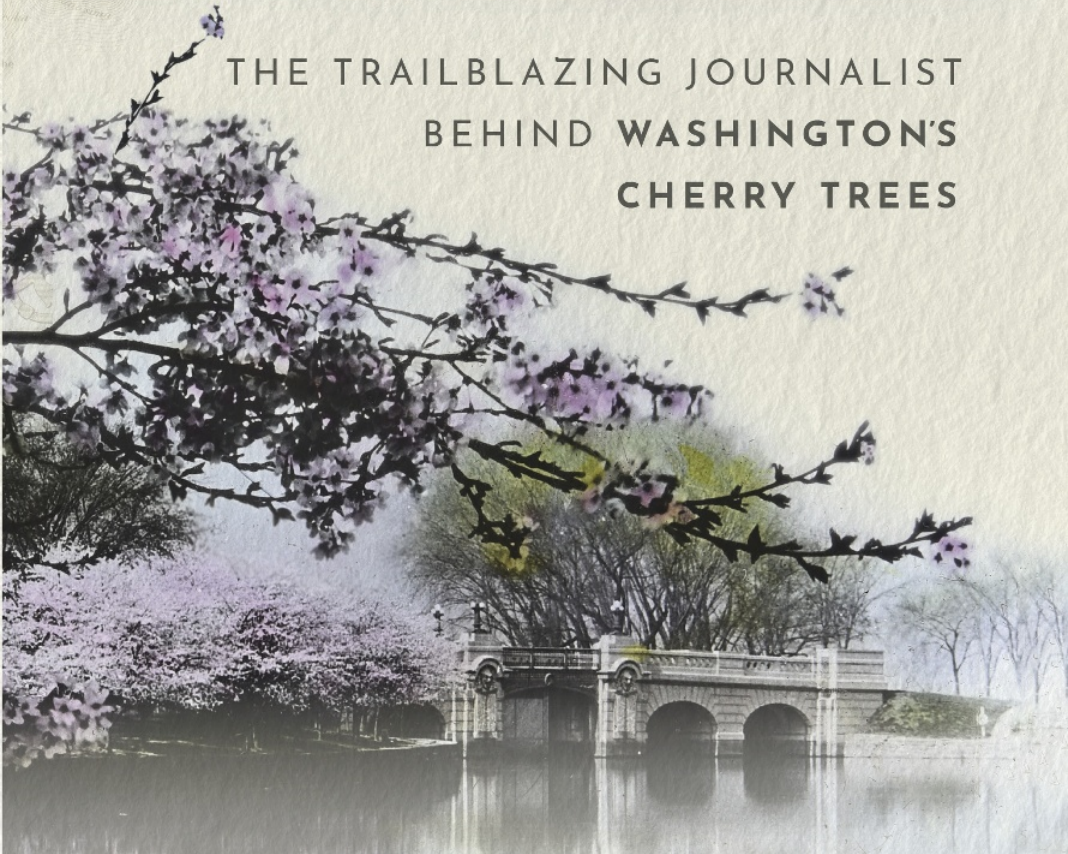


DIANA P. PARSELL

Uchikura
JAPAN

ELIZA SCIDMORE

THE TRAILBLAZING JOURNALIST
BEHIND WASHINGTON'S
CHERRY TREES



ELIZA SCIDMORE

Praise for *Eliza Scidmore*

“To the canon of women explorers like Gertrude Bell and Nellie Bly, add journalist Eliza Scidmore to the list of exceptionals. Diana Parsell’s meticulously researched biography brings to life the woman whose curiosity and passion for travel bought the wonder of distant lands in words and pictures to American readers.”

—Cathy Newman, author of *Women Photographers at National Geographic*

“Parsell has brilliantly rescued Eliza Scidmore, a celebrity journalist and travel writer, from obscurity. Her family background and character are intriguing, and the biography is packed with cultural and historical detail that positions Scidmore as a professional with friends in the highest positions in many fields, both in the United States and the Far East. In addition to the long and complicated saga of her role in securing Japanese cherry trees for Washington D.C., she is especially esteemed for her books about Alaska and Japan, and her instrumental work for *National Geographic* magazine.”

—Susan Schoenbauer Thurin, author of *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China 1842–1907*

“Diana Parsell’s meticulous biography of the important, intrepid, though still sadly under-researched and insufficiently known, Eliza Scidmore, will be an invaluable resource for travel writing scholars and students. The interweaving of the author’s own biography with Scidmore’s history makes for a wonderful connecting of two women writers’ stories more than a century apart.”

—Julia Kuehn, The University of Hong Kong

“Parsell writes in a clear and lively style and makes thorough use of primary sources, effectively blending narrative drive with evocative detail.”

—Michelle McClellan, Bentley Historical Library,
University of Michigan

“A riveting read, this comprehensive biography of Eliza Scidmore is full of surprises, demonstrating a legacy that extends far beyond her role in bringing the now-iconic cherry blossoms to Washington, D.C. Through prodigious research and vivid writing, Diana Parsell brings to life the dynamic period from America’s Gilded Age into the 1920s, when Scidmore was an eyewitness to major world events. I highly recommend this book.”

—Ann McClellan, author of *Cherry Blossoms*
and *The Cherry Blossom Festival: Sakura Celebration*

“One part writer, one part adventurer, one part cultural ambassador, and 100% tenacious—and at a time when women were supposed to linger in the shadows—Eliza Scidmore literally changed the landscape of the nation’s capital. In this terrific biography, Diana Parsell’s obsessive quest to piece together Scidmore’s extraordinary life moves this forgotten journalist from footnote to center stage.”

—Lisa Napoli, author of *Susan, Linda, Nina & Cokie:
The Extraordinary Story of the Founding Mothers of NPR*



“On the Way Home,” by Kazumasa Ogawa in *The Hanami*
(Flower-picnic), A. B. Takashima, 1899.
(Special Collections and Archives, The Claremont Colleges Library)

ELIZA SCIDMORE

The Trailblazing Journalist Behind
Washington's Cherry Trees

Diana P. Parsell

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*To Bruce,
for being there*

Who knows how circumstance and character
conspire to write the narrative we come to recognize
as our life? Of course, one part of the answer is that
we bear responsibility for our own narrative.

