenter had sent his three-volume manuscript to several publishers. All responded politely but were reluctant to publish such a long manuscript with what would be, they said, a high price tag and an uncertain audience. Whatever hesitation this should have triggered in my own mind had little impact: Zelia had by now become *my* girlfriend. As I delved into the materials Parmenter had collected, I found a gold mine of information, including a hint that the white bear rug ended up in her drawing room in Mexico.

Over the years I ransacked many archives. I visited Nuttall's extraordinarily beautiful home, a burnt-orange, eighteenth-century palace on a leafy street in Mexico City. In various museums I was shown baskets and terra-cotta heads, belts and tapestries, spears and feather headdresses she had collected and studied, and the notes she had penned about their origins. I perused the facsimiles of ancient codices she had recovered and interpreted. When the COVID-19 pandemic kept me from traveling, I discovered additional material on the internet. I amassed more than a thousand pages of notes.

Yet even with the incredible research undertaken by Parmenter and the materials Zelia Nuttall and her correspondents had left behind, many fragments of her life are missing—pieces of a puzzle lost to time. In particular, while archives hold many letters *from* her, most of those written *to* her were destroyed after her death. Sadly, and despite vigorous excavation, parts of her story have been lost and are now subjects for sympathetic conjecture.

Why have so few people heard of Zelia Nuttall? After the publication of several obituaries in scholarly journals, and notices in national and local newspapers, she largely passed from the public's eye. "Who was she?" I was asked time and again as I continued my search. This book is an effort to piece together the story of a remarkable woman and to understand how she lived, what she discovered, and why it mattered.

During her lifetime, Zelia Nuttall was known as an anthropologist, an archaeologist, an ethnologist, an Americanist, an antiquarian, a folklorist, and "a lady scientist." These labels were as fluid—and interchangeable—as the theories spun off to explain the origins and development of different

civilizations. Anthropology existed in the nineteenth century as one of several related fields of study, but not yet as a discipline with its own paradigms, methods, and boundaries. Most of its practitioners were “amateurs” in that they were self-taught, had served as apprentices to a handful of recognized experts, or had strayed from more recognized fields like medicine or natural history. In those early days, without the requirement of a university degree, women often made important contributions to the field.

It was not until well into the twentieth century that departments of anthropology became common and that the subfields of archaeology and social and cultural anthropology were institutionalized. Today, anthropologists often have special expertise in linguistics, religion, gender, astronomy, ethnology, medicine, or other ways of understanding diversity in human societies past and present. Regardless of focus or expertise, they generally identify as anthropologists.

In this book, I have used the term *anthropology* to include what was often referred to during Nuttall’s lifetime as archaeology, ethnology, linguistics, or folklore. In her time, what she thought of as the science of anthropology meant a self-conscious application of scientific methods to the study of ruins, artifacts, and early literature. It was an amorphous calling with a range of names, but one that drew a generation of investigators to new ideas and means for assessing where we come from and what we believe. In those less specialized times, Zelia Nuttall was a star.

I did not embark on this journey alone. From that early email from Bill Fash to the encouragement of other colleagues at Harvard—especially David Carrasco, Tom Cummins, and Diana Sorensen—I have been supported all along the way, and for that I am deeply grateful. I have benefited from the probing questions of Silvia Aarom, Robert Adkins, Berta Angulo, Jeffrey Cameron, Wayne Cornelius, Ann Craig, Diane Davis, Kathy Eckroad, Susan Eckstein, Mary Hildebrand, Penny Kates, Tappy Kimpel, Liz Leeds, Rob Paarlberg, Etta Rosen, Bish Sanyal, Deborah Thaxter, Patricia Villarreal, Lois Wasserspring, and Vicki Zwerdling, whose support and nudges kept me going.

I owe much to my friend and colleague in Latin American studies, Marysa Navarro, who admonished me to “just keep staring at it until you see it,”

when I turned to her for help deciphering difficult handwriting. Retired from a distinguished career at Dartmouth College, she tutored me tirelessly in the process of historical research. June Carolyn Erlick of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard was a wonderful and honest reader of multiple versions of multiple chapters, and I embraced her insightful suggestions. At the Mexico office of the same center, Mauricio Benítez was tireless in locating needed material. Anthony Aveni shared his expertise in archaeoastronomy, and Nina Gerassi-Navarro was generous in adding her deep knowledge of Latin American cultural and intellectual history to the story. I cannot thank these friends and colleagues enough.

