

**ON THE  
PLAINS,  
AND AMONG  
THE PEAKS**

---

OR, HOW MRS. MAXWELL MADE HER  
NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTION

**Mary Dartt**

EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY JULIE MCCOWN

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## Introduction

At the end of an 1873 hunting trip on the plains southeast of Boulder, Colorado, Martha Maxwell encountered a mother skunk nervously protecting her young: “The young one could run but slowly, and the mother would not leave it; but, in her solicitude, ran back and forth, always keeping her body between it and their foes” (Dartt 1879, 150). Maxwell expressed admiration for the mother skunk, declaring “it is a shame to kill anything capable of manifesting so much affection. But she must die some time, and if that time is now, she may be saved the pangs that are so often caused by ungrateful children” (150). Maxwell then unceremoniously shot the two animals, with the promise that she would transform them into specimens for her taxidermy collection. This episode, one of several such scenes in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, highlights how, as the book’s subtitle explains, *Mrs. Maxwell Made Her Natural History Collection*. The foregrounding of the mother-child skunk relationship complicates what would otherwise have been a straightforward hunt. The book’s author, Mary Dartt, could have easily edited out those details and merely informed readers that Maxwell

acquired two skunk specimens. In choosing, however, to anthropomorphize the animals before dispatching them, Dartt creates a compelling and exciting narrative that explores the tensions and contradictions in the life and work of one of America's pioneering naturalists.

American naturalist and taxidermist Martha Maxwell became famous in the 1870s for her skill and expertise in collecting and preserving specimens of Colorado's wildlife. Despite her notoriety in the late nineteenth century, Maxwell is virtually unknown today. Her work and the accompanying book describing it, *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks; or, How Mrs. Maxwell Made Her Natural History Collection* (1879), written by her half-sister Mary Dartt, provides a fascinating case study of how women practiced natural history and taxidermy, as well as a look at the early exploration and settlement of Colorado.

While not the first American woman naturalist, Maxwell is the earliest extant example of one who acquired and prepared animal specimens. Earlier American female naturalists such as Jane Colden and Almira Phelps focused on botany, leaving the messy, dangerous, and bloody work of animal study to their male counterparts. In contrast, Maxwell's life's work in natural history shows her drive to demonstrate that a woman was every bit as capable as a man at excelling at the artistic and scientific endeavor of taxidermy. The small body of scholarship on Maxwell echoes this sentiment, including Karen Jones's (2015, 253; italics in the original) assessment that "Maxwell's extraordinary collection of mounted animal life in the Rockies points to an important insider story of taxidermy, in other words, a story *in* the West as well as *of* it. Her work also serves to mediate the myth of female subservience on the frontier as well as highlighting (yet) another public outing of the hunter heroine." What remains relatively unremarked upon is *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* itself; Dartt's book should be regarded as a significant literary artifact in its own right rather than simply as a source of information on Maxwell and her taxidermy. While the book does indeed serve that purpose, it also stands on its own, providing an account of the nineteenth-century American West as a contested and contradictory space for humans and nonhumans alike in which women both conform to and break out of gendered expectations, Native Americans are regarded with both romanticized nostalgia and generalized annoyance and irritation, and animals are both sentient, intelligent beings and raw organic material that promotes scientific progress.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MARTHA MAXWELL

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Martha Ann Dartt was born on July 21, 1831, in northern Pennsylvania to Amy and Spencer Dartt. After Spencer's death from scarlet fever in 1833, Amy married his first cousin Josiah Dartt in 1841, and the couple had two daughters, Martha's half-sisters, Mary Emma (b. 1842) and Sarah Elizabeth (b. 1844). Martha's love of nature and passion for education were encouraged and supported by two family members in particular: her maternal grandmother, Abigail Sanford, and her stepfather, Josiah Dartt. The Dartt family settled in Wisconsin in 1845, and in 1853, Martha met her future husband, James A. Maxwell, a prominent businessman in Baraboo, Wisconsin. James Maxwell, twenty years Martha's senior, was a widower with six children. He initially asked Martha to serve as companion and chaperone to his two oldest children at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, in exchange for him paying for her to go to the university as well. Shortly thereafter, James wrote to Martha, soliciting her hand in marriage. Reluctant at first, Martha wrote in a reply to James a few weeks later: "Think you that I am capable of bearing the responsibilities of *Mother* in a family like yours? As you very justly conclude I 'have neither gifts or graces above many,' but I think that I should *need* to have were I to enter this responsible situation, for I know of *no* one of my age, who is, (in my opinion) capable of filling it" (quoted in Benson 1986, 39; italics in the original). After their marriage in 1854, the birth of their only child, Mabel, in 1857, and James's financial devastation caused by the Panic of 1857, Martha and James Maxwell moved to Boulder, Colorado, in 1859 in hopes of cashing in on the Colorado Gold Rush. They left two-year-old Mabel in Wisconsin in the care of her maternal grandparents, Amy and Josiah Dartt. Mabel, along with Mary Dartt, eventually joined the Maxwells in Boulder in 1868.

Although James Maxwell never found financial success in prospecting, the move to Colorado introduced Martha Maxwell to the new and varied wildlife of the American West that would become her life's work. Maxwell's first stay in Colorado was cut short in 1862 when she had to return to Wisconsin to attend to her sick mother, as well as care for her husband's family. While in Wisconsin, Maxwell first learned and discovered her extraordinary skill in taxidermy, a story that is recounted in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*. After Maxwell's return to Boulder in 1868, she began her work of collecting and preparing specimens of Colorado's wildlife. She was an avid, even

obsessive, collector of specimens, and her taxidermy mounts were renowned for their lifelike appearance and their placement in natural habitat groupings. Her taxidermy techniques were cutting-edge at the time and seemed to have developed simultaneously, although not in concert, with those of better-known taxidermy pioneers William Hornaday and Frederic Webster. Indeed, she was highly skilled and made advancements to the art that future taxidermists would copy, including using natural poses for animal specimens, placing animals in natural surroundings, inventing a special pickling solution that both softened and preserved hides and protected against insect predation, and creating plaster body molds (Moring 2005, 177–179). In discussing Maxwell's taxidermy, an 1876 article in *New Century for Woman* observes Maxwell's skill and innovation:

She learned something of the arts of the taxidermist, but satisfied neither with their results nor her own, she set to work to do better, and succeeded in making improvements, that if she had been self-appreciative and "had known at the time," might have been patented with profitable results. But now her "way" is copied by many. Which "way" was, not to stuff the skin to any shape it would assume, but to take careful measurement of the animal, construct a model and then clothe it with its own skin. She first used plaster, but finding this too heavy for transportation and liable to crack, she has since found a more desirable material for her models. ("The Colorado Naturalist" 1876)

Maxwell was also an accomplished naturalist, discovering a new species of owl that would be named after her, *Scops asio* var. *maxwellæ*, or Mrs. Maxwell's owl, and acquiring some of the first specimens of the black-footed ferret, an elusive animal initially identified and described by John James Audubon. Maxwell corresponded regularly with noted scientists of her day, including Robert Ridgway, a Smithsonian Institution ornithologist who named the owl after Maxwell and contributed the catalog of birds included as an appendix to *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, and Spencer Fullerton Baird, a naturalist and curator at the Smithsonian, to whom Maxwell sent bird specimens and in return received catalogs of birds and mammals to continue her study of the natural sciences.