Cathy Newman,
Women Photographers at National Geographic
(National Geographic, 2000)

Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	xiii
Prologue: A Grave in Yokohama	1
Part 1: Foundations	
1. Child of the Frontier	15
2. A Fresh Start	31
3. World's Fair	47
4. "Lady Writer"	59
5. Inside Passage to Glacier Bay	77
6. The Potomac Flats	95
Part 2: Far and Wide	
7. Jinrikishas in Japan	109
8. A Singular Vision	125
9. Among the Scientists	141
10. A Voice for Conservation	157
11. New Highway to the East	177
12. "Miss Scidmore, of Everywhere"	193
13. Trouble in China	207
14. Eyes on Japan	227
Part 3: A Dream Realized	
15. "The World and All That Is in It"	243
16. Field of Cherries	259

17. An Ally in the White House	275
18. Up in Smoke	289
19. “Mrs. Taft Plants a Tree”	305
20. War and Peace	319
Epilogue: At Home in the World	339
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	347
<i>Notes</i>	351
<i>Bibliography</i>	411
<i>Index</i>	421

Author's Note

To respect the integrity of the nineteenth-century texts on which this work is drawn, I give many of the place names in their original published form. Thus, today's Beijing appears as *Peking*. In cases where there are minor variations in spelling, as in *Tokio* and *Kioto*, I have adopted the more familiar modern terms (*Tokyo* and *Kyoto*). As for the names of people, I have converted many of Eliza Scidmore's original spellings, such as for the emperor and empress dowager of China, to more recognizable spellings used today. Inconsistencies in stylistic guidelines reflect my intent to aid readability.

About the illustrations: Most of the images used in this book consist of historical photographs out of copyright and in the public domain. In the case of those from various collections for which I received reprint permission, I have made every effort to properly credit the original photographers and sources. Any errors or omissions will be redressed in future editions.

Prologue: A Grave in Yokohama

“If one should inquire of you concerning
the spirit of a true Japanese,
point to the wild cherry blossoms
shining in the sun.”

—Motoori Norinaga

They visit her grave site every year, always in the springtime. If nature cooperates, the cherry trees are at peak bloom. Clutching bright bouquets of flowers, several dozen Japanese citizens and their guests gather inside the tall iron gates of the Foreign General Cemetery, which spills across a high cliff overlooking the harbor of Yokohama. Tea shops and gingerbread-trim bungalows line the streets of this leafy neighborhood where many Western residents lived in the late-nineteenth century, when the area was known simply as “the Bluff.”

The cemetery, lush with trees and shrubs, has the air of a private garden. Tombstones instead of statuary line the paths. On a Sunday afternoon in early April, an enormous crow-like bird alights on a stone monument, its oily black feathers burnished with a dull sheen. Overhead an airplane putters across a patch of blue sky visible through the treetops.

Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore lies in Section 11, on an upper terrace near the main road. In this region prone to earthquakes and violent storms, the forces of nature have upended many of the 4,200 graves. Hers is intact, marked by a thick rectangular slab of granite with a peaked top (Figure 0). Nearby stands a flowering cherry tree, its fifteen-foot canopy in full bloom, a graceful study of symmetry and strength. Planted three decades ago by those who come to pay tribute and descended from one of the 3,000 cherry trees that Japan sent to Washington a century ago, it provides a fitting monument to the American woman whose



Figure 0. Scidmore family grave, center, at the Foreign General Cemetery in Yokohama.

(Courtesy of Shinya Oto)

dream of seeing cherry blossoms every spring along the Potomac River indelibly shaped the public face of the U.S. capital.

Of a popular variety called Yoshino, the cherry tree has snowy-white blossoms tinged in pink. The flowers appear early in the season and last barely two weeks, disappearing before the tree gets its leaves. When the petals drop, they fall onto Eliza Scidmore's grave. A small plaque near her name bears the brush-like strokes of Kanji characters. The inscription explains in Japanese, with the power of a haiku poem: "A lady who loved Japanese cherry blossoms rests here in peace."¹

Eliza Scidmore was born in the American Midwest in 1856, three years after Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed his fleet of coal-powered "black ships" into Edo (Tokyo) Bay with a letter from President Millard Fillmore demanding that Japan open its ports to American vessels.

A year later, during Perry's follow-up visit, a young marine died aboard ship while the squadron sat anchored in the bay.

When Perry requested a burial spot overlooking the sea, Japanese officials offered the grounds of the Buddhist Zotokuin temple, above the tiny fishing village of Yokohama.² Over the years the site became a cemetery for foreigners who died in the area: Russian sailors and Dutch sea captains; merchants and military officers; Western diplomats, missionaries, scientists, and engineers. Some were struck down in violent early clashes between the Japanese and the foreigners.³ Others succumbed to diseases like cholera and typhoid. Many went to Japan as technical experts and teachers—invited by the government to help build the country's modern infrastructure and institutions—and ended their days there. The gravestones show that a tragically high number buried there lost their lives in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 that leveled Yokohama.⁴

A few years after that cataclysmic event, Eliza Scidmore's ashes were deposited in the cemetery, next to the remains of her mother and her brother George. Three Americans self-exiled far from their native land, intimately tied to one another in death as they were throughout their lives. Eliza's name is inscribed on the narrow side panel of the shared gravestone.

She went to Japan for the first time in the summer of 1885, making the long voyage across the Pacific with her mother to visit George, an American consular official who would spend most of his career in Japan. Though still in her twenties, Eliza had just published her first book, based on her sightseeing adventures in the remote U.S. territory of Alaska.

Japan thrilled her from the start. The soft strokes of summer were washing across the land when she arrived, and Eliza found the country "beautiful from the first green island off the coast to the last picturesque hill-top."⁵ The landscape unfolded in a succession of terraced hills, cleft by narrow valleys and ravines. Tiny villages of thatched cottages dotted the countryside, framed by dark groves of pine, palm, and bamboo.

