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Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner: Frederic Ward Putnam and the Support of Women in Anthropology

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGYGUESS WHO'S NOT COMING TO DINNER: FREDERIC
WARD PUTNAM AND THE SUPPORT OF WOMEN IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Although traditionally anthropology has been perceived as more open to women than many other disciplines, the record has in fact been somewhat spotty, and seems to have depended to some extent on the roles and attitudes of particular male anthropologists in positions of institutional power. In this country, the most notable twentieth century figure has been Franz Boas, whose later students included a large proportion of women. Even Boas' advocacy, however, was compromised by the ambiguities of his position in a male-dominated society. As Judy Modell has argued, Boas did not have the same professional expectations for his women students as he did for men. Similar ambiguities affected the role of a prior institutional entrepreneur who in fact played a considerable role in Boas' early career: F. W. Putnam, Curator and Peabody Professor at the Peabody Museum, of American Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge.

A member of the National Institute an association for promotion of higher education of women, Putnam encouraged a number of women students in anthropology. The best known of these was of course Alice C. Fletcher, who under Putnam's sponsorship was the first woman to hold a fellowship at Harvard University (the Thaw Fellowship), and worked with Putnam for thirty years. Putnam also tried, unsuccessfully, to get the Duke of Loubat to establish a fellowship for Mrs. Zelia Nuttall. While no other anthropological fellowships materialized, Putnam did employ a number of women as assistants at the Peabody Museum to make it possible for them to prepare for a career in anthropology. Mrs. Jennie Smith was appointed as early as 1878, followed by Fletcher and Cordelia A. Studley in 1882, and by Nuttall and Miss Alice E. Putnam in 1886. Putnam's secretary, Miss Francis H. Mead, was also an assistant in the Museum. While Mrs. Sara Y. Stevenson did not have an appointment, she did become a student of Putnam's and was encouraged in her professional ambitions. Of these women, Nuttall, Fletcher and Stevenson achieved considerable reputation as anthropologists (cf. Lurie 1966). As early as December of 1893, Putnam wrote to a Mrs. Henderson: "Several of my best students are women, who have become widely known by their thorough and important works and publications; and this I consider as high an honor as could be accorded to me."

Some years later, when it came to according the honor of a 70th Anniversary Celebration to Putnam, none of his female students was included among the guests at the anniversary dinner. Although Alice Fletcher was greatly disappointed, she later responded with thanks when Putnam sent copies of the anniversary volume (which contained contributions from her and Nuttall) to his faithful followers: "I'm glad to know why I was left out of the dinner. I forgot I was a woman. I only remembered I was a friend and a student." Later she wrote: "You have been most unselfish. You have tried to help others and often at the sacrifice of yourself."

Franz Boas, ed., Anthropological Essays Presented to Frederic Ward Putnam in Honor of his Seventieth Birthday, April 16, 1909 by his Friends and Associates (New York, 1909).

Nancy Lurie, "Woman in Early American Anthropology," in June Helm, ed., Pioneers of American Anthropology (Seattle, 1966).

Judy Modell, "The Professionalization of Woman under Franz Boas, 1900-1930," Paper given at the 1974 Meetings of the American Anthropological Association.

(Quotations are from the Putnam Papers in the Archives of Harvard University and from R. W. D.'s collection of Putnamiana; cited with permission of the Putnam family and the Harvard University Archives.)