IN THE SHADOW OF QUETZALCOATL
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ZELIA NUTTALL
and the Search for Mexico’s Ancient Civilizations

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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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“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. 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. 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.”

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.”

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 terracotta 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, Emeralde 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

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.
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. 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 puttering 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.”

INTRODUCTION
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 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.

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. 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.

In the end, Batres was relieved of his official responsibilities, although this had more to do with the revolution that toppled Porfirio Díaz than with the accusations of an irascible foreigner. Nevertheless, a collective sigh
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echoed through anthropological circles in Mexico and the United States when Batres stepped down in 1911. Zelia Nuttall was celebrated for taking on the inspector and for protecting antiquities from ignorance and vice.

Over a century later, most of this pioneering anthropologist’s accomplishments have been forgotten, though many remember her showdown with Leopoldo Batres. Both sought to bring the other down in the most visible way possible. But their confrontation was about much more than personal animosity and ambition, and raised big questions: Who was the lawful owner of Mexico’s past? Who had a right to carry out excavations and sift through the ruins? How should the history of the Indigenous civilizations be understood? Theirs was a dispute that echoed a much larger struggle about divergent claims of science and national identity in Mexico and the United States.

Who was this fierce woman who claimed so much for herself and her science? At the time Zelia Nuttall crossed swords with Leopoldo Batres, she was a middle-aged divorcée, a mother and grandmother who lived in an impressive house, wore her hair in a pompadour, and favored shawls, laces, and jet beads that hung in profusion around her ample figure. Age had darkened her complexion—some whispered that she “looked Mexican”—and she needed thick lenses to see. From time to time, when crossed, she dashed off irate articles to expose those who challenged her. She was at the center of an extraordinary web of social, political, and scholarly friendships at a time of great scientific and cultural change.

In her day, Zelia Nuttall was a figure of accomplishment and myth. According to an oft-repeated legend, at one of her soirées, as Mexican servants wearing white gloves circulated with trays of tiny seedcakes, she advanced to welcome an eminent guest just as her voluminous Victorian drawers came loose and dropped to her ankles. She calmly stepped out of them and proceeded as if nothing had happened. Apparently Teresita, her maid, scooped up the aberrant garment and whisked it away. Zelia was, above all, self-confident.

From the 1880s to the 1930s Zelia pursued a life of research and publication, traveling relentlessly to sift through long-forgotten manuscripts in venerable libraries and museums across Europe. Mexico offered her a vast canvas of some ten thousand archaeological sites and innumerable artifacts, and she
painstakingly matched these to old texts to make sense of them. She was fascinated by ancient gods and myths and wanted to reconstruct the world as the Aztecs and others had known it, understanding their stories of creation and time. Even the smallest fragment added to her appreciation of past civilizations.

Few were as familiar as Zelia was with the accounts Spanish priests and soldiers had left of their encounters in the New World. In letters, journals, captain’s logs, and books, they detailed what they had seen and what they were told. They described libraries full of screen-folded codices—books that held the secrets of the earth and stars: stories of pilgrimages, maps of villages, and images of markets, workshops, boats, armor, and caches of gold. Evidence of this rich past was destroyed or dispersed by the Spanish Conquest, when the Indigenous population was decimated by disease, famine, and cruelty. Memory of “the time before” was for Zelia to reconstruct with the shards and histories that remained.

She focused much of her energy and intellect on what could be learned of Aztec civilization. She had the instincts of a hunter, and she was skilled at tracking down ancient codices and making sense of their pictographs. Adhering to rigorous standards for accumulating and assessing evidence, Zelia developed expertise in reading old texts, unlocking their meaning with exquisite care, translating them, and bringing new knowledge to light. She studied, compared, checked, and rechecked until she believed she had excavated the truth.

Zelia was quoted as an authority on New World antiquity in the Chicago Tribune, London Times, New York Times, and San Francisco Examiner and was invited to speak at major conferences. She was honored at an international exposition to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal. President Theodore Roosevelt welcomed her to the White House and President William Howard Taft invited her to a lawn party there. She was one of the judges of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, which was a platform for showcasing the cultural and scientific advances made in the United States. She was an early member of scholarly associations that were important to the growing number of women seeking careers in the sciences.