With outside knowledge of Japan still quite limited, Eliza arrived, as other visitors did, with images of the country informed

by common stereotypes and prejudices of the day. Under patronizing attitudes in the West that regarded Eastern cultures and peoples as inferior and less developed, Japan was seen as picturesque but backward.⁶ A “flowery fairyland inhabited by little people in kimonos, carrying fans and parasols,” as one U.S. minister put it.⁷ Though traveling with an attitude of openness toward cultural discovery, Eliza expressed similarly simplistic and clichéd views in her initial reporting, while revealing what would become her lasting admiration for the artistic sensibility of the Japanese. “The houses seem toys, their inhabitants dolls, whose manner of life is clean, pretty, artistic, and distinctive,” she wrote. Everything looked “too theatrical” to be real. “Half consciously the spectator waits for the bell to ring and the curtain to drop.”⁸

Despite the studied effect, change was rippling through Japan.⁹ Before Perry’s arrival, a long line of military rulers, or *shoguns*, had tightly restricted Japan’s interaction with the outside world for more than two centuries to insulate the country and its people from the menace of Christian missionaries and the colonizing grasp of European nations. Trade occurred chiefly with the Chinese and a few Dutch merchants confined to an island off Nagasaki. Most Japanese people lived as their ancestors had for many generations, working the land under powerful feudal lords known as *daimyo*. A well-educated class of *samurai* served the governing elite as both warriors and skilled bureaucrats.

Perry’s voyage forced open the gates. Other countries were bound to follow. With the world suddenly at their doorstep, a faction of Japan’s leaders concluded that for their country to protect its sovereignty and ancient culture, it would have to abandon its isolationist policies and adopt practices and technologies like those that had made nations in the West so strong. A turning point came in 1868, after a decade of civil war, when the shogunate lost its dominance and governing power was restored to the emperor. The period that followed—known as the Meiji era, for “enlightened rule”—brought a sweeping program of reforms across society and in the military that would

transform Japan, in a half-century, from a feudal state into a modern world power.

Among Westerners, pent-up interest in the little-known island empire gave way to a craze for all things Japanese. Globetrotters streamed across the sea for a firsthand look. Back home they stuffed their Victorian parlors with Japanese objects—fans, porcelain, woodblock prints, and painted screens. In a wave of cultural imitation, “Japonisme,” as the trend was known, influenced Western art and design in works ranging from Tiffany luxury goods to Impressionist masterpieces by artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Edgar Degas, and Mary Cassatt.¹⁰

Eliza Scidmore returned to Japan many times, chronicling the ways of old and new Japan in prolific writings that included her best-known book, *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*. Living there on and off for four decades, she came to feel a deep affinity with the Japanese and their cultural values. She shared their passion for the ethereal beauty of cherry blossoms—*sakura*—and loved the ancient ritual of *hanami*, when huge crowds of Japanese turned out every spring to stroll among the trees in bloom. Washington, she decided, needed something like it. Though a series of men in charge of Washington’s parks rebuffed her suggestion, she kept her idea alive for more than two decades, until she finally saw her vision become a reality in 1912 with the support of First Lady Helen Taft and a gift of 3,000 cherry trees from Japan, bestowed as a gesture of friendship at a time when its relations with the United States had grown tense.

Before I ever heard Eliza Scidmore’s name, I crossed her path many times halfway around the world. In the late 1990s I lived for two years with my husband in Jakarta, and over the next decade I returned often to Southeast Asia as a science writer and editorial consultant. On one of those trips, I bought a paperback reprint of an 1897 travelogue, *Java, the Garden of the East*. Back in America, I laid it aside, only to come across it again a few years later. Dipping

into the book for first time, I was quickly engrossed. One passage that caught my eye was a description of the author's visit to Buitenzorg (now Bogor), forty miles south of Jakarta. A popular "hill station" in the nineteenth century where colonial officials sought relief from the tropical heat, Buitenzorg had rich volcanic soil, frequent showers, and abundant sunshine that offered ideal conditions for a world-class botanical garden.

I had worked in Bogor and knew it well. My early morning commutes were the best. The route to the office took me along an avenue lined with banyan and kenari trees, towering palms, giant ferns, and thickets of bamboo; past a whitewashed presidential palace, where a large herd of slender deer grazed on the lawn. Orange and magenta bougainvillea spilled across the walls of the neighboring houses and shops. With noxious car exhaust not yet fogging the air, I breathed the loamy, rainforest scent of the tropical garden at the end of the street.

Back home in a suburb of Washington, D.C., the book brought it all back to me. The writing was vivid, and I found the voice beguiling. Who was this author, "E. R. Scidmore," I wondered, and what had taken him out to Java so long ago?

What I discovered in a quick online search astonished me. Not only was the author an American woman, but she had led a remarkable life a century earlier as a prolific author and world traveler. Among her impressive achievements, Scidmore became the first female board member of the National Geographic Society (in 1892) and an early writer and photographer for its now-iconic magazine. Most surprising to me was her key role in bringing Japanese cherry trees to Washington. I had lived in the D.C. area more than three decades. I went every spring to see the city's cherry trees in bloom. Yet I had never heard of Eliza Scidmore.

As I pondered the limited details about her, I realized Scidmore must have been in her late twenties when she first pitched her idea of the cherry trees to the men in charge of the city's parks. Thinking about myself at that age, I begged to know: what would

have given a young woman of that era such audacity and confidence? Who was she and where did she come from? And what was it about Japanese cherry trees that made her so taken with the idea in the first place? I headed downtown to the Library of Congress in search of answers. There I found copies of Scidmore's seven books and some of her articles, as well as entries in two dozen biographical indexes. But there was little about her personal life—and no biography. So began my quest to learn all I could about Scidmore and ultimately to tell her story.

It came as a great disappointment to learn early on that a relative destroyed most of Scidmore's personal papers soon after her death, reportedly at her wish. A final, decisive act, it would seem, of self-editing her life and controlling her own narrative. What fascinating secrets those records must have held. Evidence of romantic relationships, perhaps, or revelations of regrets and disappointments she experienced along with her many triumphs. The paucity of records helped explain why she remained little known over the years despite her historical significance.

My growing obsession with uncovering her life story took me on a zigzagging course: from Washington to New York and Boston; across the Midwest; as far as Japan and Alaska. To my delight, research at two dozen libraries and archives turned up a surprisingly rich trove of information about Scidmore, much of it hidden in plain sight for decades in historical newspapers and magazines, letters collections, photographs, public records, and other primary and secondary sources. Digitization and other advances in research tools helped me uncover about 800 of Scidmore's published articles, an important but little-examined body of work that shows she deserves greater recognition as one of America's pioneering female journalists (a contemporary of the early newspaperwomen whom historian Alice Fahs describes in *Out on Assignment*).¹¹ Story datelines and several hundred letters to friends and editors, many never revealed before, enabled me to piece together the course of Scidmore's life for the first time. The findings offer new insight into her environmental advocacy and

her role in Washington's cherry trees and magnify her legacy by revealing her importance as one of the Western travel writers who "opened" China to mass tourism in the late-nineteenth century.