As Maxwell's taxidermy collection grew, so did her reputation as a highly skilled taxidermist. In addition to adding to her own ever-expanding collection, she would mount specimens for others as a way to earn money; she also

began to exhibit her collection at fairs, including the Colorado Agricultural Society fair in 1868 and 1870. By 1870, the Maxwell family's financial situation had worsened, and Maxwell made the difficult decision to sell her collection of around 600 specimens for \$600 to Shaw's Garden (now known as the Missouri Botanical Garden) in St. Louis, Missouri. The money allowed the Maxwell family to purchase land and build a new house in Boulder. Maxwell immediately set about rebuilding her collection, and it quickly grew so large that she could no longer contain it in her home and taxidermy studio (which her family referred to as her "den"). Maxwell soon decided to open a museum, both to accommodate her extensive collection and to, she hoped, alleviate some of her family's financial problems, which while temporarily eased by the sale of specimens never entirely went away. Transforming personal collections into public museums was not uncommon at the time; as Sarah Amato (2015, 205–207) notes, museums in the Victorian age often "were formed out of private collections, . . . displaying diverse objects that were amassed according to the tastes of an individual collector." The Rocky Mountain Museum opened in Boulder, Colorado, in June 1874. Maxwell intended the museum to serve multiple functions, simultaneously contributing to scientific knowledge, educating the public (especially children and young women), and providing popular entertainment and curiosities—all common aims of natural history museums at the time.<sup>1</sup>

The centerpiece of the museum was Maxwell's taxidermy placed in her signature habitat groupings, which, while novel at the time, would soon become, as Rachel Poliquin (2012, 81) phrased it, "the zenith of artistic taxidermic skill."<sup>2</sup> In a letter dated November 11, 1874, Maxwell wrote to Marianne Dascomb, the principal of the Oberlin Female Department (in Ohio), where Mabel had recently enrolled, explaining what she hoped to gain by turning her collection into a museum: "I am anxious to make it a pecuniary success for two reasons, first that we may be able to give our daughter as good an education as she is capable of receiving, and my next ambition is to build up a temple of science that shall be a credit to *our sex* and an acquisition to the world." Maxwell goes on to note: "A determined will and strong muscles have been my principle [*sic*] capital."<sup>3</sup> The museum was moved to the more populous and tourist-heavy Denver in 1875 in an effort to make it more profitable, but the museum was never financially successful. Its lack of financial success, despite praise from both the general and

scientific communities,<sup>4</sup> can be ascribed to multiple factors. In her biography of Martha Maxwell, Maxine Benson (1986, 111) notes that “the receipts from the sale of the twenty-five-cent tickets did not go far to meet the other expenses such as light and fuel.” In addition, tourism in Colorado outside of the summer season was low, and Boulder’s population wasn’t big enough to support the museum, “particularly considering the depressed economy in the mid-1870s” (111). These problems persisted even when the museum moved to more populous Denver.

Maxwell achieved her highest level of fame with her exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition of 1876. She re-created her taxidermy tableaux as part of Colorado’s exhibit in the Kansas and Colorado Building. Her massive exhibit, titled *Woman’s Work*, included 47 mammal species and 224 bird species arranged in natural groupings on an artificial landscape of mountain ledges, plains, and running water. *Woman’s Work* proved enormously popular with both the general public and the scientific community. Reactions to the exhibit from two of the country’s foremost ornithologists at the time are included in the appendix of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*. First, Robert Ridgway (1879, 226) comments that the collection’s specimens are “excellently mounted” and that the collection “illustrates very fully the avian fauna of Colorado” and “bears testimony . . . to the success which has crowned the enthusiastic and intelligent efforts of a ‘woman Naturalist.’” Second, Elliott Coues, a prominent ornithologist and author of *Key to North American Birds* (1872), writes in “Notice of Mrs. Maxwell’s Exhibit of Colorado Mammals” (1879, 217)—included as an appendix to *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*—that *Woman’s Work* gave him “both pleasure and instruction”: “I was glad to see a collection of our native animals mounted in a manner far superior to ordinary museum work, and to know that there was at least one lady who could do such a thing and who took pleasure in doing it.” In addition to its scientific value, Coues notes that *Woman’s Work* is a means of “popularizing Natural History, and making the subject attractive to the public; this desirable object being attained by the artistic manner in which the specimens were mounted and grouped together” (217). The high praise for Maxwell continued into the early twentieth century. Writing in 1915, Junius Henderson asserts that Maxwell’s taxidermy is “well worthy of the high commendation it received, not only from the general public, but also from naturalists whose opinions command high respect,” and that it

marks “one of the earliest efforts in America to exhibit the animals of a large area in imitation of their natural environment” (88, 89). Alongside his praise, Henderson laments the waning recognition of Maxwell’s work: “Forty years have elapsed, and those who are familiar with Mrs. Maxwell’s work at first hand are rapidly dwindling in numbers” (89). Her lack of recognition is also due in part, Henderson argues, to the fact that “published accounts of her work are meager and obscure, hence apt to escape the attention of future museum workers” (90). Importantly, Henderson notes that while it is impossible to accurately measure Maxwell’s influence, “even those who never heard of the estimable lady are perhaps to a greater or less extent reaping the results of her stimulating example” (90).

Despite massive public interest and favorable reviews from the popular press and the scientific community, Maxwell’s exhibit was not financially successful. The financial disappointment of *Woman’s Work* can be largely attributed to two factors. First, the Colorado legislature had promised Maxwell that it would reimburse her for the transportation costs of shipping her collection to Philadelphia; however, the legislature refused to honor that promise, and by June 1876 it still owed her around \$733. Second, the primary source of income for Maxwell at the exposition was selling photos of herself and her collection. The Centennial Photographic Company, which had a virtual monopoly on photographs at the exposition, could not keep up with the high demand for photos of Maxwell’s exhibit; when Maxwell tried to sell her own copies to meet demand, the company threatened to close her photo stands completely. In the following years, Maxwell’s continued efforts to make her collection profitable failed. Following her death from an ovarian tumor in 1881, the logistics and cost of shipping and storing Maxwell’s enormous collection eventually resulted in its loss and destruction by the early years of the twentieth century. Written descriptions and photographs are all that remain of her groundbreaking taxidermy work.

#### COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION OF *ON THE PLAINS, AND AMONG THE PEAKS*

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One of the efforts undertaken after the centennial to both raise Maxwell’s status as a naturalist and taxidermist and earn much-needed money, *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* was a collaboration between Maxwell and her

half-sister Mary Dartt Thompson, with whom Maxwell maintained a close friendship throughout her life. Mary Dartt graduated from the Baraboo Collegiate Institute in Wisconsin in 1865 and then taught at Catharine Beecher's Milwaukee Female College until she moved to Boulder to join the Maxwells. While in Colorado, she frequently accompanied Maxwell and her husband on their excursions in the Rocky Mountains to collect specimens. Dartt moved to Massachusetts in 1875 with her husband, Nathan Thompson, a minister she had married in 1870. Dartt had some experience as a published writer, having contributed poems and essays to the *Baraboo Republic* newspaper between 1865 and 1867.

Dartt began writing *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* in 1877, working with Maxwell in composing the book. It was published in 1878 by the Philadelphia firm Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger. As Dartt explains in the opening section of the book (9), which is set at the Centennial International Exposition and features a litany of questions from visitors about Maxwell and her taxidermy, Dartt wrote *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* as an answer to the repeated questions from visitors to the *Woman's Work* exhibit: "Do tell us who she is, and how she did it?" Following her promise to do just that, Dartt first describes the Rocky Mountain Museum by way of a lengthy excerpt from Helen Hunt's review "Mrs. Maxwell's Museum," published in the *New York Independent* on September 23, 1875. She then backtracks to introduce us to Maxwell when she was living in Wisconsin between 1862 and 1868 and first learned taxidermy. From there, Dartt recounts several episodes of Maxwell hunting and procuring animals, crafting taxidermy specimens, and creating her Rocky Mountain Museum. Along the way, Dartt introduces her readers to the landscape and wilderness of the Rocky Mountains and Colorado Territory, explaining the territory to non-Coloradans and providing a vicarious experience to readers. *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* concludes with a description of Maxwell's creation and installation of *Woman's Work* at the Centennial International Exposition. *The book* ends with an appendix featuring two catalogs of Maxwell's specimens: Elliott Coues's "Notice of Mrs. Maxwell's Exhibit of Colorado Mammals" and Robert Ridgway's "Mrs. Maxwell's Colorado Museum. Catalogue of the Birds."

As with Maxwell's taxidermy, the book was well reviewed by both the press and the scientific community; yet it was not the financial success for which Dartt and Maxwell had hoped. A four-page pamphlet published by Claxton,

Remsen and Haffelfinger as a promotion piece for *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* includes snippets of reviews of the book from twenty-six newspapers and publications. The reviews frequently praise Dartt's "pleasant," "entertaining," and "unpretending" writing style, as well as the exciting and vivid adventures of Maxwell's hunting expeditions. Notable reviews in the pamphlet include the *Chicago Tribune's* assertion that "the work has been well done, and it makes a fascinating story" and the *Sunday Post's* observations that "the style and intellectual atmosphere of the little volume is pleasant throughout" and that "Miss Dartt manifests no less talent and skill in her style of dressing up abstruse scientific facts than did Mrs. Maxwell in preparing her numerous subjects for the Centennial levee" ("A Suitable Book for Holiday Presents"). In his 1879 review of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Joel A. Allen notes that the book is "a very intelligent and pleasantly written account" (113). Like most discussions of the book, the review quickly moves past Dartt's writing and focuses on Maxwell and her taxidermy. In praising *Woman's Work*, Allen calls the exhibit "a startling revelation of what a woman can do in one of the most difficult fields of art" (113). Maxwell, Allen writes, was "more than a successful and enthusiastic taxidermist; she [was] an ardent and thorough student of nature, and her explorations of the zoology of Colorado have revealed the existence of many species in that State not previously known to occur there, and contributed many new facts regarding the habits and distribution of others" (113). The combined sensationalism and novelty of a woman taxidermist and Maxwell's undisputed mastery and skill at her craft invariably (and somewhat understandably) overshadowed Dartt's writing.

Although it makes no mention of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Nina Baym's comprehensive study, *Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927* (2012), helps situate Dartt's book in its literary and historical context. Baym notes that of the 343 women writers in her study, "at least two-thirds were literary professionals or semiprofessionals—mainly journalists or women who freelanced for newspapers and periodicals. There were also editors, teachers, community activists, clubwomen, local historians, and novelists" (5). Dartt fits comfortably within this pattern. Moreover, Baym draws the following general conclusion about the women writers she analyzed: "I found these writers showing women making western lives for themselves and their families by achieving domesticity in a new place, improving over what they'd known before but still accepting a domestic agenda . . . Women are seen

to be crucial to the western development of families, farms, and business. In exchange for their work, the West made women healthier, more active, more useful, more engaged than their sisters back East" (2). When specifically examining writings about Colorado, Baym notes that as the prospecting of the early Gold Rush "quickly gave way to heavily capitalized mines and turned miners into day-laborers, many of them immigrants," many writers in Colorado "were keen to portray the place as manly, traditional, and truly western," leaving women's place in that vision less than certain (116). In *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Dartt creates a carefully crafted image of Martha Maxwell "as a feminine artistic woman devoted to the study of natural history" (Benson 1986, 168). Dartt achieves that image by scrupulously balancing riveting hunting expeditions on the Colorado frontier, descriptions of the meticulous study and practice of natural history, and scenes of motherly care and concern for Maxwell's daughter, Mabel.

#### CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF *ON THE PLAINS, AND AMONG THE PEAKS*

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There are no extended analyses of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* specifically and only limited discussions of Maxwell and her taxidermy, much of which focuses on her gender and how it relates to her taxidermy and scientific pursuits. The publication of this new edition presents an opportunity for renewed interest in and appreciation of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* and Martha Maxwell, as well as representing a text for scholars to study and analyze. The critical interpretations that follow are by no means exhaustive, and Dartt's book presents many more areas for further study and analysis than I address here. My intention is to open a conversation about the possibilities for critical analysis with the hope that other literary scholars and historians will join in and further situate Dartt's and Maxwell's work within the numerous disciplines to which it speaks, including nineteenth-century American literature, women's history, the history of the American West, natural history, museum studies, animal studies, environmental history, and many others.

##### *Gender*

Even with all the various fields of interest related to *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Maxwell's gender consistently draws the most attention,

both from her contemporaries and from twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars. *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, in its descriptions of Maxwell's work, provides a meaningful glimpse of how women both practiced and wrote about natural history. In her book "*Good Observers of Nature*": *American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820–1885*, Tina Gianquitto (2010) charts the changes in how women wrote about nature over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> She observes that the use of nature "as a platform for discussing issues of domesticity, education, morality, and the nation" (1), which was common in early nineteenth-century natural theology writing, was challenged by developing scientific understanding as the century progressed, especially Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) in which he argues, as Gianquitto states, "for a directionless evolutionary process that was determined by natural and sexual selection mixed with a heady dose of chance and adaptation" (10). Other factors also "influenced the ways in which women wrote about nature, including women's education reform and the attendant challenges to conventional notions of domesticity, the shift to literary realism after the Civil War, and the rise of professionalism in the sciences in the latter part of the century" (2). Gianquitto's study of four women writers—Almira Phelps, Margaret Fuller, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Mary Treat—focuses almost exclusively on botany, with the only animals the insects and arachnids of Treat's work. While botanical education became quite common in school curricula for girls, as it "was seen to serve several valuable ends: it led girls outside, exercising in the fresh air; it trained them to look for scientific connections among objects in the natural world; and it showed them how to translate those connections into pious lessons for the home" (5), the kind of scientific work undertaken by Maxwell (both her hunting expeditions and her taxidermy work) was outside the normal bounds for a nineteenth-century woman naturalist.

