Eleanor Mae Zelliot was born October 7, 1926, in Des Moines, IA, to parents Ernest Zelliot and Minnie Hadley Zelliot. Growing up, Eleanor and her family, including her older sister Carolyn Zelliot, lived in Des Moines, Boston and Denver. From a young age, Eleanor was eager to explore the world around her. A passionate learner, she earned a BA in 1948 from William Penn College, an MA in history in 1949 from Bryn Mawr College, and, two decades later, a PhD in South Asian regional studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1969. That same year, Eleanor came to Northfield, MN, where she taught history at Carleton College from 1969 until her retirement in 1997 as the Laird Bell Professor of History emerita. While at Carleton, she inspired hundreds of undergraduate students to think and write about the history of South and Southeast Asia, and to make the most of the rich intellectual and cultural opportunities available to them in India. Generations of students fell in love with the country through her classes, learning to cook and eat Indian food at her house, experiencing Indian culture through the many events she organized, or traveling with her to Pune, India. She developed the ACM (Associated Colleges of the Midwest) India Studies Program in Pune, leading the program four times.

A prominent writer who specialized in the history of India, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, women of Asia, Untouchables, and global social movements, Eleanor was considered one of the foremost international experts on the history of the Dalits (Untouchables) of India and their leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and, as the first American scholar to pursue a doctorate on Ambedkar’s work, is today considered a pioneer in the field. Eleanor’s historical work on Ambedkar, on the Buddhist conversion of the Dalits for which he was largely responsible, and on the subsequent cultural and literary movements “changed the paradigm” in the study of South Asia. Eleanor was the author or co-author of numerous books and articles, including “Ambedkar’s World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement” (considered an essential document for researchers and students of the Dalit movement), “From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement,” “The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra,” “Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon,” “An Anthology of Dalit Literature,” and many others.
she claimed she didn't “do religion,” she wrote beautifully about the saint-poets of Maharashtra, as well as the importance of Buddhism in the lives of the Dalits.

Among her many honors were three American Institute of Indian Studies Fellowships (1963, 1975, 2000), a Fulbright Fellowship (1997), and the 1999 AAS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies, noted for her dedication to teaching and ground-breaking scholarship about Asia. Additionally, she served on the executive committees of the Minnesota Consortium for South Asia, the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American Association of Asian Studies, and ASIANetwork.

Eleanor's strong dedication to social justice was certainly influenced by her lifelong commitment to the Friends (Quakers), through whom she first became a writer, editor, teacher, and went on Quaker mission trips to India in 1952 and the Soviet Union in 1955. It was on that first trek to India that she discovered her love for the country, impressed by India’s complex, colorful and open society. That journey would lead to a lifelong passion and academic pursuit.

Eleanor generously gave of her time and attention to her students, colleagues, and friends around the world, offering love, advice, and often a bit of wry humor. She traveled widely, including well into retirement, and continued to write up until her last year. She enjoyed reading, especially mysteries and detective stories, and made a point of keeping up on current events.

Eleanor loved her home on the banks of the Cannon River, which she designed to take full advantage of the many flowers and birds and other wildlife that surrounded her, and to provide a retreat for all who visited. Eleanor died June 5, 2016, at her home in Randolph, MN, surrounded by loving friends and family. She was 89 years old.

Eleanor is survived by two nephews, Donald Piburn of Grand Junction, CO, and Marvin Piburn of Hudson, IA; a niece, Carol Thonen of Wichita, KS; their families, and many close friends near and far.

Memorial services for Eleanor will be held on Friday, June 17, at 9 am in the Carleton College Skinner Memorial Chapel and on Saturday, June 18, at 2 pm at the Cannon Valley Friends Meeting House (512 Washington St., Northfield).

Gifts in memory of Eleanor may be made to the Cannon Valley Friends Meeting House or the Eleanor Zelliot Memorial Fund at Carleton College.