A driving question I had from the time I began pursuing Scidmore's story was how she managed to achieve all she did at a time when few women had careers and society frowned on female ambition. Happily, the historical record provided some answers. Gradually, a picture of Scidmore came into focus like a photograph that takes form in a chemical bath. Despite gaps in her story, the evidence points to a woman who was clearly exceptional: a trailblazer who melded the traits of journalist, explorer, geographer, and ethnographer; environmentalist; advocate of world peace; and collector of Oriental art.¹²

The late writer and editor Charles McCarry captured Scidmore deftly, I think, in an anthology of excerpts from *National Geographic*. Calling her "the best pure *National Geographic* writer the magazine ever had," he saw her "fluently confident" style as an expression of her personality: that of an independent, intelligent, and highly principled woman of the late-Victorian period "whose visible passions were those of the mind." Scidmore reminded him, McCarry said, of his maternal aunts—schoolteachers, travelers, suffragists. "Reading one of her stories was like reading a letter from my Aunt Carolyn, a teacher of geography who, every summer, set off for some interesting foreign destination aboard a tramp steamer."¹³

Though a maverick in many ways, Scidmore was not exceptional in her day as a woman who cherished her independence. A large number of women in the decades after the Civil War showed little interest in marrying. With gender constraints loosening, they discovered they liked the freedom of doing as they pleased, of having agency over their own lives.

Because Scidmore did not have family wealth or a spouse to depend on for support, she might be thought of today as a "self-made woman" who owed her success to the force of her own talent and drive. A freelancer for all of her forty years in journalism,

she spent much of her adult life living out of apartments and hotel rooms and ship's cabins, packing and unpacking her steamer trunk for life on the road. Thanks to a wide circle of friends and professional contacts, she was often the guest of prominent people, yet she also endured, as a matter of course, the rigors of travel that could be quite challenging in many of the places she visited.

Though her personal circumstances were relatively modest, in the context of her day Scidmore traveled from a position of privilege as a white, well-educated American woman who enjoyed the advantages of her race, nationality, and family ties. She benefited from favorable foreign exchange rates in her travel costs and acquisition of Asian artifacts. Her brother's consular status ensured a measure of security and eased her access to places off the beaten track. Deference from local people opened the door to her acquaintance with "natives" up to the highest levels of power.

A real-life "Forrest Gump," Scidmore was an eyewitness to many historical events and rubbed elbows with famous people around the globe, from John Muir and Alexander Graham Bell to U.S. presidents and Japanese leaders. One of the most accomplished women of her day, she became so widely known that newspapers routinely reported the comings and goings of "Miss Scidmore." In the scope of her adventures, she was an American equivalent of intrepid British travelers like the famous Isabella Bird.

As with any life, Scidmore was full of contradictions. Though generally enlightened in her attitudes, she made derogatory and racist observations about some nationalities that reflected cultural biases and stereotypes typical of her era. As Nicholas Clifford writes in his study of British and American travel writing in China, Scidmore conveyed "a decidedly unflattering picture of hundreds of millions of Chinese, from one end of the empire to the other, as alike as peas in a pod."¹⁴ Culturally insensitive language she used throughout her reporting, as in her references to boatmen in India as "black man-apes" and to an elderly Mexican woman in Santa Fe as "a shriveled old crone," makes us wince

today.¹⁵ Such passages are especially jarring from a woman who came to see her writings as a bridge to increase understanding between people of different cultures.

Even when she expressed abhorrent ideas, however, Scidmore grounded her writing in diligent reporting and research that won her the respect of scientists and other experts. As Clifford says of her reporting on China, Scidmore spoke, like Isabella Bird, “with the kind of authority thought to be reserved to men.”¹⁶ For all her faults, Scidmore’s peripatetic life and keen reporter’s eye make her a fascinating guide to the dynamic period of U.S. history from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, as seen from an all-too-rare female perspective.

This book is not a work of literary analysis or critical theory. Rather, my aim has been to write the first deeply researched biography of Eliza Scidmore, chronicling her life in a narrative style that makes her story accessible to a wide range of audiences. My research began not long before Scidmore was “rediscovered” during the centennial of Washington’s Japanese cherry trees in 2012. Blogging about her on my website, I fielded inquiries from scores of people keen to know more about her: journalists, scholars, and authors; cherry blossom enthusiasts and Japanophiles; U.S. park rangers; women’s studies bloggers; students and educators. Over a decade, interest has expanded such that even the Girl Scouts now include information about Scidmore in their Cherry Blossom Patch program. By providing a well-documented account of her life based on the best available evidence to date, I hope to satisfy the curiosity of general readers like these while giving scholars and other specialists a foundation for further investigation of Scidmore’s life and deeper analysis of her work.

Any biography raises the implicit question of why the subject matters. Scidmore certainly matters as a “hidden figure” of historical importance whose life was long overlooked. Despite my diligent efforts in piecing together her story, much about her remains unknown. One thing that became clear in my research is

that she zealously guarded her privacy and avoided personal references in her published work. In most cases it's not even clear who she was traveling with at various times.

Biographical writing is an iterative process of sleuthing, to connect the many dots of evidence that add up to a life. Over time, with additional research and scholarship, our knowledge of Scidmore will grow. In the meantime, I believe her achievements speak for themselves and merit attention. It is through her impressive body of published work that Eliza Scidmore tells us who she was.

PART 1
FOUNDATIONS

Child of the Frontier

It must have shocked people in Madison, Wisconsin, to hear that Mrs. Scidmore planned to up and move to Washington, D.C., in the middle of the Civil War. That she had two small children made it seem all the more fool hardy. But what was she to do? Three times married, and still she lacked the security that women of her era were led to expect in the traditional role of wife and mother. Remaining in Madison meant accepting family charity and being subject to pity and gossip. Unfortunate circumstances handed her a chance to take control of her own destiny, and in a leap of faith, she acted.

