

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Diana Parsell, author of *Eliza Scidmore: The Trailblazing Journalist Behind Washington's Cherry Trees*. Now, there's a lot to say about her, so why don't we start with the trailblazing journalist part?

DP: This was one of the biggest discoveries in writing this book. There wasn't much known about her before I started this project, other than the fact that she was the woman who came up with the idea to bring cherry trees to Washington. And there were a few other facts about her that were known, but I was stunned in my research to uncover so much about her record as a journalist. It turns out in the end that I uncovered almost 800 newspaper and magazine articles that she published in her lifetime. And this was extraordinary, and I never saw that mentioned in anything about her. And it was significant because it really placed her in the forefront of early American women journalists. So that was really one of the biggest findings in my research.

AT: So apart from the sheer volume of her work, what was it about her career that you found particularly interesting? Because I understand that she started when she was just 19, and then she was also known as a travel writer. So could you tell us a bit more about, I guess, what she actually did with her writing?

DP: Yes, she started, as you mentioned, in journalism at the age of 19. And there's an interesting bit there because she made her debut as a journalist at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in America. Well, that was essentially America's first World's Fair. So she went to this fair, and she wrote reports. On that first week, she filed five reports for a newspaper in Washington. That tells you what a quick study she was as a journalist. So she came back to Washington. She got a job as a correspondent for a newspaper in St. Louis. She would file three stories a week. And to put it in perspective, this was the Gilded Age in Washington. So there's a lot of lavish entertaining and reporting on reception. So she covered receptions at the White House, profiles with VIPs. She also covered the development of Washington, the physical development of Washington. And then she clearly was a person with a great deal of curiosity about the world. This was manifested even from the time she was a child. So after she'd been reporting a few years, the newspaper she was writing for in St. Louis encouraged enterprise reporting. And she really seized that opportunity and began traveling around America, writing about these places that, of course, most people would never see in their lifetime. And so that got her into the track of being a travel writer. And from that point, she went to Alaska in 1883, wrote what became the first guidebook to Alaska, went to Japan because her brother was posted there in a government position. That was the trajectory of her life that she eventually became known as a travel writer. But the journalistic foundation of her work was very, very solid and quite little known. As I've already mentioned, she was filing these articles when she's still in her 20s. And then she went to Japan in 1885 and started traveling back and forth to Japan. While she's in Japan, she wrote a very influential book on Japan, *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*, and became really her best known book. But also that gave her a base because her brother was there and her mother moved to Japan to live with her son. That gave Eliza a base for traveling around the entire southeast Asia. And so she ended up writing books on Java, China, India. And she really became so well known that when she went in, I think it was 1900 to give a paper in Europe, it was a horticultural paper on morning glories, I think, in Japan that she had studied. And when it came time to introduce her, the presenter said, "I think I will introduce her as Miss Scidmore of everywhere." So that's really a testimonial to her celebrity as a travel writer during that period.

AT: She was even National Geographic's first female board member, right?

DP: Right. And that's interesting, too, because that grew out of her travels in Alaska. She went to Alaska for the first time in 1883. She was very influenced, I think, by John Muir's travels in Alaska. He had gone there for two summers in a row to study glaciers. She kind of followed in his footsteps, both out of curiosity as a tourist. And

also, I think as a reporter, she saw this as a great opportunity, because so few people knew anything about Alaska. So she began writing about Alaska. And she got such respect in Washington for her Alaska reporting, that the scientists there were very impressed by her reporting on Alaska. So she joined the National Geographic in 1890, two years after it had been founded. And in 1892, they elected her corresponding secretary, which made her the first woman to hold a position of such high status in the scientific community. And one of the really important female figures in the early history of the National Geographic.

AT: She was also interested in, from an activism standpoint, environmentalism. So advocating for wilderness preservation in the early U.S. conservation movement.