In Maxwell's case, being in the American West afforded her additional benefits, as the West was a region that, as Baym (2012, 9) points out, "was seen to allow women to become capable, physically active, independent, honest, and forthright. Ideas of bigness and spaciousness, of freedom from convention, of physical development, contribute to a sense of the western heroine as a new kind of person." However, the new western heroine did not mean a rejection of traditional femininity; in fact, western books, Baym argues, "portray their local heroines in opposition to their overcultivated and too-often

manipulative sisters from Boston or New York as the thoroughly American development of true womanhood” (9). Maxwell embodies this model of the new western heroine, whose scientific pursuits exercised both her body and her mind. Yet Maxwell’s engagement with natural science resulted in behaviors that could have been judged by her peers as a dereliction of her motherly and domestic duties. She left young Mabel behind in Wisconsin when she and James initially moved to Boulder; once reunited with Mabel, Maxwell took her along on hunting trips that often turned dangerous, including a perilous descent down a mountain in a raging storm (see chapter 10). Mabel appears to have harbored lingering resentment and bitterness toward her mother and her single-minded focus on her work. In Mabel Maxwell Brace’s 1948 book *Thanks to Abigail*, she states that Maxwell “lacked any very strong maternal qualities. They may have been swallowed up in her artistic and scientific interests” (n.p.). The fraught dynamics of Maxwell and Mabel’s relationship are conspicuously absent from Dartt’s book, reflecting both Dartt’s and Maxwell’s efforts to present a particular image of Maxwell as the ideal model of a woman naturalist.

Maxwell’s status as a woman naturalist and how it spoke to broader ideas about women and their place in society was a key focus for both Dartt and Maxwell. In a passage in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* discussing Maxwell’s decision to take up shooting to acquire animal specimens, Dartt (1879, 25) makes a broader claim about women’s abilities, noting “that *capacity* and *ability*, rather than birth, color, sex, or anything else, should determine where individuals belong, and what they shall do. If they can use a gun, and are so inclined, what is to hinder their doing it?” Dartt capitalizes on Maxwell’s gun usage, turning it into an opportunity to make a broader claim about women’s abilities and their right to pursue their own interests. This sentiment about women’s abilities is mirrored in Maxwell’s own writings and correspondence. In a letter to Spencer Baird from 1875, Maxwell writes, “The greatest desire of my life is to help inspire women with confidence in their own resources and abilities” (quoted in Benson 1986, 119). In an undated note, Maxwell observes that “woman’s selfdenial[,] will and muscle has brought [the collection] to its present status—and I am unwilling it should loose [*sic*] its feminine identity” (quoted in Benson 1986, 136). In addition to her passion for natural history, Maxwell displayed an acute appreciation for how her work would symbolically and materially affect

society's attitudes and behaviors toward women in general, a responsibility she did not take lightly. Perhaps most obvious, Maxwell naming her centennial exhibit *Woman's Work* shows her awareness of and savvy regarding how inseparable her gender was from her work. Leslie Madsen-Brooks (2009, 17) posits that Maxwell's choice of the title was an effort "perhaps to capitalize on the novelty of her gender as well as on the scope of her talent." Madsen-Brooks suggests that *Woman's Work* offered "a (possibly unintentional) critique of science-as-usual" by eschewing the at-the-time standard museum triad display of one male, one female, and one juvenile of a species—opting instead for a display that highlighted an ecosystem, "a landscape alive with stories of species diversity, cohabitation, and interdependence" (17, 18). Not content with merely following the example set by the male naturalists of the day, Maxwell used her perspective and knowledge gained from hours of careful observation in the Colorado wilderness to innovate, showing that women could provide valuable contributions to scientific knowledge.

At the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition, Maxwell spent hours answering countless questions from the public about her work. Dartt includes a sampling of those questions in the opening section of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*: "How could a woman do it?" "Did she kill any of the animals?" "What did she do it for?" "What sort of woman is she?" "If she's married why isn't it called Mr. Maxwell's collection?" (5–9). These questions reveal the public's preoccupation with and concern for Maxwell as a woman, as well as an inability to ever fully divorce her work from her gender. Perhaps the most salient point of discussion in terms of Maxwell's gender was her use of guns to hunt and kill her animal specimens. In *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America*, Laura Browder (2009, 1) notes that "throughout much of American history, the gun has served as a recurrent symbol that links violence and masculinity. For over two centuries, there have been women who have escaped conventional gender roles by picking up guns." In discussing Maxwell specifically, Browder examines Maxwell's use of guns, arguing that it led the American public to question "both her whiteness and her femininity," as spectators and press at the centennial identified Maxwell "as variously white, Native American, a hunter, a housewife, a lady, and an amazon" (57). Browder also observes that Maxwell's combined gun usage and scientific acumen might offer an explanation for her lack of lasting recognition: "The armed woman as scientist was not a figure that endured, for an intellectual

woman hunter was an uncomfortable combination of things—too smart, too violent—for the public to assimilate” (65). Maxwell was a gun-toting naturalist, and her identity threatened to unsettle not just one but two gender expectations of her time, which only served to compound people’s interest in her gender as such.

Many contemporary reviews of Maxwell’s exhibit at the centennial emphasize her bodily appearance and identity as a “little lady” of “refined sensibility” (Browder 2009, 61–63). An 1876 review in *Harper’s Bazaar* notes: “Mrs. Maxwell is a quiet little blue-eyed woman, shy and unassuming in mien, and not at all like the Amazon that one might expect to find in the Rocky Mountain huntress” (“Mrs. Maxwell’s Rocky Mountain Museum,” 730). An 1876 newspaper clipping from the *American Register* moves quickly from an overview of *Woman’s Work* to Maxwell herself, focusing at length on her physical appearance: “Admirable as the collection is in taxidermic skill and landscape arrangement, the most wonderful of all is the little Rocky Mountain woman herself, who killed most of the animals and prepared them all. She is still young, rather small, her face is somewhat bronzed, but not at all unpleasantly so; her blue eyes dance with sweetness and intelligence, and the mixture of gentleness, courage, and capabilities is so blended in her appearance as to make her very attractive.”<sup>6</sup> Returning to Junius Henderson’s essay (1915, 91) praising Maxwell’s scientific skill, he concludes his discussion of Maxwell by drawing attention to her gender and her body: “She was not a coarse, angular, western giantess, imbued with a desire to kill. Acquaintances have described her as slight, not strapping; refined, not coarse; modest, not brazen; tenderhearted, not bloodthirsty.” Even while conceding Maxwell’s skill with a gun, Henderson is careful to assert that she used a gun “not because of a thirst for innocent blood, for she loved the creatures whose lives she took; but she was determined to bring about results pleasing to her artistic and nature-loving eye and instructive to those who were unacquainted with wildlife in its native haunts” (91). For these and many other reviewers, Maxwell’s body is worthy of as much, if not more, attention as the taxidermied bodies of the animals she prepared, and, in their view, it is vital that her body be represented as “appropriately” feminine.