For her five-year-old daughter, Eliza—"Lillie," the family called her because mother and daughter shared the same first name—leaving Madison would be the latest in a series of moves that made the idea of home a fluid concept. So it would be for much of her life. Born October 14, 1856, in the Mississippi River town of Clinton, Iowa, during an itinerant period of her parents' marriage, she came into her early consciousness of the world in Madison, romping with her brother George and a brood of Sweeney cousins in her mother's large clan. Later in life, the writer Eliza Scidmore would feel such an association with Madison as her place of origin that she listed it at times as her birthplace on U.S. passports.¹

Her roots on the American frontier became a part of her self-identity. Her forebears, who hailed from England and Ireland, included patriots who fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.² Later generations on both sides of her family

left their homes in New York State to join the Great Westward Migration that expanded the contours of the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. The American “West” of the time encompassed the vast region of the continent stretching from the Allegheny Mountains to the Pacific Ocean—an area where Native Americans were being pushed off their ancestral lands to make way for white settlers. To hundreds of thousands of Americans in the East and newly arrived immigrants, making a home in the western territory offered the prospect of freedom and self-sufficiency, and room for families to spread out. In an unpublished and heavily autobiographical novel Eliza Scidmore wrote late in life, one central character refers to residents of the West, only half-mockingly, as the “real Americans.”³

To those seeking land, the rich soil and bountiful forests of Wisconsin loomed as a paradise. “The natural resources of Wisconsin are almost unlimited and nothing is wanted but the hand of cultivation to make it the garden of the world,” one man wrote to his wife back East.⁴ The Sweeneys arrived in Wisconsin during a period of heavy migration to the area in 1848, the year the territory joined the Union as the thirtieth state.

Madison, where Lillie Scidmore spent a formative period of her childhood, was an uncommonly pretty town on the frontier. Named for the fourth president shortly after his death, Madison grew from a thousand acres of primeval forest that the town’s founders saw as an alluring spot for a state capital. Under their city plan, the dome-topped capitol building of white stone stood atop a rise of land between lakes Mendota and Monona, overlooking pristine waters whose shores of pebbles were fringed by rows of cedars. Avenues of white and burr oaks radiated outward from the capitol building, giving Madison the sylvan charm of an English park. Editor Horace Greeley of the *New-York Tribune*, America’s most widely read newspaper, declared on a lecture tour that Madison had “the most magnificent site of any inland town I ever saw.”⁵ An “Interlaken of the West,” some people called it.⁶

Lillie Scidmore's parents, George Bolles Scidmore and the former Eliza Catherine Sweeney, married in Madison a few weeks before Christmas in 1851. They likely met through Eliza C.'s brother-in-law, David Atwood, a talented political reporter who was soon to become the founding editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. The two men were both strong backers of the Free Soil Party, a short-lived but influential populist movement—later absorbed into the new Republican Party—that sought to prevent the extension of slavery into the western territories.⁷ Eliza C.'s own views as an “ardent abolitionist” undoubtedly factored into the couple's mutual attraction, at a time when Northerners were still far from united on the issue of slavery.⁸ At a deeper emotional level, George and Eliza C. shared an understanding of how hard and lonely life on the frontier could be without someone to share the burdens. Each was marrying for a third time.

George Scidmore, of Herkimer County, New York, had moved west in 1847 with his first wife to farm forty acres in Indiana's LaGrange County, near a homestead staked out by his parents.⁹ By the time he married Eliza Catherine Sweeney four years later, George had buried two wives at the United Methodist Cemetery in Plato. At thirty-two years old, and with no record of surviving offspring, he may have ached for a family.

Eliza C. came into the relationship with two young children from her first marriage, Eddie and Fanny Brooks. To the pretty widow of twenty-eight with lively blue-gray eyes—the eyes her daughter Lillie would inherit—the marriage offered more than just the prospect of a making a new home. It gave her the chance of a fresh start, after a scandalous incident that had shaken her world a few years earlier, soon after she first arrived in Wisconsin with her family.

When the Sweeneys packed up their wagons in Ohio and moved north to Wisconsin in 1848, they all migrated together: five adult siblings and their elderly parents. The family patriarch, Connor

Murray Sweeney, was one of five sons of an Irishman who emigrated to America just after the Revolutionary War. He learned the hatter's trade as a young man and ran a shop in his native Tonawanda, New York, along the Niagara River, until he was widowed. After remarrying, he settled with his second wife at Canton, in northern Ohio's Stark County. There, the couple ran a store where Connor peddled felt and wool hats while his wife, Susan, did "a brisk business" selling fresh gingerbread and "pop beer."¹⁰ The couple raised their five children—a son and four daughters—in rooms next door. Eliza Catherine Sweeney, the future mother of the writer Eliza Scidmore, was born in 1823 as their middle child.

Eliza C. developed her antislavery ideas while growing up in Ohio, and later passed those convictions on to her own children. The Sweeneys' neighbors in northern Ohio included Quakers, German-Americans, Yankees, and free blacks whose opposition to slavery made the area a hotbed of abolitionism.¹¹ As early as 1827, during the presidency of John Quincy Adams, Connor Sweeney joined town folk who called publicly for the freeing of slaves.¹²

After leaving home to marry at the age of nineteen, Eliza C. found herself widowed a few years later. When the Sweeneys looked to make a new home in Wisconsin, Eliza C. and her two young children joined them. The family settled initially at Potosi, in the southwest corner of the territory, where land opened up in a former lead-mining area. Gradually, they drifted sixty miles east to Madison.¹³

The "dearth of womankind" that plagued many settlements across the West made the Sweeney household a popular place after the family's arrival in southern Wisconsin.¹⁴ A stream of suitors came calling, and in 1849, three of the four Sweeney sisters married within several months of one another. Eliza Catherine went first to the altar, remarrying in early May when southern Wisconsin vibrated with the greening shoots of spring. Her new husband, William W. Wyman, was a prominent businessman

and a widower twice her age with several grown children. Originally a printer from New York, he started one of Madison's first newspapers, the *Express*, and owned a hotel.¹⁵ A month later, Eliza's favorite sister, Jane, wed a local man named George Oakley. In late summer, the oldest of the girls, Mary Ann, married the newspaperman David Atwood, who bought the *Express* from Wyman and remade it as the *Wisconsin State Journal*.