Zelia Nuttall was at home among the elite of Boston; Chicago; New York; Philadelphia; San Francisco; Washington, DC; and the capital cities of Europe, although her life ended in penury. After a short-lived marriage she confronted the world as a single mother pursuing a career and supporting
a family, a difficult undertaking when proper society was skeptical of independent women—particularly divorced ones. Sometimes alone, and sometimes with her daughter, mother, and sister, she traveled and lived for extended periods in England, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Switzerland and eagerly set out on long voyages to Alaska, Hawaii, Japan, Norway, Russia, and Sweden. Fluent in many European languages, she spoke often at international conferences, scarring the conventional view that women should not put themselves forward in such a way. Awarded gold medals by scholarly associations for her early work on terracotta statuettes, decoding the Aztec calendar stone, and the exhibit she organized at the Columbian Exposition, she enjoyed the esteem of eminent researchers. Wealthy philanthropists supported and promoted her work.

Zelia was a protégée of one of the founders of modern anthropology, Frederic Ward Putnam, and she counted luminaries such as Franz Boas, Daniel Brinton, Alice Cunningham Fletcher, and Alfred Maudslay as trusted colleagues. Her influence was felt at Harvard University, the Universities of California and Pennsylvania, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the National Museum in Mexico, as each of these institutions assembled valuable collections from ancient civilizations in Mesoamerica and elsewhere. She championed the work of Manuel Gamio, and guided the philanthropic activities of Charles Bowditch, the Duc de Loubat, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, Sara Yorke Stevenson, and others who were fascinated by early societies and wanted to leave their imprint on cultural institutions in the United States.

Zelia Nuttall was known for decoding the Aztec calendar, revealing the meaning and function of a brilliant headdress of feathers and gold, and locating a sixteenth-century document that shed new light on Sir Francis Drake's travels. During one eureka moment, deep in the stacks of the British Museum, she found an Indigenous pictorial history that predated the Spanish conquest, the Codex Nuttall. She was the first to transcribe and translate other ancient manuscripts, as she knew Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs and their predecessors and was skilled at understanding their pictographic stories. She identified a new period in Mesoamerican history, the archaic, and knew, as few others did, the pottery and gods of the Aztecs, their myths, and the stars they watched to regulate their rituals and daily activities. In her lifetime she published over seventy-five articles and three books.
She was an accomplished person, but not an easy one to live with, and she grew more imperious with age. If as a young woman Zelia had been diffident, hesitant to seek meetings with eminent scholars, by the age of forty she was instructing a famous professor on how to handle her mail and make her hotel reservations. Insistent that she be given credit for her discoveries and often scornful of opinions contrary to her own, she hectored those she expected to display her collections and support her work. She had, as one friend noted, “a remarkable belief in the truth of her theories.” She seemed to think that publication deadlines did not apply to her. She lived closely, but not always harmoniously, with her family and wheedled money from friends and acquaintances, never hesitating to use her network of influential acquaintances to advance her causes.

Zelia was remembered as much for her personality and style as for her accomplishments. More profoundly, however, the questions she asked about Mexico’s pre-Columbian world were critically important: Who were the people who had built such remarkable cities and ceremonial places and traded goods over thousands of miles? How were their societies organized, what did they eat, how did they dress? Who farmed the land, and who crafted the arrows and shields, the murals, and the pottery whose shards bore witness to lost civilizations? What rituals were observed in their temples, and what could they reveal about human relationships to the gods, the meaning of the stars, and beliefs about the origins of life? Why did so many of these societies flourish and then disappear?

Zelia Nuttall committed her life to answering these questions. She lived at a propitious time for doing so.

Advances in science animated Zelia’s world. Everywhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, discoveries in medicine, biology, geology, botany, zoology, astronomy, and archaeology were celebrated and debated; progress was in the air. Newspapers regularly covered debates occurring in the lecture halls of scientific conferences, and almost every town in the United States boasted a natural history society and local collections of plants, insects, and artifacts. Cities vied to host international fairs showcasing science and invention; universities debated how to break up the classical field of natural philosophy into focused departments of biology, botany, zoology, geology, and a host of other “-ologies” of scientific study. Curators organized museums dedicated to public education about the natural world and ancient
civilizations. Society matrons met for tea while eminent personages explained to them about the stars, solar cults, rock formations, and lizards.

Of course, the Victorians did not discover science; they developed it, encouraged a widespread fascination with all things scientific, and set about classifying and organizing people, plants, animals, and things. It was a time, as John Pickstone put it, of “describing and collecting, identifying and classifying, utilising and displaying . . . of men and women who loved to ‘take note’ of their surroundings.” The US Congress created the National Academy of Sciences in 1863 and funded expeditions to explore, chart, and measure the nation’s coasts, rivers, and mountains. Newly established organizations, from local societies of naturalists to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, gained significantly in membership, and new academic journals were founded: *American Naturalist* (1867), *Science* (1880), and *American Anthropologist* (1880). *Popular Science* was first published in 1872, and *National Geographic* in 1888, bringing news of science, invention, and discovery to a broad public.