This careful positioning of Maxwell’s feminine identity can be explained in part when put alongside the big game hunting narratives of men in the Victorian age. In discussing the narratives of Victorian big game hunters,

Harriet Ritvo (1987, 254) argues: “If the spoils of the big game hunter powerfully evoked the conquest and domination of exotic territories, written accounts made his exploits seem still more inspiring and more widely accessible. The connection between triumphing over a dangerous animal and subduing unwilling natives was direct and obvious, and the association of the big game hunter with the march of empire was literal as well as metonymic.” Ritvo further asserts that “even more than trophy collections, narratives written by the potent protagonists fanned public appreciation of the heroic big game hunter” (255). To avoid readers equating Maxwell with these male big game hunters, reviewers like Henderson reminded readers of Maxwell’s “proper” femininity.

Dartt also takes great care to position Maxwell as almost the antithesis of the Victorian big game hunters. For example, Dartt (1879, 118) presents a conversation in which a female friend asks Maxwell, “You fearful woman! how can you have the heart to take so many lives?” Maxwell replies: “I suppose you think me very cruel, but I doubt if I am as much so as you! There isn’t a day you don’t tacitly consent to have some creature killed that you may eat it. I never take life for such carnivorous purposes! All must die some time; I only shorten the period of consciousness that I may give their forms a perpetual memory; and, I leave it to you, which is the more cruel? to kill to eat, or kill to *immortalize*” (118–119). In explaining herself, Maxwell justifies her hunting of animals not as a heroic pursuit and mastery of dangerous wild beasts but as a rational method of preserving animals in “perpetual memory.” Rather than emphasize bloody conquest of the hunt like the big game hunters do, Maxwell focuses on the end result of her hunting: the production and proliferation of natural history knowledge. This focus on scientific observation over killing ability is also reflected in a *New Century for Woman*’s 1876 article, which first carefully points out that Maxwell is “simply and sincerely a naturalist, who shrinks from destroying life as sensitively as would the most delicately reared metropolitan woman,” and later reiterates that “she is a naturalist, who studies the pose of her animals to a degree that drew from the most distinguished visitor at the Exposition an expression of admiration” (“The Colorado Naturalist”). Later on in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, when Dartt recounts Maxwell successfully hunting a buffalo, Dartt (1879, 132) makes sure to note that shooting a large animal such as a buffalo was no stunning achievement: “Any *man* could have done what she did there. I have



**FIGURE 0.1.** Stereoview produced by the Centennial Photographic Company of Martha Maxwell’s *Woman’s Work* exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition

seen many a one who had, and considered it almost honor enough for a lifetime, and told of it with no end of flourishes. Well, it don’t take much to satisfy some people. Now I’ll tell you of something of which she had reason to be proud.” Dartt goes on to recount how Maxwell discovered a new species of owl, concluding the chapter with the assertion that “a thousand years hence, when all people are mourning over the extinction of large animals from America, her name will live associated with a variety of the bird, that has been from time immemorial a symbol of wisdom” (133). What is important in Dartt’s telling is not tales of hyperbolic and hyper-masculine struggles between man and beast but feats of perseverance, careful observation, and keen intellect—areas in which, as Dartt tell us, Maxwell excelled.

As mentioned previously, Maxwell sold images of herself and her animals at the Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition (figure 0.1). In *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Dartt (1879, 211) explains that while Maxwell initially found “the idea of selling her own likeness” repulsive, she changed her mind as the public’s demand for these images became apparent. The images draw attention to how Maxwell’s female identity and body are intertwined



**FIGURE 0.2.** Photograph of Martha Maxwell in her hunting costume

with and shaped by the animal bodies she came into contact with in her work. Two particular photographs of Maxwell help illuminate the tension or dissonance in her public persona. The first one (figure 0.2) showcases Maxwell's hunting costume; the second one (figure 0.3) shows her "at work" in her studio. A rifle appears in the foreground of both photos, as well as a dead fox (clearly dead in the first image and "lifelike" in the second). These photographs emphasize Maxwell's "lady-like" poise while still gesturing to her work in killing and preserving her specimens. The images are not out in nature but in an indoor and controlled environment that gives the illusion of safety and feminine propriety; it does not reveal the reality of the strenuous physical exertion required in traversing the Rocky Mountains tracking, shooting, and retrieving specimens of all sizes.

For writer Helen Hunt Jackson, who wrote a review of Maxwell's Rocky Mountain Museum, the dissonance between gendered expectations and



**FIGURE 0.3.**  
 Photograph of  
 Martha Maxwell  
 posed at work  
 in her taxidermy  
 studio

Maxwell's work centered less on her shooting the animals and more on her skill as a taxidermist: "That a pioneer woman should shoot wild cats and grizzlies seemed not unnatural or improbable; but that the same woman who could fire a rifle so well could also stuff an animal with any sort of skill or artistic effect seemed very unlikely" (quoted in *Dartt 1879*, 11). Maxwell's hunting defied expectations for the average American woman but fit within expectations for a woman on the western frontier. But as a pioneer in taxidermy and natural history, Maxwell had truly broken new ground. Yet *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* ends not with a reminder of Maxwell's trailblazing but with worry about Maxwell's daughter Mabel's education. The book's final chapter concludes with a paragraph calling attention to Maxwell's "ceaseless exertions and self-denials for her daughter's higher education" and reminds viewers that Maxwell's work in natural history does not "diminish the sweetness of true womanhood, or render the heart, once gentle and

tender, harsh and cold” (216). The book allows Maxwell to be a trailblazing woman, but at its end she is safely returned to the role of caring mother, lest readers think she has strayed too far from prescribed gender roles.

### *Native Americans*

Although *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* presents readers with a progressive view of women’s education, abilities, and accomplishments, its treatment of Native Americans is decidedly problematic. The indigenous peoples of the western United States occupy the periphery of Dartt’s book, and their occasional presence reveals a troubling, although not atypical, depiction of white settlers’ views of the American West.