The glow of the wedding season had not yet dimmed when a family crisis broke out: something turned sour in Eliza C.'s marriage to William Wyman. That fall, she left him and fled to her family, agonizing over whether to seek a divorce. The measure was drastic; divorce carried such a stigma that many women put up with a lot to avoid it. No court records exist that describe her complaints, but most divorces by women in the nineteenth century were granted on the grounds of a husband's cruelty, habitual drunkenness, desertion, or failure to provide for the family.¹⁶ Her family must have found her concerns reasonable, as the Atwoods and a friend helped Eliza seek a divorce. Wyman fought the move, but eventually consented, on the condition that no "attempt was made to furnish proof [against him] of an infamous character."¹⁷

Eliza Catherine obtained the divorce in a neighboring county, possibly to minimize public exposure. To erase other traces of the marriage, she legally restored the use of her earlier married name; henceforth she would be known again as "Eliza C. Brooks."¹⁸ With no home of her own, she had to depend on her family to take her in. She and her children lived alternately with her parents in Potosi and the Atwoods in Madison.¹⁹

The situation shattered her expectations of a secure future. And it was troubling to think what a divorce could mean for her social standing. She knew herself to be a good and moral woman, but reputation was everything in middle-class respectability.

As Eliza C. embarked on her new marriage to George Scidmore in 1851, the couple decided to move west of the Mississippi, where

the region was booming under a fast-growing lumber industry, busy steamboat traffic, and the coming of the railroads. George sold his farmland in Illinois and took up insurance work.²⁰ In Dubuque, Iowa, Eliza C. gave birth to a son, George Hawthorne, on October 14, 1854. The couple's daughter Eliza arrived two years later, when the family was living sixty miles south in Clinton. The name they gave her, Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, was a weighty one for a tiny baby, though she would grow fully into it in time. The distinctive middle name, derived from her paternal grandmother, was a biblical name meaning "having obtained mercy."²¹

To Eliza C., starting a second family in her early thirties, a baby girl must have seemed a special gift. Two years earlier, she had suffered the death of her older daughter, Fanny Brooks, at the age of nine.²² Now Lillie would become the vessel of her mother's hopes and dreams.

Through their father's lineage, Lillie and her brother George were born ninth-generation Americans. The family's earliest ancestor in America, Thomas Skidmore (or Scudamore), emigrated from England to Boston during the period of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Scudamore family—whose ancestral home at Holme Lacy, in Herefordshire, survives today—dated its ancestry in England to the time of the Norman conquest (Figure 1.1).²³ As descendants of Thomas Skidmore branched out across America, they adopted many variants of the name. Some people who met the writer Eliza Scidmore as an adult recalled her tendency to correct anyone who addressed her as "Miss Skidmore" instead of pronouncing her name correctly as SID-more, with a silent "c."²⁴

Around Lillie's first birthday, in the fall of 1857, the Scidmores' situation grew precarious when a banking crisis sparked a financial panic that spread across the United States. Thousands of businesses and private fortunes were wiped out. George found work managing an inn in Decatur, Nebraska, a new town on the upper Missouri River. Presuming the family accompanied him, Lillie, a blond and round-faced child, would have learned to walk



Figure 1.1. Holme Lacy, the Scudamore manor house in Herefordshire, England, as shown c. 1890.

(Copyright Francis Firth Collection)

in the long corridors of Brown's Hotel, a square frame building with banks of windows on every side. The views overlooked a still-raw settlement where many of the dwellings were cabins built along a creek, surrounded by woods that ran thick with turkeys and other wildlife. When the local railroad boom failed to materialize, the hotel went bust. By then, George Scidmore had likely exhausted local goodwill in a long-running dispute centered on "wrongful detention of property." In the 1859 trial, the court ruled that the plaintiff could seek to recover from Scidmore "one yoke of oxen valued at \$85" and the costs of the suit.²⁵

By the eve of the Civil War, the Scidmores were back in Madison, living on a farm. George and Eliza apparently took in boarders to raise cash, as the 1860 census for Dane County shows George heading a household of eighteen people. One of the other couples living with them had a little girl of three, the same age as Lillie.²⁶

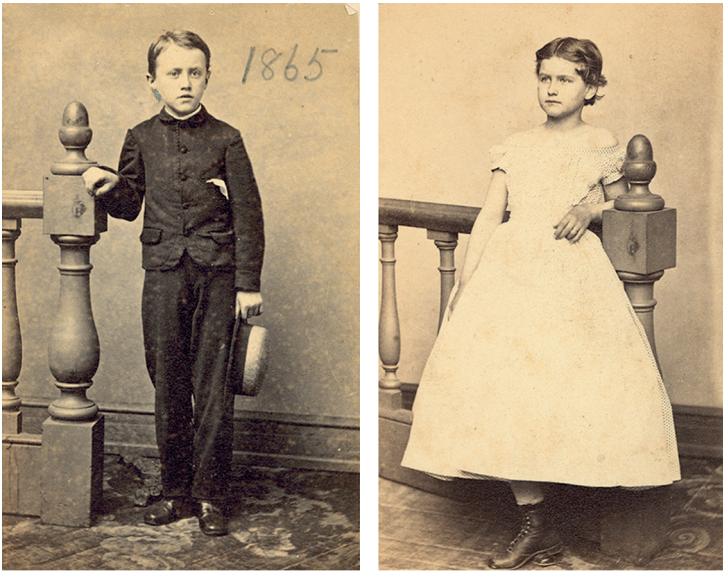
Eliza Catherine oversaw the cooking, cleaning, laundering, and other chores; given her later ease in handling money, she may have managed the household budget as well. All the work she

did make her, in effect, an equal partner of George in providing for the family. Yet any fruits of her labor could never be her own. Legally a husband had proprietary claim to his wife's property, and even any wages she might earn. Victorian America valued women's work in the "domestic sphere," as wives, mothers, and caretakers. But money and politics were strictly the purview of men.²⁷

A decade earlier, in 1848, activists at a convention in Seneca Falls, New York, had launched a movement calling for women to be given the same civil and social rights that men had, including the right to vote. Eliza Catherine Scidmore left no record of her views on the issue, though in later years she and Lillie would both act in ways that aligned with today's notions of feminism. At the least, Mrs. Scidmore would have understood that when it came to looking after their own interests, women had little power over their own lives and remained dependent on men. The unfairness of it must have rankled, for her own sake and her daughter Lillie's future.

