

Ambrose Lecture Series talk focuses on Evelyn and Ewen Cameron

Marga Lincoln for the Independent Record

Oct 10, 2019



Lorna Milne, author of "Evelyn Cameron: Photographer on the Western Prairie," talks about the research process behind it in her Helena home recently. Milne will give a lecture on the book at the Lewis and Clark Library, Thursday at 7 p.m.

THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

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They were an odd couple -- Evelyn and Ewen Cameron.

Eccentric, yet fascinating.

And, likely two of Eastern Montana's more interesting immigrants in the 1880s.

Evelyn Cameron, an English transplant, would go on to become a frontier photographer whose works are widely admired more than a century later.

Her Scottish husband Ewen was a self-taught ornithologist, who was convinced he would turn a fortune raising polo ponies in Montana.

Helena writer and Cameron biographer Lorna Milne will share insights about the couple during her talk, “A Frontier Photographer and a Naturalist: Evelyn and Ewen Cameron,” 7 p.m. tonight at Lewis & Clark Library.

It is this year’s Stephen Ambrose Memorial Lecture and will be followed by a reception.

Milne wrote a 2017 young adult biography, “Evelyn Cameron: Photographer on the Western Prairie,” published by Mountain Press.

A native of Glendive, Milne became fascinated with Cameron when she saw the 1990 Montana Historical Society exhibit “Photographing Montana 1894-1928: The World of Evelyn Cameron.”

“But it took me another 10 years to start the book,” she said in a recent interview at her kitchen table.

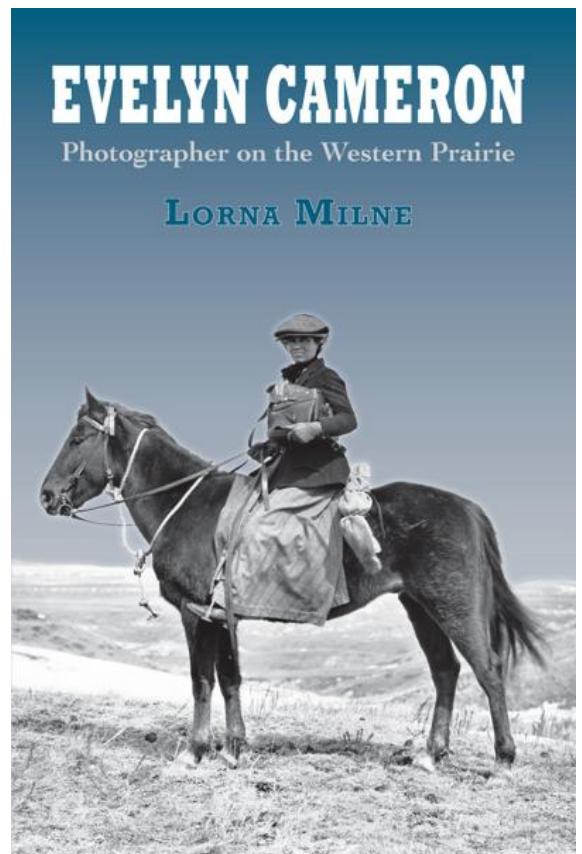
She estimates it was an additional 10 years to research and write it.

Milne had known for years she wanted to write a young adult biography, she said, but she just didn’t know who it would be about.

While growing up, Milne had voraciously read every young adult biography in her school library and anxiously awaited any new arrivals.



Evelyn Cameron standing on Jim the horse. Photo Courtesy of Evelyn Cameron/ MHS Photo Archives





Homesteaders at Cabin Creek on July 13, 1913.

Photo Courtesy of Evelyn Cameron/ MHS Photo Archives

When she saw Cameron's frontier photos, she knew Cameron had to be her focus.

They were kindred spirits, having both wandered similar river bottoms and buttes in Eastern Montana.

Milne discovered her Cameron connection actually goes way back.

Her great-uncle Clarence Starr grew up on a homestead near the Camerons' final ranch on Fallon Flat and used to buy vegetables from Evelyn.

Among Milne's many interesting discoveries in researching the book was finding that Evelyn and Ewen were "probably never legally married."

Milne could find no official record of their marriage before they set sail for the United States in 1889, "but as soon as they were off the boat, they called themselves Mr. and Mrs. Cameron."

And, it seems, he was still married to his first wife during the couple's earliest days in Montana.

The theme of Milne's talk tonight is how Evelyn and Ewen were able to develop their interests, even though they were scrambling to make a living and how much they supported each other in their pursuits.

"Ewen devoted a lot of time to his birds," Milne said. "He wrote the first bird list for Dawson and Custer counties.

"Ewen did that, and she supported him."

Evelyn had grown up in an English household, but she in no way fit the mold of the proper English young lady raised by a governess.

Instead, she much preferred riding horses, hunting and exploring the wide, open spaces of Montana.

It was likely that Evelyn was the one who came up with the idea for her and Ewen to head to America, said Milne.

Later, Ewen wanted several times to return to England, but Evelyn always stalled and resisted.

She was a perfect match for Montana -- hard-working, ever-resourceful and always up for adventure.

Both she and Ewen were excellent horsemen and good shots.