*On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* takes place against an unacknowledged backdrop of excessive violence and the genocide of Native Americans, particularly the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, in which hundreds of Native Americans at a Cheyenne and Arapaho camp—many of whom were women and children—were brutally murdered and mutilated by members of Colorado troops led by Colonel John M. Chivington. Prior to the massacre, settlers in the West had increasingly encroached on Native lands, a problem exacerbated by Colorado’s Gold Rush that brought the Maxwells to Boulder in 1859. Michael Shally-Jensen (2014, 99) writes that Native Americans presented the US government with a “quandary” of how to balance its goal of “the expansion of American power over the whole of the continent” while also upholding the American democracy’s founding “principles of freedom and mutual respect.” The United States frequently revised existing land treaties with Native tribes. For example, with the “massive influx of settlers” that resulted from the Gold Rush, the United States revised the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, “greatly reducing Native lands” and contributing to growing resentment from Native Americans (99). In addition, as Karen R. Jones and John Wills (2009, 176) observed, settlers essentialized Native Americans “as bloodthirsty and primitive, aberrant in their social practices and uniformly warlike,” thus painting them as “hostile ‘others’ and enemies of the state deserving of eradication.” In discussing the Sand Creek massacre, Jones and Wills emphasize how the negative perception of Native Americans by settlers was further exacerbated by John Evans, the governor of Colorado Territory, who in the months preceding the massacre “consistently spoke in threatening terms, warning of ‘depredations’ and imminent war. Such protestations fashioned

a monolithic image of Indians as belligerent ‘others’ and asserted a concomitant imperative to armed action” (184). The initial public approval of the Sand Creek massacre soon gave way to horror and disapproval as details of the event began to emerge; yet despite a congressional investigation and recommendations for punishments, “no actions were taken against any of those responsible for the killing” (Shally-Jensen 2014, 109).

The prominence and significance of the Sand Creek massacre shaped and influenced how western writers wrote about both Native Americans and the West in general. In discussing another female-authored book on Colorado published the same year as *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Anna Gordon’s *Camping in Colorado, with Suggestions to Gold-Seekers, Tourists and Invalids* (1879), Baym (2012, 118) draws attention to “one of the earlier defensive references to the bitter fighting between Natives and settlers during the Civil War, which culminated in the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, where the wrong tribe—Cheyenne rather than Ute—paid the price in the brutal killing of noncombatants by soldiers under the command of Col. John Chivington.” The Sand Creek massacre is never mentioned in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*; however, as the Maxwells moved to Boulder in 1859, they and Dartt would undoubtedly have been familiar with the event and its aftermath.

In *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Dartt portrays Native Americans alternately as dangerous nuisances who impede white settlers from taking full advantage of the West’s resources and as romanticized Others clearly equated with the region’s large buffalo herds, noble and majestic but destined to vanish from the landscape. One particular scene demonstrates the perceived “threat” Native Americans posed for white settlers. At the start of a chapter describing one of Maxwell’s hunting trips, Dartt (1879, 53) draws readers’ attention to “a strip of valuable meadow land,” which “white people had endeavored a number of times to occupy . . . long enough to cut and secure the grass, but had been driven away by the Indians and their work destroyed,” as well as “an old adobe fort, formerly used as a government defence, but long since rendered—by the noble red men (?)—useless for such purpose.” Dartt’s reference to Native Americans driving away white settlers hints obliquely at the violence and tensions between the two groups, and her inclusion of the question mark immediately following “noble red men” at once challenges her stereotyping of Native Americans as “noble” and suggests, again somewhat indirectly, her true sentiments toward them.

On that hunting trip, Maxwell comes upon an apparently abandoned fort that actually holds two white frontiersmen; Maxwell and the men mistake each other for Native Americans. Maxwell believes the man she spies in the fort “from his clothing, or rather lack of it, was undoubtedly an Indian, and both he and the dog seemed furious with rage at her presence there, and came rushing toward her” (Dartt 1879, 55–56). Maxwell makes a calm, steady retreat back to her camp and warns the others in her party of the Native American. Her husband immediately insists that they leave the area, as he is certain that there must be more Native Americans nearby, and “they would be out soon to see what enemy or plunder was at hand; finding them alone, they would not hesitate to kill them and take what they had, for there would be no danger of the deed being reported and the terrible vengeance of the whites aroused” (56–57). Shortly thereafter, the two frontiersmen introduce themselves to Maxwell’s group and relate their side of the encounter. They reveal that they initially believed Maxwell was a Native American. These men harbor more hostile attitudes toward Native Americans, referring to them as “ornery beasts” as they declare: “We’ve done sworn we’d shoot the first one of ’em that puts his condemned mug inside this valley, no matter what he’s here for” (58). Their negative stereotypes and animosity toward Native Americans almost resulted in tragic violence. Furthermore, Dartt portrays Native Americans as innately hostile and combative, ignoring white settlers’ role in creating such hostility and strained relations.

In a later section, Dartt describes Maxwell’s efforts to acquire buffalo specimens. While approaching a herd of buffalo, Maxwell’s party comes upon a Native American man pursuing a young female buffalo. Dartt (1879, 128) marvels at the skill of the hunter and his pony and contrasts it with the ignoble “atrocities” of white settlers shooting buffalo from the windows of a train. Dartt describes an innate sense of connectedness between the Native American man and his pony, noting that he “seemed instinct with his will, and, without being touched by his hands, which were busy sending arrows into the beast, at every turn it veered and tacked, duplicating every movement the buffalo made” (128). What might at first seem like a compliment about the man’s skill, upon closer examination subtly dehumanizes the man, placing him closer to the “brutes” he hunts than to the white settler hunters in Maxwell’s party. This animalization of Native Americans is made more explicit at another point in the book, in which Dartt lists Native Americans

alongside other “herds” of animals: “vast herds of deer, buffalo, Indians, and other wild horses” (40). Dartt establishes a parallel between the “noble beasts” (the buffalo) and the Native Americans, both inextricably linked to the fantasy of the West and both under threat from its settlement by white people.

In another scene toward the end of the book, Dartt describes Maxwell’s visit to and use of the Hot Sulphur Springs. As with the earlier scene with the two frontiersmen in the fort in which Maxwell is initially mistaken for a Native American, the scene begins with Dartt (1879, 198) recounting the story of how the footprints Maxwell left at the hot springs led to confusion from other visitors as to whether they were left by a Native American or a white woman, leading one trapper to note: “Squaws turn their toes in and white folks don’t. The jaunt ain’t a very likely one for ’em to take, I allow, and none of ’em ever took it afore, I know; but if you jest inquire ’round enough, you’ll find out some white woman made it.” While this little aside is not terribly relevant to the book’s narrative, it does speak to Dartt’s and Maxwell’s preoccupation with Maxwell’s image. With this scene, Dartt tells readers that even if her hunting expeditions might feature behavior and actions that run counter to the expected behavior of a white woman, Maxwell, as the trapper’s assessment of her footprints attests, is definitely a white woman, effectively answering the questions from the start of the book “Is she a half-breed?” and “Is she an Indian?” (9) with a decided “no.” Three paragraphs later, Dartt acknowledges that the Ute tribe previously enjoyed use of the hot springs but can no longer do so: “Alas for the poor Utes! They can no longer submerge their sick horses, pappooses, and puppies in its purifying waters! They were said to hold them in great reverence as possessing powers little less than miraculous. To judge from their appearance, they hold water, wherever found, as too sacred to be used except in a last extremity. It is useless to longer imagine that the picture memory holds of their utter ugliness and filth can ever be changed. Hot chemicals are no longer possible to them, and cold water would be powerless on a Ute” (198–199). The brief glimmer of sympathy for Native Americans’ displacement (“Alas for the poor Utes!”) is severely undercut in the scene by Dartt’s denigration and mockery of the Utes with her insistence on “their utter ugliness and filth.” Dartt’s immediate return in the next paragraph to Maxwell’s focus on searching for elk specimens abruptly ends the discussion of Native Americans, effectively signaling that they are of no real concern or consequence to her retelling of Maxwell’s

work. Yet the appearance of Native Americans in the periphery of *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* provides a fuller picture of the context in which Maxwell completed her natural history work.

