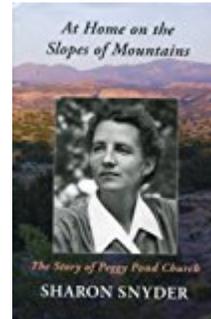




Sharon Snyder. *At Home on the Slopes of Mountains: The Story of Peggy Pond Church*. Los Alamos: Los Alamos Historical Society Publications, 2011. v + 296 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-941232-39-5.



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Peggy Pond Church: A Life Time in Northern New Mexico

In this evocative biography of Peggy Pond Church, author and historian Sharon Snyder brings an intimate touch to the life of the woman many consider to be the First Lady of New Mexico poetry. Author of eight books of poetry as well as several pieces of prose including two children books, Church's sensitivity to her New Mexico surroundings permeate all her writings and indeed, her life. Born in tiny Valmora in northeastern New Mexico in 1903, she moved with her parents and two siblings to north central New Mexico when she was ten years old. Her father, Ashley Pond Jr., was intent on establishing a ranch in the West for young boys with health problems and in a dubious investment scheme purchased a ranch resort thirty miles northwest of Santa Fe on the Pajarito Plateau at the base of the Jemez Mountains.

Within two years, the venture had failed and the family left the plateau for a home in Santa Fe. But for Peggy, those two years spent on horseback and on foot in the rifts and caves of the Pajarito Plateau shaped her world and her writing thereafter. Always she would treasure that time spent outdoors, riding her horse through the

canyons and valleys; pocketing arrowheads and pottery shards; and observing the harmony between people, animals, and the land. She wrote her first poems in this early period on the plateau, finding an outlet for what she termed her fantasy world. Later as a wife and mother, she often retreated to this inner life, "for out of it poetry grows" (p. 75).

Church's high school and college years were spent away at boarding schools in California and on the East Coast. But after her father purchased yet another ranch on the plateau in 1917, she happily spent her summers back on the Pajarito. Fate would take her back there for the next twenty years when, in the summer of 1923 after her first year at Smith College, Peggy met one of the young masters her father had hired to teach at the Los Alamos Ranch School; she and Fermor Church married in 1924. She returned to the Pajarito Plateau as a twenty-year-old teacher's wife facing challenges she had not imagined. In the next eight years, three sons were born and her life took on the veneer of domesticity if not the commitment. Her heart was with and on the land.

Her community was the male-dominated ranch environment that required Ferm to spend nearly all his time with the students; few other women lived on the plateau to provide companionship in the early years. Then, in 1928, Edith Warner came to serve as a governess for one of the ranch families and a beautiful friendship developed between the two women. Eventually, Edith moved into a small house below the Otowi Bridge that spanned the Rio Grande near Los Alamos. Her story and Peggy's would forever be intertwined, grounded in Peggy's 1960 dual memoir, *The House at Otowi Bridge*.

Early in the Church marriage, Peggy began to realize the lack of communication between her husband and herself. She was sensitive to nature and feelings and the need to share them; Ferm was content to observe in silence. Within the first year, with a baby on the way, Peggy began to wonder if she had married too soon and for the wrong reasons. Her feelings about the land and the poetry it produced allowed her to retreat into her inner self and let her doubt her early commitment to husband and children. This tension prevailed throughout most of their married life, culminating at one point in simultaneous affairs by each of them, yet they remained married until Ferm's death in 1975 and periodically recommitted to strengthening their union.

Two major related influences shaped Church's adult life. The first was her long friendship with poet and author Haniel Long; the second was her exploration into Jungian psychology, a popular new treatment in early twentieth-century America. Long, part of the circle of Santa Fe artists and writers that Peggy had come to know in the 1920s, became her mentor but their friendship went much deeper; Long provided support and encouragement for her writing but also for her personal growth, sharing his own dark times when he, too, fell into periods of depression. Five months after Church's father died in 1933, she suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent to a hospital in Connecticut, near her sister, to recover. Long wrote earnestly to Peggy, urging her to "clean everything out and get started all over ... it is vital ... to be any good" (p. 102). Long's compassionate support forced Peggy to see that she must begin the painful work to "re-design her life" and leave behind old behaviors and attitudes that had for so long contributed to her insecurities and low self-esteem.

Her path to self-renewal came at the suggestion of a former college roommate she and Ferm visited in Berkeley in 1935 who urged counseling. Her marital and inner lives still troubled, Peggy agreed to see an analyst in the Bay Area and continued with a psychologist in Santa Fe thereafter. The following year, she heard Carl Jung speak at Harvard and was deeply impressed by his research into the psychology of human behaviors. Thereafter she began to record her dreams, read articles, and keep notebooks to educate herself in self-analysis. This form of therapy lasted throughout her life and was especially effective in her relationship with her husband.

Then, in 1942, WWII intruded into life on the Pajarito Plateau when the government purchased the Los Alamos ranch and thousands of acres of Church's beloved landscape for the Manhattan Project. Once more, the family was forced to leave the plateau choosing to settle in Taos where they had relatives. Eventually they returned to Santa Fe where Peggy lived for the duration of her life. Over time, her self-confidence grew, her emotions matured, and she became a loved and honored New Mexico author. *The House at Otowi Bridge* became a beloved New Mexico chronicle and has not been out of print since it appeared in 1960. She traveled, gave lectures and poetry readings, and continued an active lifestyle. In 1984, she was presented with the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts; in 1986, she was named a Living Treasure of Santa Fe. But gradually, her senses began to fail, both her eyesight and her hearing, greatly diminishing the quality of her life. In October of 1986, Church took her life in accordance with the principles of the Hemlock Society; she was eighty-three.

Snyder has produced an insightful biography of a complex and talented writer drawn from Church's poetry, journals, and letters and balanced with interviews that Snyder carried out with Peggy's family and friends. Inserted in the text at meaningful intervals, we hear the author's voice, writing in the second person, as she gleans deeper meaning from Peggy's journals. These sections enhance the narrative that precedes them and paint an additional poetic picture. Snyder sees Church's life so closely joined with the beauty and history of New Mexico that she considers this work to be a biography of both poet and place. The poet, however, might demur, claiming, as she once did, that "it is the land that wants to be said" (p. xv).

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