Upon their return to Madison, Eliza C. and her family enjoyed the advantages of close ties to the Atwoods, now one of the most prominent families in town. Besides running the *Wisconsin State Journal*, David Atwood had influence stemming from a range of business activities and his activist role in the founding of the Republican Party in 1854. The grand home he built for his family in Madison's "silk-stocking district" of Mansion Hill was a meeting place for powerful men from all walks of life. Atwood had the kind of connections that opened doors.²⁸

As part of his kinship obligations, Atwood hired his sister-in-law Mrs. Scidmore's older son, Edward P. Brooks, as an apprentice at the *Wisconsin State Journal*. The family's avid readership of newspapers gave the child Lillie her first glimpse of what would become her life's work. None of them could ever have imagined the journalistic success she herself would one day achieve, though her precociousness was evident at an early age.



Figures 1.2 and 1.3. “Lillie” Scidmore at around age eight, and her brother George, two years older.

(Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI-91614 and WHI-90043)

Twin portraits of young Lillie and her brother George, two years older, taken around the end of the Civil War, suggest their temperamental differences, and offer clues to the adults they would become (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). The photo of George shows a sweet-looking child with soulful eyes and a pensive expression; the kind of boy who would grow into a man beloved for his courtesy, kindness, and “dignified, yet unassuming nature.”²⁹ Lillie, in contrast, looks high-spirited, and possibly stubborn. Most striking in the slender little girl with an assertive pose and a firm-set mouth is what appears to be a great deal of self-possession for one so young. A strong sense of herself would be a lasting trait. Throughout her life, Lillie Scidmore would show little inclination to regard herself as her brother George’s inferior, by age or by sex.

When it came to a true big brother, Eddie Brooks fit the bill. Blond, boyishly handsome, and thirteen years older than Lillie, he was a joy to be around. “Everyone liked Ed,” a cousin recalled.³⁰ His comrades in the Civil War would laugh recalling how “Little Ed Brooks”—so called for his slight stature—amused everyone in camp with his pranks.³¹

Lillie was several months shy of her fifth birthday when she watched her brother march off to fight in the summer of 1861. Little did she realize that before the second year of the war had passed, her own childhood would be turned upside down.

The outbreak of the war in the spring of 1861 turned Madison into a military town. After the April attack by Confederates on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for volunteers to put down the insurrection and defend the Union. Men and boys from across Wisconsin joined the rush to enlist. By summer, 2,000 recruits were in training at Camp Randall, on the former county fairgrounds just outside Madison. As they drilled for hours every day, the faint beating of drums floated across the meadow at the edge of town. Families and town folk often rode out to the camp late in the day to watch the men preparing for war: sons, husbands, brothers, and sweethearts.³² Lillie’s brother Edward Brooks joined up in mid-July, soon after turning eighteen.³³ He was assigned to the Sixth Wisconsin Infantry, a regiment that would gain fame at Gettysburg and other major battles as part of a hard-fighting unit of men from several western states who came to be known as the Iron Brigade.

On the evening of July 13, Eliza Catherine Scidmore was among a group of Madison residents who met in Assembly Hall to plan a banquet for the departing soldiers. “On a motion of Mrs. Scidmore,” a local newspaper reported, several prominent women—including her sister Mary Ann Atwood—were elected to head the organizing committees.³⁴ Mrs. Scidmore herself offered to help raise funds. The plans called for farm families to provide chickens, boiled ham, and vegetables; women from town would donate

sweets and decorate the dining hall. A week later, banners waved and bands played as wagons rumbled through Madison on their way to the campgrounds. By late afternoon, 6,000 people from across the county had turned up for the supper, one of the largest patriotic gatherings held in the North.³⁵

As the men prepared to set off, news came of the disastrous defeat of 35,000 Union troops in the First Battle of Bull Run, in Northern Virginia. Eddie and his comrades expected to be sent to the area but were assigned instead to help guard a line of fortifications ringing the U.S. capital. Eddie wrote home in late October, not long after Lillie and George both celebrated their birthdays, just two days apart. Lillie had turned five and George seven. Eddie and his comrades were camped in the wooded heights of Virginia overlooking Washington and the Potomac River. A mile away stood Arlington House, the stately former home of General Robert E. Lee that now provided a base of defense for the Army of the Potomac. The fine discipline among the Wisconsin men had done the state proud, Eddie reported, when Major General Irvin McDowell arrived with Secretary of State William Seward and other dignitaries to review the troops. "On the whole we are satisfied with our situation save that we wish to be nearer the rebels," Eddie wrote. The closest Confederate outpost was seven miles away.³⁶

That winter, as Lillie felt her brother's absence, how much did she detect of the tensions at home that were about to shatter her world? Children who grow up to become writers tend to be observant; they notice things, even though the meaning of what they perceive may not be clear at the time.

The record is blank on exactly what happened. But around that time, George and Eliza Catherine Scidmore went their separate ways. The estrangement apparently became permanent, leaving Lillie and her brother George to grow up essentially fatherless.

George Bolles Scidmore remains the biggest enigma in his daughter Eliza's story. Though he is noticeably absent from the Sweeney family's photo albums, military pension records describe

him as five-feet-ten-inches tall, with gray eyes and brown hair. His written statements in the files attest to his intelligence, and character references vouch for his “judicious” nature; there is nothing that suggests he was the kind of man who would abandon his family.³⁷ Still, at some point, George left home and struck out on his own for parts farther west.