DP: Absolutely. The conservation movement was really just getting started about this period. John Muir was not yet well known as a naturalist, but this helped propel him to that. Because as I mentioned, he went to Alaska, and then he lectured on it and wrote a lot of articles about it. He was a big proponent of efforts to make Yosemite a national park. And so he came out in favor of this conservation effort. And Eliza then got involved in this. There are letters to John Muir and his wife, encouraging him to protect Alaska, to preserve Alaska. And that got her involved in this conservation movement with a lot of prominent people of the day. And of course she had these writing skills that made her a real asset. So she actually published some pretty significant articles advocating for greater preservation of American wilderness.

AT: She was also a photographer.

DP: Well, the thing about the photography is, she wasn't really known in her day as a photographer. She must have been an early adopter of photography because I think the early camera for amateurs came out around, I think it was 1888. And by 1890, she is on her way to Alaska. And she's writing to Muir saying, "I took some photographs of you at your camp in Alaska. Here are copies of the photos." And so she clearly was an early adopter. She traveled then with a camera. Later when she traveled in Asia, she had a camera and she took a lot of photographs. But at the time, newspapers did not run halftone photographs, they really didn't have the technology at that time. So her photos were basically turned into woodcut illustrations. So a lot of newspapers and magazines were taking these photographs and transforming them into illustrations. So she wasn't recognized at all for that. And it was only in the early part of the 1900s that she started supplying the National Geographic with photographs that they would credit her. Although that's still problematic because she was both taking photographs that were published in National Geographic, but she was also acquiring photographs. And as you probably know, the attribution policies were pretty loose at the time. So the National Geographic has a large collection of images credited to her. But I'm pretty convinced from my research that some of these she acquired and did not actually take. But she still had a substantial photographic record, although it's not very well understood.

AT: That's fascinating in part because in my book, *Uncredited*, one of the things that I talk about when it comes to documentation and everything is works that were credited to men when they should have been credited to women. And this is the first time I think I've heard of that happening the other way around where a woman was credited for something that she didn't do.

DP: Well, that has to do with the records at the National Geographic. Somewhere along the way, they created a file called the Eliza Scidmore Image Collection. And all of these files got compiled. But if you read articles in the magazine by her, it will say "photographs from and by Eliza Scidmore." And so they do not have a distinction of whether she took them or acquired them. Now, having said this, a much more reliable source is the Smithsonian. They lent her photographic equipment and film for a number of her travels. And they now

have a collection of over 300 images by her. And I was just there about 10 days ago with a Japanese reporter, we were reviewing these photographs, very little identifying information on those photographs. But I know from my research, when and where some of these photographs were taken. And that annotating information doesn't exist on a lot of those records. I was able to do that because I know the articles she published, and I know the photographs that were used to illustrate those particular articles. So I've been able to correlate her photographs with her journeys. So the Smithsonian's are pretty reliably by her, where the ones that the National Geographic are kind of a mixed bag, which makes it problematic in trying to assess accurately her photographic legacy.

In this case of the illustrations or the woodcuts that were based on Eliza's photographs, it never says in these illustrations, of course, that these were based on her photographs. It will just say illustrator and it credits the person who made that piece of art as an illustration. So she's behind the scenes taking these photographs that are used to illustrate her articles. But there's no mention that these are based on her actual photographs, which I've been able to document that they were indeed based on photographs that she took. So there are relatively few photographs that have been credited to her to this day, because of the poor documentation and because a lot of them were not printed as halftones, they were printed as woodblock illustrations based on those images.

AT: So speaking of potentially problematic aspects of someone's legacy, regular listeners will know that I love talking about biases. And anytime we have a white woman who has made a name for herself as a travel writer, writing about predominantly non-white locales and locals, I always have to ask if/to what extent her views might be considered problematic today. Like, if not, great. But I have to ask the question.