### *Animals*

In contrast to her portrayal of Native Americans, Dartt offers a more nuanced and thoughtful look at the animals of the American West. She both showcases various animals as individual creatures with their own personalities and motivations and argues that their ultimate purpose is to serve as raw material for Maxwell's taxidermy. Dartt's depiction of animals as thinking, feeling creatures that, despite their sentience, must still be killed for the furtherance of scientific knowledge results in a curious and unsettling combination of feminized sentimentality and corporeal violence. Of particular note in her book are the descriptions of Maxwell's taxidermy work, her killing of specimens, the use of those specimens as commodities, and the juxtaposition of corporeal violence with feminized sentimentality. Dartt's (1879, 26) first extended discussion of Maxwell's taxidermy work is rendered in highly physical and visceral terms as she describes the "hours of careful, often intensely disagreeable work." For example, in working with a dead, rotting turkey buzzard specimen, Maxwell finds herself battling her own physical disgust and discomfort: "Too sick to endure its presence a moment longer, she would retreat for a while; but as soon as it was possible to summon the strength and resolution, go to work again. It was more than a week, however, before she recovered from the effects of such a disgusting task enough to be able to eat an ordinary meal; and it was many weeks before the mounted bird could be taken from the outer shed, that gave him shelter, and have a place among her other birds" (29–30). The physical presence of the dead buzzard and its putrefying corpse is powerful enough to disorder Maxwell's own body as a result of her close contact with it. Maxwell preferred to kill the animals herself, both so she had the opportunity to observe them alive first, which she felt gave her the ability to more accurately and truthfully present the animals after death (30), and because "it gave her the opportunity of studying the shape and disposition of prominent muscles, etc. She considered a knowledge of the anatomy of an animal as essential in taxidermy, as in sculpture, to the finest artistic effect" (109). Accurate, well-executed taxidermy, Dartt implies, requires intimate observation and contact with the

animal bodies. This was in line with the increasingly professionalized field of taxidermy in the nineteenth century.

In discussing advancements in taxidermy in that century (but with no mention of Maxwell), Rachel Poliquin (2012, 72) notes that “the real poetry of taxidermy—was imparting the suggestions of life by capturing an animal’s character. Ideally, taxidermy not only protected the carcasses of birds from decay, insects, and the ravages of time but preserved the elegance of life.” Partly as a result of taxidermy’s rising status, Maxwell’s carefully prepared specimens became commodities that helped support her financially. On more than one occasion she sold her specimens, only to replenish her collection with new animals. Dartt (1879, III) also notes that Maxwell always tried to collect “duplicate skins” when she went out hunting: “These, properly cured, could be sent to any part of the world, exchanged for skins from other lands, and were valuable for scientific institutions everywhere.” Maxwell’s attention to the financial potential of her work shows that she continued the practice of earlier (male) naturalists, including Hans Sloane, Mark Catesby, and John James Audubon, in recognizing the commercial potential and value of animals’ bodies.

At multiple points in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*, Dartt emphasizes the scientific value of Maxwell’s work in an effort to mitigate its inherent violence. “Ritualistically claiming the animal as a scientific specimen,” Karen Jones (2015, 256) argues, “successfully neutralized questions of killing, violence, and species decline in the material environment; while the power of the taxidermy elevated the animal body to a higher status than other valuations of animal capital.” Multiple scenes in the book, however, reveal that the situation was not quite as neutralized as Maxwell or Dartt might have wished. Along with the skunk scene discussed at the start of the introduction, two scenes in particular epitomize the unsettling combination of violence and sentimentality in Maxwell’s work. In the first scene, Dartt (1879, 73) describes how Maxwell collects two baby birds to later kill and preserve them: “Both birds reached Boulder in safety the next day, where they were fed and cuddled, and made happy until their robes of snowy-white down were of the most desirable length, when a little chloroform induced them to stop growing. A nest, like the one they occupied in their native tree, was procured. They were stuffed, and placed in it, with their little mouths open and their necks stretched up toward their mother, which, with a rabbit in her

talons, was suspended over them.” The nurturing, maternal quality of this episode is quickly disturbed with the rather euphemistic description of the birds’ deaths, only to have the maternal and nurturing image be re-created in the tableaux Maxwell constructs with the dead birds’ bodies. The second scene concerns two bear cubs rescued by Maxwell:

The mother of the [cubs] was killed at the same time as their capture. Ten days or more after her death, her skin being mounted, was placed in the museum. Mrs. Maxwell, to test her work and to see whether the cubs still remembered their mother, let them out into the room where she was. Selecting her from the other animals, they ran, whining, and jumped about her, licking her face, and seeming overjoyed at finding her again. But when conscious that she would not return their caresses, their grief was touching in the extreme. Standing up and stroking her face with their little paws in the most pleading manner, they licked her nose and cheeks, and moaned like two heartbroken children. It was more than Mrs. Maxwell could endure, and with tears of sympathy for their disappointment, she took them away. (178–179)

While Jones (2015, 257–258) briefly discusses this scene in her analysis of Maxwell’s work, she curiously chooses to only emphasize the cubs’ “affection and joy at the reunion” and makes no mention of the grief that quickly replaces the cubs’ joy. An analysis of the scene in its entirety shows the changed physical, material, and maternal presence of the mother bear and how this change results in an increased visibility of the female body, both in the bear’s taxidermied skin and in Maxwell’s display of fellow feeling with her “tears of sympathy.” It also highlights the tensions inherent in taxidermy between aesthetics and ethics, a tension theorized extensively by Poliquin.

Taxidermy, Poliquin (2012, 10) notes, “requires death of our closest compatriots—our fellow sentient creatures. Looking at dead animals necessarily engages our emotions.” She argues that “by creating animal-things, taxidermy necessarily creates encounters. This is the strange, unsettling power of taxidermy; it offers—or forces—intimacies between you and an animal-thing that is no longer quite an animal but could not be mistaken for anything other than an animal” (39). Poliquin uses the term *visceral knowledge* to describe the “bodily knowing that occurs in contact with physical things, a knowing that blurs emotions with materiality and may even defy reason, logic, and explanatory language” (39). This concept of visceral

knowledge ties in with post-human theories of shared double finitude and absolute materiality.