A Scidmore family historian would later lay much of the blame for the failed marriage on Eliza C., describing her as “a dedicated social climber” for whom George Scidmore “never amounted to the kind of successful husband she envisaged.” Yet George, the author conceded, was “hard on wives,” and Eliza C. was no doubt unhappy with “all the moving and removing” in her life.³⁸ Social ambition may in fact have been a source of strength and aspiration as she strove to make a better life for herself and her children. Those hopes would not have accorded with the prospect of starting over in the harsh environment of the far West, a region regarded as “a heaven for men and dogs but a hell for women and oxen.”³⁹

For George, the siren call of the West may have derived in part from his political ideals as a “free-soiler.” In May 1862, Congress fulfilled one of the movement’s chief aims by passing a homestead law that allowed settlers to claim 160 acres of federal land. That summer, records show, George tried acquiring land in Colorado, though the deal fell through.⁴⁰ Later that year, while living in Pueblo, he enlisted at age forty-three in Colorado’s Third Infantry Regiment. In subsequent transfers to cavalry units in Colorado and Missouri, he became a first lieutenant and worked as a recruiting officer. But military service left him a broken man. During a grueling Tennessee campaign in the fall of 1864, he contracted a severe case of dysentery that lasted several months, leaving him in a debilitated state that would affect his health the rest of his life. After several hospitalizations, he was discharged as “unfit for military duty.”⁴¹

George married again after the war, but he and his fourth wife, a homeopathic doctor, remained together only two years.⁴²

Another attempt to stake a homestead in Colorado failed when he relinquished his claim after a few months, likely because of poor health.⁴³ Records show that he moved often in the last three decades of his life, holding a string of jobs in a half-dozen states.⁴⁴ He died in March 1898, at age seventy-nine, of “old age and la grippe” (influenza) at a home for disabled soldiers in San Diego, California. His military pension records mention no family except for a sister he lived with in Indiana for a while after the war. It is not clear whether his children Eliza and George stayed in touch, though his obituary identified them as his survivors and described their careers.⁴⁵

Even in his absence, George Bolles Scidmore had a major influence on his daughter Eliza’s life. Children, and the adults they become, bear the marks of genetics and family dynamics. Eliza and her brother George owed their intelligence in part to their father. For Eliza, growing up outside conventional family life likely contributed to the maverick sensibility that led her to follow an independent life of adventure highly unusual for a woman of her day. The workaholic habits she exhibited in her many years as a travel writer may have stemmed in part from a deep longing for security.

In total, available records on George Bolles Scidmore suggest a man who, despite his obvious intelligence and talents, found it hard to ground himself and get a firm foothold in life. The chief legacy he left his daughter may have been a restless spirit that made her pine for the novelty of little-known places.

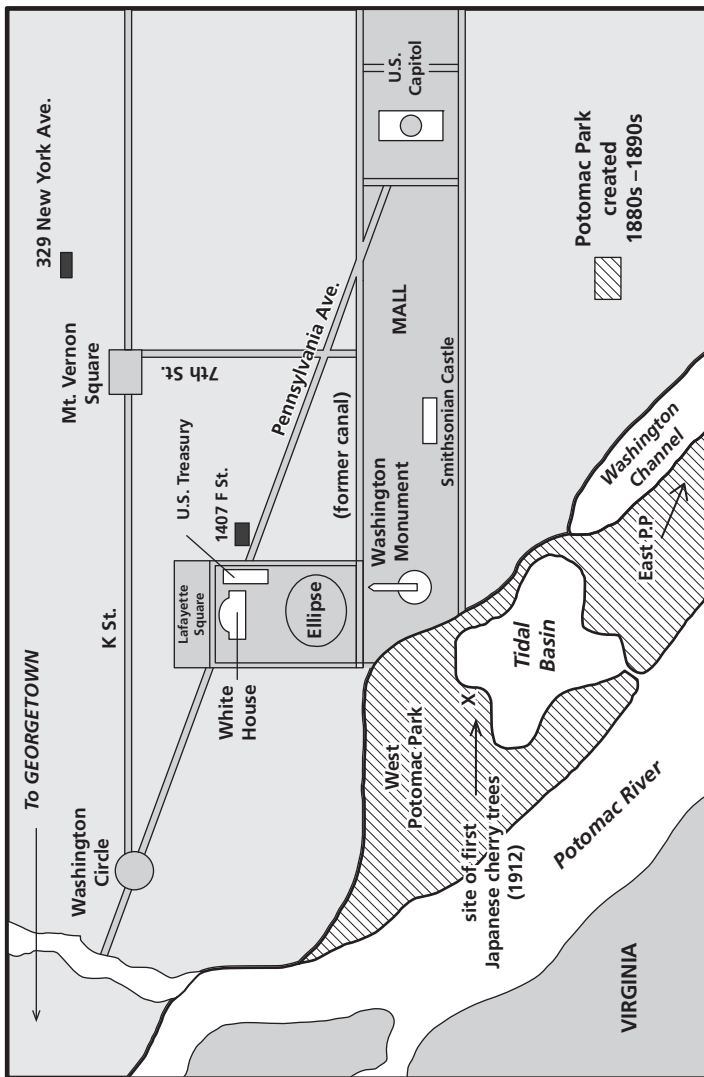
The ceaseless travel that the writer Eliza Scidmore pursued as an adult was a classic quest of leaving home to explore the world. Her mother’s motivation in striking out from Madison seems more an act of desperation—or maybe liberation. Scholars have noted that the Civil War had a transforming effect on the lives of many women by making them more self-reliant and confident of their own abilities.⁴⁶

Perhaps, in the end, Madison was too small for someone of Eliza Catherine Scidmore's energy and ambition. Growing up, Lillie Scidmore would have in her mother a model for how a white middle-class woman could prevail against the gender conventions of Victorian America through vision, pluck, resourcefulness, and charm.

It was a cold, wet spring in Madison in 1862 when Mrs. Scidmore sold off the family's household goods—a table here, a chair there.⁴⁷ Sometime in the weeks that followed, life changed radically for young Lillie. The turn in her destiny probably occurred one day at the height of summer, when grass in the meadow was high and horses' hooves kicked up dust in the road. One can imagine the scene as the little girl, wearing her Sunday best and maybe a straw hat, arrived at the train depot with her mother and climbed aboard a coach. Lugging parcels, they would have made their way down the aisle and settled into the plush seats, then leaned into the window to wave goodbye to family members who came to see them off.⁴⁸

With the blasts of a shrill whistle and great puffs of white steam, the trip began that would carry them 900 miles across America's heartland. At the other end lay Washington, D.C., and a future far different from the life the little girl would have led had she never left Madison.

At the age of five, Eliza Scidmore set off on the first big journey of her life.



Washington, D.C., and National Mall