

The Michael Field Diaries: Life-Writing as a Lens into the Fin-de-Siècle

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Abstract

Fin-de-siècle poet and dramatist Michael Field (the collective pen name of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) kept a joint diary for over 26 years. Until recently, those 28 volumes of manuscript diaries have only been accessible by visiting The British Library archives. Now, for the first time, a team of international scholars is working together to transcribe and annotate these diaries in order to create “The Michael Field Diaries Digital Archive” that is set to launch in January of 2018. Our project was to transcribe and annotate the 1907 diary manuscript, under Dr. Andrea Gazzaniga’s leadership. In order to successfully complete our work, we conducted thorough research into critical biographies, archival records, primary sources from the Victorian era, liturgical texts, and scholarly articles. In the last 10 years, Michael Field has emerged as an important figure in literary history and so too has Cooper and Bradley’s life-writing. From what we discovered about their creative process and their relationships with other artists of the time, we argue that these diaries provide significant context for understanding their poetic works and provide context for scholars and historians wishing to document the life stories of many other fin-de-siècle artists. In addition, the record of their conversion from Paganism to Catholicism allows us to draw conclusions about the many queer writers who converted to Catholicism at the end of the 19th century, including Oscar Wilde and John Gray. Moreover, Cooper and Bradley’s detailed record of art exhibitions, fashion, and dramatic performances offers an intimate insight into the development of aestheticism throughout Europe. Through our work on this project, we have a new appreciation and understanding of how these diaries are an invaluable scholarly tool for unlocking the fin-de-siècle as a time of interest for religious, literary, gender, and queer studies.

Keywords: Michael Field, Life-Writing, Fin-de-Siècle

1. Introduction

‘Michael Field’ is the pseudonym for two female writers, Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper. They were lovers in the romantic sense, but they were also artistic collaborators. They chose to combine their names so that they would receive the same criticism for their work that men did, but it fit their situation very well, as they deeply felt their connectivity and saw their work as a purely joint effort. They wrote lyric poetry and verse dramas in the late 19th and early 20th century, an era commonly referred to as the fin-de-siècle. They lived in Richmond, London for the larger part of their life, near another collaborative couple, Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, who will be addressed later. During the phase of their life which we studied, they also spent a large portion of their time in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Beginning in 1888, they kept a joint diary of their day-to-day life, which would later be published as “Works and Days.” The diaries exist in a physical form in the British Library, and until recently, it required travelling there to view and study them. But what good is that to the undergraduate, to the casual interest, to the scholar who doesn’t have the freedom to up and take the pilgrimage to England? Marion Thain, a renowned Michael Field scholar, had an ambition in the 90’s to digitize the entirety of the diaries, as well as make them open access. In 2002, they were published as a

microfilm, but still, there were issues: “faint pencil markings on the manuscripts were often illegible; the microfilm set was expensive to buy; and there was no shortcut to winding through whole reams of film to find even the start of the relevant year let alone to search for a particular word.”¹

Eventually the diaries were uploaded to the *Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium*, but it was still a slog to find any specific information – they were uploaded as scans, so it required reading page after page to find the exact information one might want, and that’s after getting used to their script-y, swirly handwriting.

It takes one more step to turn years of diary writing into an invaluable scholarly tool, and that’s where we come in: Under the direction of Dr. Andrea Gazzaniga, we and three other students transcribed and annotated Field’s 1907 diary. The diaries we worked through covered the year 1907 in their lives, which is marked by the death of their dog, Whym Chow, their conversion to Catholicism, and their progress on the poetry collection *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*.

2. Methodology

Each of us were given a set of 100 pages to start, and as this was new to all of us, it was a steep learning curve. Most of us started by looking at the pages and writing down what we thought the words were, and then later typing up the page. This was helpful in that it gave us a second eye on the page and gave us an opportunity to explore some of their writing quirks in our own hand, but it proved to be very time-consuming. This would turn into doing the work entirely on the computer, with one window showing the page itself and the other a blank Word document for us to transcribe the page on.