DP: Yeah, no, there are some disturbing phrases that she uses that really take you back. And I think in some cases, it was her as a young reporter kind of straining to be colorful in her writing. And she would say, for example, she's describing an Indigenous Indian woman in New Mexico, and she describes her as a hag. It's pretty appalling, but she's writing about India. And she talks about "black apes" as the men who were rowing. And of course, this is crude and insensitive. And as I say, I think it had to do with kind of straining for colorful language. But her views were, I think, pretty commendably progressive for her day in her attitudes toward people of other cultures. And there are a number of incidents that can kind of sound disturbing today. But when you put it into perspective, it wasn't a reflection of biases or racism as much as it was just her encounters with people. There's an incident where she's traveling in Java. And she mentions at some point, they're in a carriage, and they get down for a rest stop. And that "the little brown people" come and embrace them with these smiles and friendliness. And that's how I saw that, is that it was a genuine encounter with people, these local people, not that the word, "little brown people," which was so derided later on, she was very good at connecting with local people. The other examples I can think of is her attitudes toward China. Early in her journalistic career, she defended workers in California, these Chinese workers, it was so unfair that they were being so mistreated, because they were hardworking, they were law abiding. And then in her book on China, she has some pretty derogatory things to say about the Chinese as a people. And yet, if you look at it, it really has to do more with her condemnation of the Chinese government, saying, "these people are backward, and they're living in these primitive conditions. And it has to do with the government that's holding them back." And so you have to look at the bigger picture in some of these instances, and not think of it purely in the lens of our modern attitudes about some of these statements that she makes. I think in general, she had a pretty egalitarian outlook in terms of her interactions with people.

AT: In a review of a book that she wrote about India, a writer for Town and Country praised her for avoiding areas primarily settled by British colonial authorities and for spending substantial time and effort writing about parts of India that were not "in popular Western imagination at the time," is how the bit I was reading phrased it. That in and of itself for particularly a solo woman of her day would have been outside the norm.

DP: Yes, I think it reflects her whole approach as a travel journalist. She clearly in a number of cases saw herself as blazing trails to mass tourism or to leisure tourists. She ventured into places that other people didn't go at the time. And China was a good example of that. She writes in her book on India how really uncomfortable the conditions are. And she warns readers, "you better be prepared for this because it's pretty undeveloped." And yet, I think that in that case that you mentioned, I think she felt it her obligation as a travel writer, who's writing this travelogue, who's really writing a guide to India, I think she felt it incumbent on her to really give readers the broader picture. So she saw herself, I think in many ways, as a trailblazer. That comes up in some of her other work. Java was a good example where she went there and she's writing to her editor and said, "I'm going to go over to Java. The only writings about Java are really pretty scholarly. It wouldn't be helpful to a typical traveler." So she said, "I would like to be the first one to write a general travel guide to Java." So she had this in the back of her mind. That probably was true of her travels in Alaska as well.

AT: So how did you come to her story? How did you find out about her?

DP: Well, that's a very interesting story of itself, because despite her connection with the cherry trees and with Washington, I found out about her in Indonesia, of all places. I was living there with my husband when he was on a job posting and I bought a book, a paperback reprint of an 1897 travelogue called *Java: the Garden of the East*. And it had only the initials of the author E. R. Scidmore. Well, I brought this book back to America and one day I found it on my shelf and I picked it up and I was immediately engrossed. I thought it held up quite well after a century, very descriptive. And I was kind of intrigued by the voice of the author. So I thought, "who was this guy, E. R. Scidmore? Why did he go out to the tropics a hundred years ago?" And when I went online, I was blown away. There was a very small Wikipedia entry, but it told me a few facts about this woman that it was an American woman who had written books on Alaska, Japan, Java, China, India, that she had been the first woman elected to the board of National Geographic in 1892. And then I read that she was the person who introduced the idea of bringing cherry trees to D. C. And I said, how could this be? I have lived in Washington area for over 30 years. I go to see those trees every year. I have never heard this woman's name. So that led me to the Library of Congress just to see what I could find out about her. And I was intrigued, of course, about the cherry tree story, but even more, I was intrigued about her life as a woman's story. How in the world did a woman of her period achieve all that she did at a time when most women did not have careers and when society frowned on female ambition. So what was it that made her so successful at that time? And really, what lessons might she have for us in this modern day?