It was Evelyn who ensured their survival through trust fund payments from her father's estate, as well as her truck garden, her cattle and chickens and her photography business.

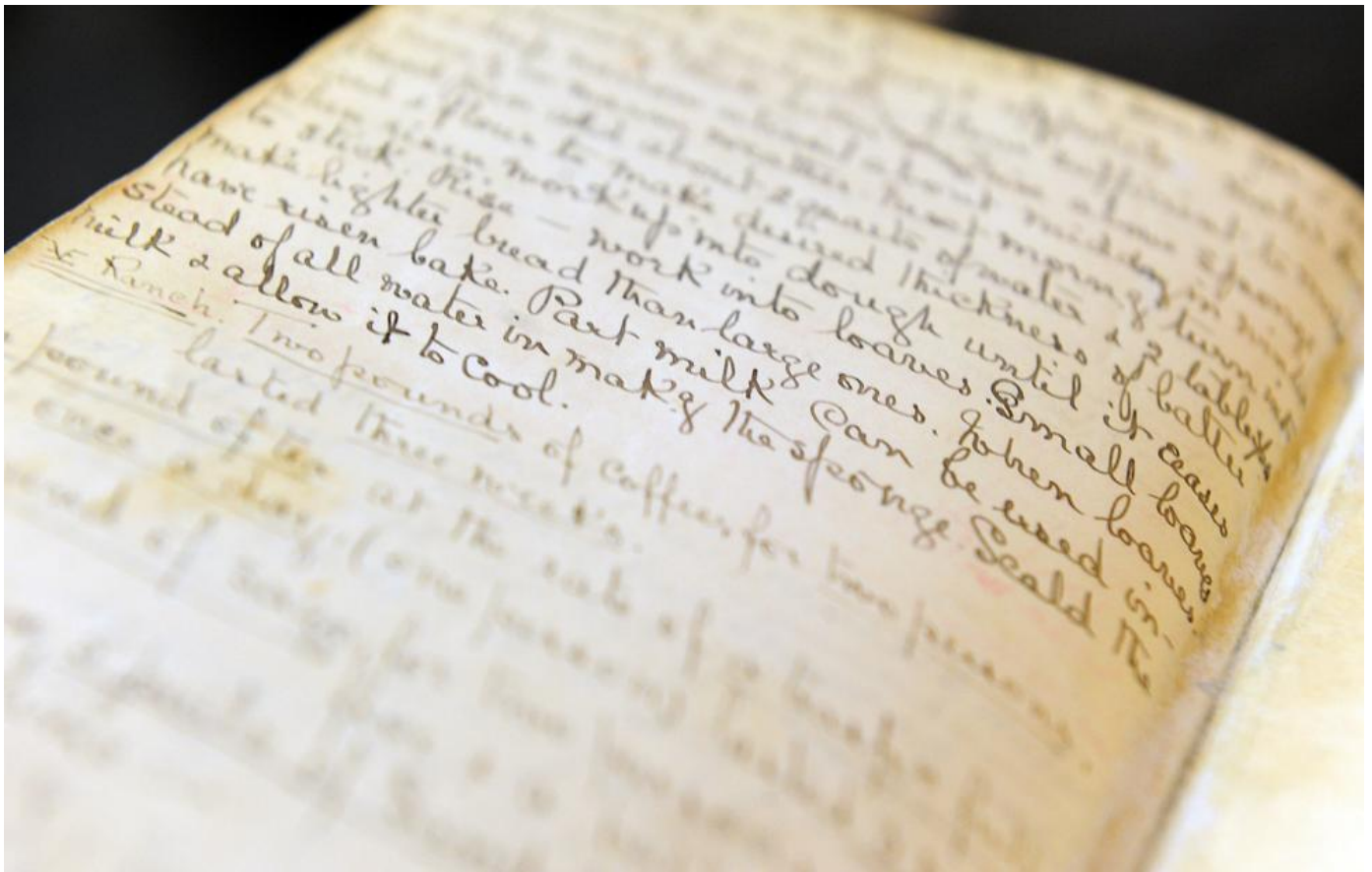
She also did all the cooking, cleaning and baking.

In addition, she kept detailed diaries of their frontier life year after year and also assisted in his bird studies.



A self-portrait of Evelyn Cameron kneading a pan full of dough in her kitchen, August 1904.

Photo Courtesy of Evelyn Cameron/ MHS Photo Archives



Evelyn Cameron's handwriting as seen from her own personal cookbook in the archives of the Montana Historical Society.

ELIZA WILEY, Independent Record

Ewen, on the other hand, was often preoccupied with his bird studies and was frequently sick.

“He wasn’t necessarily lazy,” said Milne, quoting diary transcriber Wynona Breen. “He wasn’t cut out for physical labor. He was a thoughtless husband, but not necessarily unloving.”

“She was hard-working, very organized and very intelligent,” said Milne,” and had great stamina. She was creative, artistic, adventurous and curious.”

Montana Center for the Book chose Milne’s book as Montana’s entry in 52 Great Reads, featured at the National Book Festival in 2018.

For more info visit lornamilne.com and lclibfoundation.org.

Copies of “Evelyn Cameron” will be available for sale, and a book signing will follow the lecture.