Even after leaving the page for transcriptions, we would find pen and paper more helpful for figuring out some obscure moments in their writing. The two of us especially often shared conversations where we would show each other certain scribbles or our facsimiles of them and ponder over what they could mean. In fact, we kept lists of frequently used words or abbreviations and approximately what they look like in their handwriting to refer to when we see those symbols on future pages.

Katherine and Edith both made frequent use of other languages, often Latin and French. These were some of the trickiest parts, both to transcribe and to annotate and translate. We would make the initial transcriptions, then do the translations as annotations.

The Latin phrases were typically quotes from things related to their Catholicism: quotes from hymns, mass prayers, and Bible verses. For these, we were able to search for versions of the works that had already been translated. We made annotations specifying what work they came from, what they translated to, and, when relevant, what versions they were from.

The French was harder to find. Sometimes they were from literary works, which were relatively easy to find the sources for, but aren’t always translated already. In this case, we would still mark down the source material for the words. For longer passages one of our transcribers, who studies French, did an initial translation and a native French-speaking professor from NKU helped to correct those translated words.

In addition to translations, we annotated literary or cultural references. These annotations are where the bulk of our research happened, and we found some surprising rabbit holes. On at least one occasion we had e-mails out to extremely specialized scholars, hoping they could shed light on some tangential minutia about Rickett’s design of *Elektra* or what plays Mrs. Pat was in. We used maps of Richmond, London to figure out what street or store they may have been talking about. Sometimes it genuinely did come down to guess work – “Ode to Maia” isn’t one of Keats’ most famous, and only a trail of google searches would get us there from a scrawl in Katherine’s handwriting.

Another important annotation was their use of nicknames. They had nicknames for everyone around them, even themselves. We had to learn their language of names before we could accurately annotate and learn about their work. Katherine went by ‘Michael,’ Edith went by ‘Henry’ or ‘Field.’ William Rothenstein was called the ‘Heavenly Dog,’ but another nickname, ‘Famous Little Fellow,’ we never actually nailed down whether its referent was John Gray or his dog. Another name of interest was ‘Goss cannon’ or ‘Goss’ - from a footnote in an entirely different scholarly work we learned this referred to Gerald Fitzgibbon, though in the diaries themselves they just say “his real name defies meaning.”²

While the transcribed diaries are not actually live yet, they will be published online in a searchable format.

3. Literary Circles

Michael Field spent time with a host of fin-de-siecle artists who were famous in their own right. Their close friends, Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, are known to history as lovers, contributing to the history of queer artistic couples during the fin-de-siecle which Edith & Katherine were certainly a part of. Ricketts participated in many forms of art, but was primarily known for his theatre designs and his typography. Shannon was a painter and lithographer.

Their connection with the Fields was personal as well as artistic, and was shown throughout their diaries. They would often reproduce letters that they sent and received in the diaries, and these letters offer invaluable insight into their relationships. During the 1907 diary, they were working on their poetry collection *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*, and Katherine recorded Ricketts' involvement:

Seriously, dear Painter, draw me your
wildest bees, in swarm, or settling
on S. John, or in stormy wrangle with
the locusts, or meditating with
deliberate feet, the camel's hair...
We are at your mercy, drunk with
sea-air, & so stupid we weep as soon
as Fisher Unwin grows stern &
business-like.
You will say too what colour the end-
papers should be.²

They would also include personal anecdotes that don't necessarily speak of artistry or history, but rather show slices of their own lives:

We
drink tea & talk of Mrs. Pat &
Herod, & hear that the Artists
nearly came together on Good
Friday.²

Their records of friendship turn even more personal when they discuss John Gray, who was instrumental in their conversion to Catholicism. Gray has his own infamy in the fin-de-siecle, marked as the potential inspirations for Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, and courting him for a while. By the time he existed in the Field's diaries, however, he was a Catholic priest. He writes to them occasionally of his own faith, and often about theirs – this from a letter when he learned they wanted to join the church:

"What throbbing
times! Surely all will be
well with Michael as well as
with Henry... Henry examined
in the penny catechism! How
the angels must have sung
this morning "Quasimodo
geniti infantes alleluia!"²

Again, much like with Ricketts and Shannon, John Gray is partially remembered for his romantic relationships – as mentioned with Wilde, but during this time and the rest of his life, Marc-Andre Raffalovich. Raffalovich followed suit with Gray and many others of the time and converted to Catholicism, going to church in Edinburgh with Gray. The Fields visit Edinburgh during the scope of the 1907 diary, and attend church with Gray, Raffalovich, and Florence Gribbell, one of their friends. Being around Raffalovich especially seems to awake in Edith a sort of nostalgia for their pre-conversion years.

At Low Mass, the Celebrant, the author
of Silverpoints: in one row Michael,
Field & Raffalovich [sic], who thought he was
writing to a boy of his own age
when he wrote to the author of
Callirrhoe more than 20 years
ago. Think of it!—And all of
us before a Roman Altar in adoration.²

While Michael Field was writing, Lord Alfred Douglas (also known as “Bosie,” somewhat infamously) was an editor for *The Academy*, a periodical mainly consisting of artistic reviews. Despite significant vitriol in the diary, calling him a ‘seducer,’ ‘wicked,’ and an ‘infamous Creature,’ he actually aided the women in getting their work published. During his time with *The Academy*, he anonymously published a sonnet form review of Field’s work called “To A Silent Poet,” which led to Fisher-Unwin to solicit a manuscript from them. Literary irony is rarely lost on them—they note the connection between Gray, Douglas, and themselves:

We have been abjuring the nineties, &
all their spirit, in the Church
John Gray of Silverpoints has
raised for the Divine Presence,
beautiful, austere, consecrated
—& Alfred Douglas’ is
the voice that calls to the
world to receive us as we
come forth of the Church.²

4. The Movement to the Catholic Church

So, we already established that Bradley and Cooper, like other contemporaries in the Aesthetic movement, converted to Catholicism. But, we haven’t talked about what this means for interdisciplinary studies of the time period, or how reading the diary affects the interpretation and understanding of the Aesthetic movement and its artworks. Significant about 1907 is their conversion to Catholicism, providing insight into the massive move toward the Catholic church made by other decadent authors and artists.

So why did they convert to Catholicism so late in life? The main impetus seems to be that their beloved dog, Whym Chow, died. Given to them by a family friend after their father’s unexpected and tragic death, Whym Chow became a linchpin in their relationship. Their poetry, particularly their collection called *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*, exhibits and worshipful and almost eroticized image of their dog. However, their conversion also seems to stem from their involvement with the ideals of the Aesthetic movement as a whole.

Aesthetes down to their souls, the subjects upon which they focalize in their mutual diary reflects their preoccupation with “having mutually incompatible things simultaneously”³. After reading their diary, I feel that their conversion to Catholicism and the mass influx of Aesthetes doing the same may be related to this underpinning in the artistic movement as a whole. Already having engaged with classical pagan symbols, aesthetes may have converted to experience perfect ekphrasis. The juxtaposition of Bradley and Cooper’s paganism and Catholicism in Volume 21 and 22, making up the year 1907, stuck out to me because the two practices didn’t seem to be fighting each other. I didn’t really read a strong denouncement of paganism, but more so an exploration of how pagan themes interacted with Catholic practice in their day-to-day life. Bradley and Cooper truly understood how to live as an artwork, and it is their life-writing that truly reflects that.