Such focus on flesh as a touchstone of shared corporeal vulnerability is common in animal studies theory. Cary Wolfe's (2012, 50) discussion of biopolitics in *Before the Law* emphasizes how beings, both human and animal, are reduced to flesh, which he labels a communal substrate that is manipulated and acted upon. This reduction of beings to flesh is also a key part of Reviel Netz's (2004, 39) theory about barbed wire, which he argues exploits the misfortune of our (humans' and animals') skin—a misfortune characterized by the fact that our skin, which contains pain-causing nerves, can be used against us as a form of control and exploitation. Barbed wire, Netz writes, reduces its victims to flesh, which becomes “a mere biological receptacle of pain and disease” (130). Shared corporeal vulnerability is also the cornerstone of Anat Pick's (2011) theory of creaturely poetics or creaturely ethics. Pick emphasizes the shared material, physical quality of humans and nonhuman animals as bodily creatures and, in doing so, tries to recast dehumanization as a potentially beneficial process (3–6). Pick advocates a creaturely poetics or ethics that aims to move beyond a kind of defensive humanism based on upholding “uniquely human” traits such as language, reason, empathy, and so on and instead moves toward a recognition of the experience of corporeal vulnerability shared by all creatures (193).

That experience of visceral knowledge “forces each viewer to confront the troubled relationship between the aesthetics and ethics of taxidermy: the compelling urge to look and the worry about what made that looking possible” (Poliquin 2012, 50). And while Poliquin rightly identifies the “painfully, powerfully beautiful” quality of taxidermy (50), there also exists a sense of imagination and play in which viewers must engage. To appreciate a taxidermy specimen in a museum, viewers must, according to Stephen T. Asma (2001, 38), “oscillate between knowing that it's a man-made construction and suspending [their] disbelief to enter into a play-along relationship with the display.” Yet Poliquin and Asma are focused on the implications of human encounters with taxidermied specimens. The scene of the bear cubs that Dartt depicts introduces the prospect of animals themselves as spectators of taxidermy. What do still-living animals make of taxidermied animal specimens, especially if those specimens were family members?

Because people can very easily recognize and identify with mother-child relationships in animals, they become a crucial bridge to understanding and appreciating the intelligence, sentience, and emotional richness of the non-human world—which, in turn, leads to greater awareness and consideration of humans' ethical responsibility to nonhuman animals. The perverse, disturbing image of dead stuffed mother and living inconsolable cubs combines the sympathetic identification of animals' familial relationships with the "visceral knowledge" of the taxidermied dead animal specimen. Human perception, emotion, and ethics become embodied and entangled with still-living animals' perception and bodies; at the root of that entanglement is the dead animal-object, the taxidermied animal, whose materiality has shifted and changed—not enough to be completely different but just enough to unsettle and dissolve the boundaries between human and animal, living and dead.

## EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION

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After the centennial, Maxwell moved to Boston in 1878, where she enrolled in several science classes at the Women's Laboratory of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; while there, she gave taxidermy lessons to help pay her tuition. Although she made two brief trips back to Boulder due to reports of her mother's failing health, Maxwell remained on the East Coast for the remainder of her life. In 1879, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, and leased land on Rockaway Beach, Long Island, to establish a seaside resort that would include a museum to house her collection. Her bathhouse/museum opened in 1880 but was not financially successful. During her time in New York, Maxwell's health began to fail. In addition, her marriage to James had been slowly deteriorating since the centennial; several factors contributed to their estrangement, including money issues, James's lack of support for Martha's work, and their long separation (James had remained in Colorado when Martha moved east). After Maxwell's death from an ovarian tumor in 1881, Mabel traveled to Rockaway Beach to try to turn her mother's business around; while she was able to pay off Maxwell's debts, she did not have enough money to move the collection. Mabel tried to find a museum or university willing to purchase the collection but found no takers (possibly because of its enormous size). By the time various scientific institutions realized the value of Maxwell's collection both to science and to history, it was too late.

There are a few competing narratives of what became of the collection. Henderson (1915) notes that her first collection, which was sold to Shaw's Garden in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1870, was not taken care of and had become degraded to the point of being unsalvageable (91) and that her *Woman's Work* collection eventually ended up in Saratoga Springs, New York, where a "large portion" of it was destroyed in a fire and the remainder "passed into the hands of a curio collector, who took no care of it" (90). Marcia Myers Bonta (1991, 44) notes that a few specimens remain at the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Museum as part of an exhibit on the original 1876 centennial, but I have been unable to verify this, and it is the only reference to the existence of surviving specimens of Maxwell's taxidermy. Mary Dartt Thompson published a report titled "What Became of Mrs. Maxwell's Natural History Collection?" that was presented to the Colorado Historical Society in 1924 and was included in the epilogue of Benson's biography on Maxwell. Dartt Thompson began attempting to trace Maxwell's collection in 1893. She reports that Mabel had left it in the care of J. P. Haskins of Saratoga Springs in 1882. The collection, Dartt Thompson discovered, had been improperly stored and handled; attempts to salvage it were unsuccessful due to lack of interest from scientific institutions, unreasonable demands by Haskins, and the poor condition of specimens (which were either too expensive to repair or beyond repair). By the time there was enough serious interest from the State University of Colorado, around 1906, to acquire and preserve what remained of the collection, it was too far gone, and the matter was given up entirely by 1920. In her report, Dartt Thompson notes rather succinctly: "The story of Mrs. Maxwell's Collection is ended" (quoted in Benson 1986, 201).

Mary Dartt Thompson lived to be ninety-eight years old; she had three children, a son who died in infancy and two daughters; she "helped found the Laurel, Maryland, free public library, the woman's club in Laurel, and the Prince George's County Federation of Women's clubs" (Benson 1986, 202). Dartt Thompson died in 1940 in East Falls Church, Virginia.

*On the Plains, and Among the Peaks* tells the story of a woman whose lifelong passion and dedication to work and education made her a pioneer in more ways than one. It catalogs Maxwell's important scientific contributions and development of museum habitat groupings and lifelike taxidermy mounts, showcases engaging accounts of wilderness excursions on the frontier of the

western United States in the 1860 and 1870s, and testifies to a woman's determination to show through her work that women were capable of succeeding in traditionally male-dominated fields.

## NOTES

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1. See Amato (2015), 202; Asma (2001), xii.
2. Notably, Poliquin's excellent comprehensive study of taxidermy, *The Breathless Zoo*, makes no mention of Maxwell.
3. Martha Maxwell to Marianne Dascomb, November 11, 1874. Martha Maxwell Collection (1821–1957), Hart Research Library, History Colorado Center, Denver (*italics in the original*).
4. Dartt includes excerpts of two reviews of the museum in *On the Plains, and Among the Peaks*. See chapter 2 and chapter 24.
5. As with Poliquin and Baym, Gianquitto does not mention Maxwell or Dartt in her book.
6. Newspaper clipping part of a scrapbook included in the Martha Maxwell Collection (1821–1957), Hart Research Library, History Colorado Center, Denver.

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