



**Voodoo Priests, Noble Savages, and Ozark
Gypsies: The Life of Folklorist Mary Alicia Owen
(MISSOURI BIOGRAPHY SERIES)**

Greg Olson

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Folklorist Wayland Hand once called Mary Alicia Owen “the most famous American Woman Folklorist of her time.” Drawing on primary sources, such as maps, census records, court documents, personal letters and periodicals, and the scholarship of others who have analyzed various components of Owen’s multifaceted career, historian Greg Olson offers the most complete account of her life and work to date. He also offers a critical look at some of the short stories Owen penned, sometimes under the name Julia Scott, and discusses how the experience she gained as a fiction writer helped lead her to a successful career in folklore.

Olson begins with an in-depth look at St. Joseph, Missouri, the place where Owen lived most of her life. He explores the role that her grandparents and parents had in transforming the small trading village into one of the American West’s most exciting boomtowns. He also examines the family’s position of affluence and the effect that the devastation of the Civil War had on their family life and their standing within the community. He describes the interaction of Owen with her two younger sisters, both of whom had interesting and, for women of the time, unconventional careers.

Olson analyzes many of the nineteenth-century theories, stereotypes, and popular beliefs that influenced the work of Owen and many of her peers. By taking a cross-disciplinary look at her works of fiction, poetry, folklore, history, and anthropology, this volume sheds new light on elements of Owen’s career that have not previously been discussed in print. Examples of the romance stories that Owen wrote for popular magazines in the 1880’s are identified and examined in the context of the time in which Owen wrote them.

This groundbreaking biography shows that Owen was more than just a folklorist—she was a nineteenth-century woman of many contradictions. She was an independent woman of many interests who possessed a keen intellect and a genuine interest in people and their stories. Specialists in folklore, anthropology, women’s studies, local and regional history, and Missouriana will find much to like in this thoroughly researched study.

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