I owe more than I can say to the commitment and skills of those who keep libraries and archives and are eager to share their treasures with others. At Harvard, the Peabody Museum's Katherine Satiano was instrumental in directing me to important files and Cynthia Mackey helped assemble photographs. Also at Harvard, Linda Carter, Cynthia Hinds, and Janet Stein at the Tozzer Library provided valuable guidance, and I also benefited from excellent staff assistance at the Houghton and Lamont Libraries. At the Penn Museum, Alessandro Pezzati and Evan Peugh showed me a world of correspondence, photographs, and artifacts that helped put the puzzle pieces together. At Tulane, Hortensia Calvo, Christine Hernández, Veronica Sánchez, and Madeleine White were enormously helpful as I dug my way through box after box of the Parmenter files. Ida Schooler was instrumental in making important photographs available.

I was saddened to learn of the death in 2021 of Ira Jacknis at the University of California–Berkeley, whose interest in my work had been so encouraging. Linda Waterfield of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology guided me through a series of artifacts contributed by Zelia Nuttall. I also wish to thank Susan Elrather, Peter Hanff, Rosemary Joyce, and other staff at the Bancroft Library at Berkeley. Kate Long of Smith College and Nathan Sowry of the Smithsonian Institution helped me track down important correspondence. In Mexico, Ernesto Velázquez Briseño, then director of the Fonoteca Nacional, provided an unforgettable tour of Casa Alvarado and its reclaimed gardens. Emiliano Mora Barajas also offered gracious assistance. I am grateful to all these dedicated people for their time, expertise, and interest in this project.

This book owes its shape and form to my agent, Carolyn Savarese, who

spent hours helping me see beyond a biography of a difficult and forgotten woman. And my editor, Joy de Menil, helped me tease out its characters and Nuttall's contributions to anthropology. At Harvard University Press, Emerald Jensen-Roberts helped enormously with photographs and sympathy, and Stephanie Vyce ensured that permissions were all in order. I also benefited from the careful work of Brian Bendlin, Cheryl Hirsch, and Simon Waxman. I thank them heartily while recognizing that I alone am to blame for any error in research or interpretation.

Above all, I have only *besos y abrazos* for Steven Grindle, who provided an occasional shoulder to cry on, and Alexandra Grindle, Stefanie Grindle, and Peter Knight, who jollied me along. The youthful exuberance of Eliot and William Knight saved me from fretting too long about sources, syntax, and summations. I am in their debt.



Quetzalcoatl, from the Codex Magliabechiano.

Quetzalcoatl

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, has been found in iconography reaching as far back as the Olmec (1500–300 BCE), Maya (300 BCE–900 CE), and Toltec (900–1100 CE) peoples in Mesoamerica. At Teotihuacán (150 BCE–750 CE), once the largest city in the Americas, the feathered serpent was painted onto the walls and sculpted into the friezes and stairways of the site's impressive pyramids. From there, representations of Quetzalcoatl spread to the city-states of Central Mexico such as Cholula, Tenochtitlán, Tula, and Xochicalco. The role of Quetzalcoatl in Mexico's indigenous cultures varied, but among the Aztecs, the serpent god was most often associated with creation, learning, the arts, wisdom, wind, and air.

Introduction

STORMY SEAS off the coast of Mérida delayed the ship that was to take Zelia Nuttall from Veracruz to Tampico for the Christmas holidays. Never one to shun the unexpected, she took advantage of the extra time to organize a day's outing to a nearby island with a group of friends. So it was that on a late December day in 1909, a steam-powered launch steered by port officials delivered this seasoned anthropologist and her companions to the Island of Sacrificios. They planned to picnic and explore before a leisurely return to Veracruz in the evening.

The destination was well chosen. Zelia had long wanted to visit the quiet harbor where conquistadores had dropped anchor long ago. She knew it well from Spaniards' stories of their first encounters with the New World: they had told of finding an island dotted with temples whose walls were painted with puzzling images. They described altars sticky with blood, mounds of bones, freshly flayed limbs, and heartless torsos. They named this eerie site Sacrificios and climbed the finely chiseled steps of an ancient temple to spy a hazy coastline to the west. Confident that "the great country before them was terra-firma, and not an island," they claimed it for their Catholic majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella.¹ The following day they sailed on, firm in the belief that this new land was a gift from their generous but jealous God.