So that led to this project where I started researching her. I didn't find a lot at first, but as you know, in research, you start digging, you find all kinds of wonderful information hiding in plain sight, as we say in the biography community. The records were out there, but you had to go looking for them. I was at the Library of Congress doing the research at the time and I joined a women's history discussion group. And I'm not trained as a historian and don't know much about women's history. And I posed the question to them, why is it so hard to find these records about accomplished women? And they said in a statement that's really stayed with me, "women's history is buried in the papers of the men in their lives." Well, Eliza Scidmore never married. Her father wasn't famous. I know from my research that her brother's possessions were lost at sea during one of his job transfers. And I discovered that her personal papers were not preserved by a family member after her death. So she fell into obscurity. There was no one there to advocate for her. Also, she died in Geneva, Switzerland. She moved to Europe late in life. So she fell into obscurity for almost 100 years. Her story was there. It had just never been uncovered.

AT: Coming back to the cherry trees, because she sounds like such an interesting person that I'm curious why you decided to focus on the cherry trees. You write, "in her best known legacy, Scidmore was the visionary whose idea led to the planting of Japanese cherry blossoms along the banks of the Potomac." So the trees are

lovely, but why focus on that as your title and everything, rather than all of this other incredible stuff that we've been talking about?

DP: That was a choice that wasn't totally mine. I started a website when I was beginning this project, because I learned, just as I'd started it, that Washington was getting ready to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first Japanese cherry trees. And I'm going, damn, I've missed this opportunity. But I'll start a website about this, about my research process, to establish me as her biographer. So from the very beginning, I started getting interest on that angle of the story. And an agent contacted me and said, "oh, would you do a book?" She had found me because Eliza Scidmore was mentioned on a plaque or something down along the mall. And the agent said, "would you write a book about the history of the cherry trees? Frame this story of Eliza Scidmore." And I said, "that's not the story I'm setting out to tell. That story has been told many times." I also knew from my preliminary research that the documentation was rather thin. I didn't know how to turn that into an entire book. But I also said, what I want to write is the history of this woman, because I've discovered just how extraordinary she is, more so than I even knew when I set out on the project. But the idea of bringing the cherry trees in it and framing the story around that, basically, it was a marketing decision. This had a news hook for people. And in retrospect, I might have gone in a different direction. But that cherry tree angle became such a hook. (AT: Hey, if it gets people reading her story) I've gotten a lot of interest on the cherry tree angle, because it is perennial. It's a topic of perennial interest. And I'm just coming off of a cycle of quite a few talks. And it's in the third year since the book came out. So from that perspective, it's a great avenue into her story. And I'm now moving into a new phase where I am trying to reach out and attract interest in the larger story.

The cherry tree story is quite interesting because it really came out of Eliza's frequent travels to Japan. And that began in 1885. Her brother was working there as a US consular official. So in 1885, the summer after she wrote her first book, had just gone to the press, and she's exhausted, her book on Alaska, and she and her mother decide they're going to go to Japan to visit her brother George, and they're going to stay for six months. Well, once they get there, Mrs. Scidmore decides to stay on and to live with George. So Eliza now has a part time home in Japan. So she comes and goes quite often and writes a lot about Japan, which is in this early years of the Meiji period. Lots is happening in terms of the transition from this feudal society into a modern nation. So she writes about Japan and really establishes herself as something of an expert.

