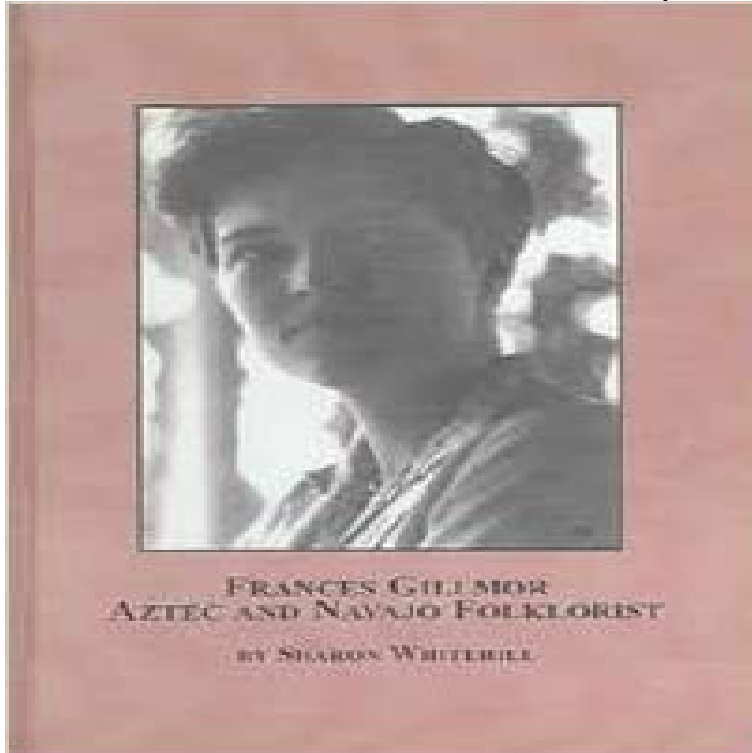


## Frances Gillmor: Aztec and Navajo Folklorist (Native American Studies)



This is a literary biography of one of the first women to travel through the Southwest and Mexico on horseback and to record firsthand traditional stories of the Aztec and Navajo cultures. The book is a literary biography of Frances Gillmor, a scholar of the native cultures of the Southwest and Mesoamerica, and a writer of regional novels. An English and humanities professor at the University of Arizona for forty-odd years, Gillmor also inspired and promoted the study of folklore in the Southwest. In the words of her University of Arizona colleague James Griffith, Any folklorist who works here is inevitably following a path which was blazed, scraped, and smoothed by Frances Gillmor. Frances Gillmor's life not only bridges a number of cultures, but also spans both a century (1903-1993) and a continent. From the old Scottish clan lore she learned from her mother to Mexican folk plays and dances, from the Indian maidens of her juvenile stories to fierce Speaker-Kings of the Aztecs, both her life and her work show a colorful breadth and variety. *Thumbcap Weir* (1929), her first novel, evokes the pioneer fishing settlements of New Brunswick; *Windsinger* (1930) takes us into the world of a Navajo chanter; and *Fruit Out of Rock* (1940) explores and foreshadows in fiction the threat of canyon erosion in terms of its characters links to a family and regional past. *Traders to the Navajos* (1934) is a double biography of the Wetherills of Kayenta, who were not only traders but arbiters, doctors, companions, and teachers to the Navajos throughout the early part of the twentieth century. *Flute of the Smoking Mirror* (1949) follows the life of Nezahualcoytl, while *The King Danced in the Marketplace* (1964) gives us the history of Moteczuma the First: two Aztec biographies which made these kings lives accessible to general readers for the first time and greatly impressed fellow scholars.

Frances Gillmor herself was an actively practicing Christian who came to believe that religious experience need not depend on supernatural events or divine revelation, but instead that the spirit of God is revealed in the myriad beauties of nature. I have looked, as it were, over her shoulder, observing her passion for spiritual matters in childhood diaries, in the stories and poems that appeared in her high school literary magazine, and in her later embrace of the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead. I have noted with great admiration her steadfast refusal to allow either personal belief or official dogma to distort her responses to the spiritual practice of non-Christian cultures - not just the Papago, Zuni, Hopi, Yaqui, and Navajo Indians, but even the bloodthirsty Aztecs. I have also attempted to show how Frances Gillmors sense of herself as an outsider, an orphan (or, as post-colonial critics would say, as the other), foreshadowed the scholar, folklorist, and author who valued so greatly the theme of connection. Leon Edels metaphor of the figure under the carpet is relevant here because it expresses so well the approach that informs my own writing. Edel suggests that the subjects life can be seen as a carpet or tapestry: place it right side up and the life-myth or mask of the person is visible; reverse the carpet, however, and the tangled threads beneath are exposed as the raw and naked real self of the tidy figure above. Intrigued by this notion, I have spent a good deal of time on the early experiences and predilections which structured Gillmors life, and which shaped from beneath the social, intellectual, and professional figure who emerged. I must emphasize one final point. Unlike Frances Gillmor, who wore many scholarly hats, I wear only one: Im a scholar of literature. This biography thus makes no claims to being either comprehensive or definitive; its primary focus is on Gillmors role as a woman of letters. Though any account of her life must of course refer to her work as a folklorist, ethnologist, and anthropologist, I shall leave it to others to do full justice to her

outstanding accomplishments in these fields.

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