The sailors wrote that they were met with honor and hospitality by the inhabitants of the mainland. Settling on green branches arranged for their comfort, with the sea before them and the lofty volcano of Orizaba at their backs, they received gifts of perfume, fruit, and cakes. It was a Friday, and so these ardent Catholics felt obliged to refuse the chicken freshly cooked for them. They appear to have given no offense, however, for when these sons of Andalucía and Estremadura, Castilla and Galicia asked for gold, it appeared the next morning—masks, figurines, and shimmering crowns all laid before

them. Each day, they recounted, the Indigenous people built sun shelters and “embraced and feasted us,” showering their visitors with more gifts of gold and gems and food.²

Almost four centuries later, on a second foray to the island that December, Zelia Nuttall stepped from her small launch onto the white sand of Sacrificios. Bound up in the style of the earlier Victorian era, she was strongly corseted, pince-nezed, hatted, and parasoled. Beneath the lace and stays was a strong intellect, ripe with knowledge of ancient Mexico. She poked about in the tropical vegetation with keen eyes, thinking she might find a few shards of ancient pottery. Instead, pushing aside the undergrowth, she spotted the ruins of a pre-Columbian wall painted with the image of a feathered serpent, the god Quetzalcoatl.

At once, Zelia knew she had found a valuable site. She was convinced she had stumbled onto the ruins of temples where sacred rituals of life and death had played out, where the gods had been cajoled with human offerings, and hymns had been raised to honor them. This could well be the place where Juan de Grijalva and his crew had landed in May 1518, months before Hernán Cortés set out on the journey that would devastate the glittering lake city of Tenochtitlán and the civilization that created it.

Zelia Nuttall was then fifty-two years old and she knew what she wanted: to organize a dig on Sacrificios, camping in the rough to collect evidence of its early inhabitants and of those who had disrupted their lives so irreparably. She was intrigued by the glimpse of Quetzalcoatl, revered by the ancients as the great priest-king, creator of the world and of human life, deity of wind and learning. “Truly with him it began,” the Aztecs sang at the time of the Spanish Conquest. “Truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl—all art and knowledge.”³ She relished the opportunity to make an important offering to her own god, Science.

Zelia thought of herself as a scientist, although she held no certificate of formal training in any of its branches. She signed letters to her mentor, Frederick Ward Putnam of Harvard University, “your goddaughter in Science.” That capital S was central to her persona. It accompanied her always, even on a small boat pattering out from the port of Veracruz. As a scientist, the desire to find out more, to explore, excavate, observe and record, to collect, categorize, and explain, came naturally to her.

But before she could undertake a scientific exploration of Sacrificios,

Zelia needed permission. She addressed her request to the Inspectorate of Archaeological Monuments of Mexico, for any excavation required the formal approval of this agency to proceed. At a time of intense, often ruthless competition for artifacts among museums, collectors, and universities, Mexico's national inspectorate of monuments had a daunting responsibility: to impose limitations on the claims of foreigners and moderate the ambitions of distant institutions to gather up its antiquities. Its mandate was part of a national effort to turn ancient accomplishments in art and war, in the knowledge of the earth and stars, into a form of cultural glue that would bind a disparate nation together. Gripped by a fascination with the feats of the Aztecs and other cultures, the government was becoming more protective of Mexico's artifacts, seeking to own the relics, monuments, and stories of its past. The inspector general, Leopoldo Batres, harbored serious doubts as to the intentions of the foreigners digging into his country's history—and for good reason.

Despite his skepticism, Zelia believed her mission to be above reproach. She met personally with Batres and the head of the National Museum to convince them of its merit, laying out her plans, presenting loose bits of stone carvings she had found on the island, and showing her photographs. She promised any objects found on Sacrificios would become the property of the state and her time and talent would be offered for free. She requested a small grant—a mere \$250—to cover the costs of excavation. She also met with the secretary and under-secretary of the Secretariat of Public Instruction responsible for the inspectorate and the museum and confidently awaited permission, making plans to camp out on the island.