Those who wondered about how human civilizations emerged and grew were eager participants in this era of discovery. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published just two years after Zelia’s birth, stimulated philosophers and scientists to observe the natural world and the human experience as never before. In 1871 his *Descent of Man* applied his evolutionary theory to human life. Darwin’s insights—controversial and even abhorrent to those who held to biblical teachings about creation and who saw the hand of God at work in the universe—invited new interest in the earth’s history and the ordering of civilizations, inspiring a search for links in the chain of evolution. In the rubble of bygone settlements and the traditions of their successors, researchers like Zelia hoped to find evidence of human migration, the evolution of primitive societies, and layers of historical advancement in art, architecture, and science.

In these decades after 1850, anthropology slowly emerged as a scientific field with its own methods, standards, and theories. Its practitioners might be most passionate about archaeology, paleontology, ethnology, folklore, linguistics, cosmology, human evolution, or ancient history, but their common quest was to study human cultures and societies in an effort to understand where they came from and how they had developed. Many emphasized scientific methods of observation, the careful accumulation of evidence, and close comparison of items of interest.
Some of the questions they sought to answer were universal: Where did human civilization originate? How can the distant past be found, studied, and understood? Another was peculiar to the age and its beliefs: How do ancient civilizations illustrate the march of human progress and the preeminence of Western culture? Their methods were self-consciously scientific—close observation, copious note-taking, measurement, cataloging, categorization, and the meticulous weaving of threads of theory—but they also carried with them a set of socially determined views about the hierarchies of civilizations and races that colored their observations and conclusions, views that a subsequent generation of anthropologists would roundly reject.

In its early decades, this new science assumed that there was an evolutionary progress to civilization, from primitive villages to ancient kingdoms to modern industrial and urban societies. From the 1880s to the early decades of the twentieth century, Herbert Spencer’s mistaken application of natural selection to human beings, social Darwinism, legitimized beliefs about the hierarchy of cultures and the inevitable path that led to the superiority of the white race. In 1877 Lewis Henry Morgan theorized that human societies could be seen as moving from savage to barbaric to civilized. “Beginning with the cliff dwellers and other primitive races, one can trace the progress of mankind in all stages of civilization and barbarism through the ages until he reaches the wonderful works of the nineteenth century,” enthused a journalist describing anthropology exhibits at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. At the time, few disputed this conclusion. Anthropologists believed that their work should explore a multitude of past civilizations that, if uncovered and documented, would demonstrate the unity and progression of human history, one that celebrated millennia of strides toward the rich, industrial, urban, and advanced nations of the West.

In this, Zelia Nuttall was no revolutionary. She did not dispute the vision of the trajectory of human cultural development, nor did she put forward an alternative paradigm to account for the diversity of social practices and beliefs in the world. She accepted her era’s assumptions about race and class and was comfortable with her elite status and its privileges. Yet, in her research, Zelia rarely referenced the widely held views of her time. She did not seek to categorize civilizations as primitive, savage, or barbaric, nor did she indulge in racial theories of development. It is true that in one
of her major publications she waxed poetic about the unity of human development and interpreted the cosmic beliefs of multiple civilizations as pointing to evidence of a one-god universe. But most often, her observations kept her away from grand developmental systems and racial ordering. Other than an underlying tone of admiration for the achievements of those who lived in the distant past, she described and explained but did not judge—except, of course, to dismiss the views of those who did not agree with her. But even then she established her rightness with carefully gathered facts and sharp reason.

Zelia Nuttall respected “the ancients” and their accomplishments in art, architecture, governance, agriculture, religion, astronomy, trade, and other fields of endeavor. She explained the complex symbols and interacting circles of the Aztec calendar; identified adornments and weapons; explained the layout of gardens, ponds, and canals; testified to the organization of commercial networks and local markets; considered baskets, pottery, and feather work; and transcribed ancient songs. She was a child of her time, but she was also a perceptive observer.

