

Marie Czaplicka

Nominated by Jaanika Vider, Postdoctoral Associate,
School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography



Marie Czaplicka and Henry Usher Hall. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
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Czaplicka was born to a family of impoverished nobility in Poland, where she received a wide-ranging but fragmented education. She attended a girls' school and underground learning initiatives, which operated secretly, away from the eyes of the Russian Empire. In 1910 she moved to England with the help of a Mianowski scholarship. She attended lectures at the London School of Economics and, in 1911, began the Oxford Diploma in Anthropology. Encouraged by her mentor, Robert Ranulph Marett, Czaplicka then began an independent study of ethnographic literature on Siberia's indigenous people that became her book, "Aboriginal Siberia: a study in social anthropology". Though not based on original research, it presented an overview of the indigenous people of Siberia and would remain one of the leading English sources of information on the subject until the 1960s.

In 1914, Czaplicka led an anthropological research expedition to the Lower Yenisei region of Siberia, for which she received the Mary Ewart Travelling Scholarship from Somerville College. She was accompanied by ornithologist Maud Haviland, artist Dora Curtis and a 'mere man' Henry Usher Hall.

After the two women returned to England, Czaplicka and Hall proceeded to explore the Illimpei tundra where they recorded tales and legends, collected material objects, took photographs, and explored the religious and social structures of the communities they encountered. The research was carried out at a time of change towards a more intensive, fieldwork-based anthropology and while on one hand it was intensely intimate with Hall and Czaplicka sleeping in their hosts' "chums" (tents), the pair also looted indigenous graves in search of 'ethnographic facts'. Maria published her popular travel book, "My Siberian Year" in 1916 but the manuscript of the expedition report remains missing. Expedition collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the University of Philadelphia Museum of Art and Archaeology are the most visible legacy of this early fieldwork.

The First World War has often been presented as a period of stagnation in anthropology. However, for Czaplicka it was a time of opportunity – she was made lecturer in ethnology for three years between 1916 and 1919, becoming the first appointed female lecturer in Oxford. Unbeknownst to her, the principle of Lady Margaret Hall, Henrietta Jex Blake, personally funded her stay at the college. With the end of the war came the end of Czaplicka's job: she resigned her position when the incumbent postholder (L.H.D. Buxton) returned from the war.

In 1920, she took the post of Lecturer in Ethnology at Bristol and was also awarded the Murichson Award from the Royal Geographical Society, a rare feat for a woman. But in May 1921, Czaplicka fell to depression – she was in serious debt, her old expedition partner Hall got married, and the Albert Kahn Travelling Fellowship she hoped for, was awarded to another. On May 21, she committed suicide by taking mercury.

*Diversifying Portraiture
in Anthropology*