Zelia was totally unprepared for the reply that arrived three weeks later. In stilted officialese, the inspectorate informed her that she would be granted access to only part of the island and that the government would provide a paltry hundred dollars for the project. Furthermore, her work had to be carried out under the direction of Inspector General Batres. Worse still, any excavation on Sacrificios would have to be personally supervised by his thirty-eight-year-old son, Salvador, who would inform the agency “of all that occurs during the discharge of his undertaking,” for it was “indispensable that he should supervise everything relating to this exploration so that thus the scientific interests of Mexico remain safeguarded and also the formalities of the law be fulfilled.”⁴

This approval, so saddled with conditions, was a slap in the face, and Zelia felt its sting. She was, after all, a celebrated anthropologist who represented eminent museums and universities in the United States and was certain her knowledge and skills far surpassed those of Batres and his son. She had famous mentors and rich patrons prepared to attest to the excellence of her work. She had committed her life to bringing attention to the achievements of Mexico's Indigenous cultures and was incensed that Batres should caution her about respecting the laws of the country.

Leopoldo Batres, who sauntered among Mexico's ruins in a top hat and cane, drunk on the authority of his official position, was a perfect target for Zelia's ire. Since 1885, he had intimidated seasoned and aspiring anthropologists, even while his superiors ignored whispers that his lengthy reign at the inspectorate was rife with incompetence and corruption. Although never substantiated, it was rumored that he had used dynamite to uncover the pyramids at Teotihuacán, built over a thousand years before the Aztecs had constructed the lake city of Tenochtitlán, and that he routinely purloined artifacts to sell to private collectors. There was certainly no reason to expect better from his son, who had a reputation for carousing and for abusing workers. To Zelia, both father and son were charlatans—and dangerous ones, at that—who stood in the way of advancing knowledge of the country's history.

At first she thought she could stop their interference by appealing to her old friend, President José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz, who in his long and authoritarian reign had been committed to transforming Mexico into a modern country of steam and iron. Yet his efforts to “adjust matters” with the inspectorate, Zelia reported, were “cleverly circumvented” by its wily director and his supporters.⁵ Hers was no doubt a small matter to the president, who had more serious issues to consider, as rebellion was gathering against him. Mexico was on the eve of a great social and political revolution, and Díaz's opponents were eager to replace him and his regime. Nevertheless, his failure to intervene successfully was a deep disappointment to Zelia.

Worse news arrived over breakfast several months later. As she perused *El imparcial*, one of Mexico's national newspapers, Zelia came upon a stunning story: Batres claimed to have discovered the ruins of a sacred site on the Island of Sacrificios.⁶ Rarely had she been so angry. *She* was the one who

deserved credit for finding the site—and she deserved the glory of undertaking its excavation.

Protesting what was, by Zelia's estimation, a theft of her legitimate rights, she reacted quickly and angrily. She had no choice, she claimed in print and in letters to her colleagues, but to refuse to go forward with the excavation, given the onerous conditions that had been placed upon her. In further protest, she resigned from her honorary professorship at the National Museum, renowned for its collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, and from the committee that was planning a world congress of anthropology in Mexico City later that year. Batres's shameful behavior called forth Zelia's sharpest knives. She was determined that her retreat would not be a quiet one, and she made certain her resignations were reported in national and foreign newspapers.

Then, in scorching prose, she published an article in *American Anthropologist* denouncing the inspector for chicanery. She excoriated him for his ignorance of modern scientific methods and claimed that he was responsible for the destruction of priceless artifacts. She accused him of enriching himself by pilfering and selling national treasures to foreigners and decried the intellectual chaos his department had imposed on the National Museum. She delighted in reminding her readers that Batres had a history of claiming credit for others' discoveries and interfering with the work of accomplished scholars, among them Manuel Gamio, who would later become the country's first and most influential professional anthropologist. She hoped that the government would recognize the failures of the inspectorate, with its " 'one-man system,' which has led to such unheard of abuses," and allow real experts to excavate Mexico's pre-Columbian past.⁷

Batres was incensed that his reputation had been called into question—and in so public a way. The article was "a diatribe" by a woman who wasn't really a scientist, he argued in a pamphlet he published in Mexico City, for she had no formal academic qualifications.⁸ He reminded his readers that she was divorced (a status far from accepted at the time, especially in Catholic Mexico), questioned her assertions about the classification of antiquities, called her judgment into question, and accused her of sentimentalism and hysteria. He quoted a letter from the secretary of education attesting to his own competence and contributions to the country. He was, he continued, not to be insulted by this overexcited woman spouting falsehoods.