So while she's in Japan, she sees cherry trees in bloom, and she says, "these are magnificent." She said, "a cherry tree is one of the most beautiful things nature has to offer. Why don't we have these trees in America?" And what better place to introduce Americans to them than in the nation's capital? Well, she had grown up in Washington, she reported extensively on Washington, and she knew a perfect spot to create a cherry tree park because the city had just created Potomac Park. And they had taken this swampy, marshy area near the Washington Monument, and they had reclaimed that land, which flooded, and it was marshy, and people complained about it for years. So they filled in that land and turned it into Potomac Park, 700 acres of new park land. So she says, we should plant cherry trees along the Potomac, so we have this experience like they have in Japan. And when she took her idea to the men who were in charge of creating this park, they politely listened to her suggestion and then ignored it. And she, I think, was a woman who was so confident about her own judgment that she didn't let this go. She approached them, according to the records, at least three times over 20 years. Each administration she would try again. And it was when the Tafts came to the White House that Mrs. Taft decided to do a beautification project down along the Potomac, to build a bandstand for public concerts. When Eliza and a botanist here in DC heard about this, they approached the White House about supporting the idea of planting some cherry trees there. And Mrs. Taft, who had lived in Japan, who understood the beauty of Japanese cherry trees, said, "yes, let's do it." And that is really what broke through all of this obstinacy and opposition that Eliza had encountered. So it really was a partnership, if you will, between these two very strong-willed women, Eliza and Mrs. Taft, who then took this project up and saw it to reality.

AT: Yeah, now I'm just thinking about Lady Bird Johnson and how much she did for environmental and beautification causes. (DP: Yes, yes.) Because we always talk about Eleanor Roosevelt, and she was just ridiculously effective. She did so much.

DP: The Helen Taft story is really quite interesting because she, in many ways, was the first modern first lady. She introduced a lot of policies and practices in the White House and her involvement in various events. She was very progressive-minded, very modern in her approach to life. I read a biography of her, and it was quite good in showing, really, what a trendsetter she was in her day, First lady of the jazz age. And she really was quite a remarkable person.

AT: This has actually come up before that, when we talk about the idea that there's just the one woman that you're telling the story of, there's never just one woman. If you dig, there are always other women in that person's story. There's never just the one.

DP: Well, the thing that was interesting about Eliza is another one of the really new findings in this book, is that she had long been mentioned as the person who brought the cherry trees idea to DC. And the National Park Service, for example, would mention that. And yet, they knew so little about her that even to this day, a lot of their online references refer to her as Mrs. Scidmore, and she never married. So she was widely attributed as the visionary behind the cherry trees. But what I found in my research, that she was more than just the visionary, she was an intermediary, as it turns out, in the gift of the cherry trees from Japan to Washington. And that had to do with her high-level contacts with the Japanese. She knew the Japanese. She associated with the Japanese. And it was her encounter with a couple of high-level Japanese men that led to this initial offer to donate 2,000 cherry trees to Washington. So she takes this idea back to Mrs. Taft, who accepts the idea of this gift, and it turns into a major diplomatic initiative. But Eliza, as I discovered, was really this bridge or this intermediary in actually triggering the events that led Japan to donate 3,000 trees in the end, 3,000 trees to Washington, which were planted in 1912.

AT: So apart from the cherry blossoms, because if that's sort of the context in which most people would recognize her name, if they recognize her name, what do you think that her legacy is, or I suppose should be today? What do you want people to know if they don't know anything else about her and her story?

DP: I think one of the really important contributions was her role as an agent of cross-cultural understanding. At a time when Americans were just beginning to reach out into the broader world, they had an interest in other cultures. And she was a trailblazer in carving out paths for people to be able to travel to some of these places, which really were not well known at the time. I think this speaks to her legacy as a trailblazer of paths toward tourism and intercultural relations is that in 1919, a year before women got the vote in America, George Washington University gave her an honorary doctorate of letters and the citation mentioned that this was for her work breaking down barriers between people of other cultures. So it was very much something that people recognized, I think, even in her day, that she was a cultural path breaker, if you will.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.