

The Mystery of the Lady in Blue

by C.F. Eckhardt

The American southwest owes much of its Spanish exploration and settlement to a woman. Texas owes the entire Spanish mission effort to her. That woman, in her entire life, never left Spain.
At least, she never left it physically

Her name was Maria, and she was born April 2, 1602 in the town of Agreda, in Castile. She is said to have been a very beautiful woman, and a very devout one from childhood. She supposedly took a vow of chastity at the age of eight. In 1618 her parents converted their home to a convent and took vows as monk and nun. The next year Maria took holy orders as a nun of the Poor Clare order at the convent in Agreda. The habit of the Poor Clares, at the time, was blue. The Poor Clares were a cloistered order, never leaving the convent. She took the name of Maria de Jesus, to which was appended 'de Agreda' to identify her birthplace.

Sister Maria was a mystic and a writer, and her works which still survive include books called *The Mystical City Of God* and *Divine History Of The Virgin Mother Of God*. Both books were written from repeated visions the abbess had. She died in Agreda on May 24, 1665, at the age of 63. Thus far we have seen the life of a not-particularly remarkable Spanish nun.

Now, give a listen to Father Damian Massanet, as he writes to Don Carlos de Siguenza y Gongora, a high-ranking Spanish official in Mexico, in 1690.

"While we were at the Tejas village, after we had distributed clothing to the Indians and to the governor of the Tejas, the said governor asked me one evening for a piece of blue baize to make a shroud in which to bury his mother when she died. I told him that cloth would be more suitable, and he answered that he did not want any color other than blue. I then asked him what mystery was attached to the blue color, and he said that they were very fond of that color, especially for burial clothes, because in times past they had been visited frequently by a very beautiful woman, who used to come down from the heights,

dressed in blue garments, and that they wished to be like that woman. On my asking whether this had been a long time since, the governor said it had been before his time, but his mother, who was aged, had seen the woman, as had also the other old people." Father Massanet went on to say that this was certainly the Reverend Mother Maria de Jesus de Agreda, whose story was already well known.

What 'story'?

Well, it seems that the visions that went into the books weren't the only ones Sister Maria had. Between 1620 and 1631, Sister Maria regularly went into what seems to be cataleptic trances, after which she described a strange dream in which she was carried to a strange and wild land, where she taught the gospel to strange and wild people. Between 1621 and 1629 numerous missionaries in east and west Texas and into New Mexico reported encountering Indians who had apparently never before been contacted by Spaniards or Frenchmen, who spoke no Spanish or French, who carried crosses, knew Roman Catholic ritual, maintained recognizable altars in their villages, and knew Catholic liturgy—in their own tongues. When the Spaniards asked how they had learned these things, they described a beautiful young woman in blue who had been coming among them for years, teaching them the new religion in their own languages, who told them to welcome the white skinned Christians who would eventually come to see them.

But who was this mysterious woman in blue?

"She came down from the heights to us, she taught us the new religion, she stayed among us for a time, she told us you would come and to make you welcome, and then she went away. That's all we know." And that's all the Spanish could get from them.

Fray Alonzo de Benavides, father-custodian of New Mexico—which at that time included most of the American southwest including Texas and California—determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. The mysterious woman was dressed in blue. The nuns of the Poor Clare order wore blue. He found a painting of a Poor Clare nun and showed it to some of the Indians who claimed to have seen the mystery woman face to face.

"Is this your woman in blue?" he asked.

No, it wasn't. The dress was right, but the woman in the picture was older and somewhat fat. Their woman in blue was young and very beautiful.

At least Father Benavides was on the right trail. If the Indians were telling the truth, the 'woman in blue' was a Poor Clare nun. The trouble was, Poor Clares were cloistered nuns—from the day they took their vows to the day they were laid out for burial, they almost never left their convents. Was there perhaps a renegade Poor Clare who had somehow made her way to New Spain, who was wandering for thousands of leagues across unexplored country—from the forests of east Texas to the valley of the Rio Grande in what is now New Mexico—crossing uncharted rivers, traveling unescorted

through territory claimed by extremely warlike tribes, learning complicated languages at the snap of a finger, and teaching Christianity to widely scattered tribes of Indians?

Father Benavides began writing letters to fellow priests in Spain. The letters said, in effect, "Fellers, there's something almighty strange going on here. There's apparently a Poor Clare nun who's wandering all over this country, teaching Christianity to a whole collection of unrelated Indian tribes in their own languages. See if you can find out anything about this and tell me what's going on."

It apparently didn't take too long. Somebody went to the convent in Agreda and asked the right question, which went something like "Does anybody here know anything about a Sister who's in New Spain teaching Indian Christianity?"

The Mother Superior, Sister Maria, said "Yes. I'm the one."

"But Mother Superior," they objected, "you've never been out of Castile. You haven't even been outside the walls of your own convent since you took your vows."

"Not in body," she said, "but in spirit." She apparently also told them enough that a letter went back to New Spain, to Father Benavides, saying "You better come over her and talk to this woman, because there is decidedly something very strange going on." In 1631 Father Benavides went to the Poor Clare convent in Agreda and met, at long last, the lady in blue.

Father Alonzo de Benavides come back to New Spain convinced. Sister Maria de Jesus had to be the mysterious Poor Clare. At the age of 29 she was a remarkable beauty, just as the Indians had described her. She gave him detailed descriptions of the clothing and customs of the tribes she taught—which she, as a cloistered nun, could not have know about because they either had never been written down or had only recently been observed and recorded. She gave him names of tribes and of specific individuals in tribes that he either knew or later found to be accurate. Sister Maria had definitely been to New Spain and had done what she claimed—of that he had no doubt. She had also never, since taking her vows in 1619, set physical foot outside the walls of the Poor Clare convent in Agreda.

There are people today who call this sort of thing 'bilocation' or 'astral projection'. They work at it with symbols and wands and religions from obscure places. Some even claim to be able to do it.

I don't think Sister Maria would have found much kinship with those folks, nor would she have had such fancy names for what she did. If she'd been asked what she called what she did, she likely would have replied in the same vein as the reply she gave Father Benavides when he asked her where she learned to speak all the Indian languages. "I didn't," she said. "I simply spoke to them—and God let us understand one another"