Early enthusiasts of the science of anthropology met at the annual conferences of newly formed associations where they presented papers and debated heady ideas. One of the first of these, the Anthropology Society of Paris, was organized in the late 1850s. The International Congress of Americanists, gathering those most fascinated by the question of how New World civilizations had come into existence, met for the first time in Nancy, in northeast France, in 1875. The first US museum dedicated completely to the new field, the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, opened its doors in 1877. In New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and elsewhere, new art, natural history, and archaeological museums also drew scholars and enthusiasts together. These institutions were eager to add to their collections and to their reputations for scholarship. Each boasted about its circle of scientists, well known to others, and quietly competed to be the most famous member of this new club. It was through these associations and museums that the spirit of scientific observation and the era’s cultural hubris was diffused.

Notably, because in its early days the field did not require formal educational credentials, a number of adventurous women found careers in the pursuit of anthropology. Alice Cunningham Fletcher lived among Indigenous communities in the American West, working to ensure that archeological
sites and the music of Native Americans were preserved for study. Erminnie Smith opened up a new understanding of Iroquois culture, and English archaeologist Adela Breton was celebrated for her exquisite watercolor paintings of murals at Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacán, and elsewhere in Mesoamerica. Sara Yorke Stevenson, a wealthy Philadelphian and early suffragist, explored Egyptian ruins and helped found the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Alice Dixon Le Plongeon photographed and sketched the ruins at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal and helped unearth a famous statue of Chacmool, the stone figure who gazes at his admirers with such steady indifference. Anne Maudslay became an expert on the Maya while accompanying her husband Alfred on his expeditions. Elsie Clews Parsons and Matilda Coxe Stevenson added to the understanding of Native American cultures in the western United States.

While social mores bound them up in corsets, cautioned them not to fatigue their eyes or weary their minds with too much study, and kept them from voting, women had begun to experience an emancipation of sorts in early field research. They banded together, reading one another’s papers and encouraging each other’s work when their male colleagues refused to invite them into their clubs. Philanthropist Phoebe Apperson Hearst was particularly helpful to these women, supporting their travels and excavations and drawing them into museum work. Zelia developed especially close relationships with Breton, Fletcher, Hearst, and Sara Yorke Stevenson; their letters indicate how important this network was in advancing their activities.

In the years after the Civil War, wealthy philanthropists in Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington, built museums, libraries, universities, botanical gardens, and opera houses to showcase US cultural aspirations. They were convinced that their country was destined to reveal the heights to which human civilization could aspire. Their money fresh from factories, railroads, oil fields, banking, and mines, wealthy citizens were eager to invest in displays of culture to rival the renowned institutions of Europe.

New museums and their benefactors funded expeditions to discover, explore, collect, and order. At the same time, European imperialism trumpeted the sense that Western culture had reached the zenith of human possibilities. Relics from Babylon, China, Egypt, Tenochtitlán, and other ancient centers
poured in, filling these new temples of learning. Many artifacts were claimed as spoils, some were purchased, but many had simply been looted. Whatever their provenance, they were labeled and studied by anthropologists and admired by eager crowds on Sunday afternoons. Primitive peoples and missing links in evolution were popular topics for public lectures and discussions. Enthusiasts set up associations that met annually to discuss their members’ work, their proceedings eagerly reported in hometown newspapers.

Questions about where the peoples of the Americas had come from were particularly inviting, stimulating interest in better understanding the temples, pyramids, and images they had left behind. Zelia’s generation of anthropologists hunted for records in old libraries and collected artifacts. They studied dwellings built into desert cliffs, temples buried in tangled tree roots, finely crafted jewelry and ceramics rescued from sacred pools, colorful murals and ancient baskets buried under rocks and dirt. Those who ventured across the desert and penetrated deep into the jungle in search of lost cities were hailed as heroes when they returned home with stories of encounters in remote villages and drawings of earthen mounds that, when excavated, sometimes revealed stunning palaces and temples.

Before this generation of anthropologists found its voice, common explanations for the origins of New World civilizations invoked the story of the lost tribes of Israel, supposing an Atlantic crossing at some misty point in history. Savants debated whether it was the Canaanites, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the “Mahometans,” the Phoenicians, the Scythians, or some other people who had traveled so far to lay the basis for the extraordinary science, architecture, and art underpinning these ancient cultures. They were fascinated by what was known of the relics, languages, and cultural practices of the Aztecs, Maya, Olmecs, and Toltecs. Some hoped to find linkages among Indigenous inhabitants and to establish a timeline of the settlement of the New World.

There was much to tempt these pioneers. Stories of the opulence of pre-Columbian civilizations had been the stuff of legend since the days of the Spanish Conquest. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who accompanied Hernán Cortés in 1519, reported that, upon arrival at Tenochtitlán, “soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream. . . . The appearance of the palaces in which they lodged us! How spacious and well built they
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