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Book Review: The Life of Elaine Goodale Eastman

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The Life of Elaine Goodale Eastman. By Theodore D. Sargent. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xvi + 173 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

As a biologist, Theodore Sargent has taken a different approach to the life and work of Massachusetts writer Elaine Goodale Eastman. For instance, he admires her childhood poetry published when she was living at Sky Farm in the Berkshires. He likes her “eye for detail and skill with words,” although many literary scholars have dismissed her verse as conventional in form and sentimental in content.

Literary criticism, however, is not what makes this biography valuable to students who have struggled to understand the contradictions in this woman who has never before been given a complete biography. Elaine contributed to her lack of critical attention by totally omitting material on her private life and marriage from her public papers. Yet even a superficial knowledge of her work reveals that her ambition to write conflicted with the demands of being a mother and the wife of a well-known Native American.

She challenged nineteenth-century notions of women’s roles by teaching Indian children in Dakota Territory in the 1880s and marrying a Dakota Sioux physician, Dr. Charles Eastman, in 1891. Yet she returned with her family to Massachusetts in 1903 when it became apparent that Dr. Eastman could not make a living for them as a physician. Over the next two decades, with encouragement and editorial assistance, Charles published nine books which popularized Sioux culture throughout the country. For this he won considerable acclaim. Elaine wrote and published seven books of her own but never received the same recognition. Yet after six children and over thirty years of marriage, the couple separated and never saw each other again.

Sargent’s work throws light upon these issues because he discovered a “treasure trove” of family letters, diaries, journals, and photographs in an attic trunk of an Amherst house that the Eastmans had once inhabited. These

papers provide insight into the conflicts in Elaine’s life: family objections to her marriage; the separation of her own mother and father; the strains in her relationship with Charles, particularly over his frequent absences and failure to provide an adequate living for his family; and finally the claim that he fathered a counselor’s child at the girls camp the family ran for some years.

Sargent explores all of these issues in detail, sometimes writing like a marriage counselor. He concludes that Elaine’s and Charles’s cultural differences were great, but he concentrates on the New England story of the couple with little reference to the Native American disillusionment with white culture that Charles experienced and that Elaine did not really understand.

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