The other Decadent poets writing and interacting with Michael Field also converted to Catholicism at this time, following Walter Pater’s example. Pater was one of their biggest inspirations, aside from Oscar Wilde, for the Aesthetic movement with his principle of Art for Art’s Sake. John Gray and Marc-Andre Raffalovich (as discussed before) were among some of the converted who held a great deal of influence on the writers. Like the Michael Fields, whose life-writing fills out the picture of the Aesthetic movement and its principles as told by first-hand members, these Aesthetes may have felt that Catholicism was the new mystery cult of their age, a beauteous, almost psychedelic ritual or an

organic, emotionally moving theatrical performance. Like Walter Pater, they seem more interested in the chants, songs, sacraments, and decorations of the church than the doctrines or dogmas themselves. Continuous with Art for Art's Sake, Pater's Catholicism became Ritual for Ritual's Sake. The Decadent poets read Catholic ritual as an internal, bodily feeling and an escape from the intellectually taxing social realm, and experiencing the diary in the visceral way that I and my fellow team members truly revealed this idea.

Following their conversion, their diary entries and their poetry would become dominated by their Catholicism. During the 1907 volume, Michael Field was revising and working on the collection of poetry called *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*, which truly captures the ekphrasis they so aspired to achieve in the sense that their pagan past was layered on the Catholic symbolism of their present. This collection, which they produced and published from 1907 and 1908, "mixed poems from the late 1890s (on nature, classical themes and love) with new religious ones."⁴

Not only were they engaging with the arts of the past, what might be called their classical period, but they were also engaging with their present as it was happening. They often shared parts of songs or prayers, and described the feelings and sensations received from participating in the sacraments. Confession and Eucharist were the two that stuck out the most in the diary and Edith was very active in recording what sins she confessed and how the eucharist had affected her. She also recorded her interaction with the homily, or the priest's talk, about the reading of that morning's mass.

This precursory stream of consciousness style of writing is what confirms the diary as a truthful, physical representation of how the mind of an aesthete interpreted the movement at the time. In the diary, Edith and Katherine answer questions had by scholars about why and for what purpose aesthetes like them would choose to convert to Catholicism, but also about how this conversion would affect the way they lived the lifestyle and the way the understood the visual arts.

Their relationship with the Painters also became a subject in the diary pregnant with opportunity to analyze their reasoning for conversion and how their pagan past and Catholic present played into the way they saw the aesthetic world. Upon noticing a painting by Ricketts called Calvary, Edith also noticed a painting of the pagan god Bacchus, with whom they had a very strong connection to in the diary. She says:

After the manner of the Ode to the Nightingale Fay has painted the sin of lyric drunkenness—a venial possession by the giddy Lord of sensual Thunder—terrible & yet we feel but Temporary! That [<] The [>] storm will drop its wind, its darts; & we shall see no more this lovely fall of Bacchus from God to Demon. India has been too much for him—The picture is busy in execution, but set next to the concentrated strength of the great Calvary we feel that the disorder is part of the whole fit of summer madness.²

Through sections like this in the diary, it is as if they are translating "what lines and colors of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate."³

When they write about paintings like this, a scholar could understand that Catholicism and the juxtaposition of Catholicism and paganism that was played with by aesthetes, particularly by Michael Field due to their involvement with both belief systems, was an attempt on their part to capture that ekphrasis of living as art. Both belief systems served as inspiration for their art because they interpreted them as active artwork.

They lived like art and their life-writing exposes how they engaged in living as transmutable, living works of art to inspire their mature works and time that proceeded after them. They achieved perfect ekphrasis without translating, but synthesizing. Their diary as a work now available to scholars everywhere is a priceless source of information about the Aesthetic movement and how those involved lived out the philosophy that continues to enchant art historians, literary scholars, and other academics across disciplines today.

5. Conclusion

This project is useful to literary scholars in their work to expand the canon of British literature, as well as to give access to feminist critics and queer theorists, in particular, to the diaries. However, the accessibility to these diaries through our research provides a more thorough basis for Art Historians, Theologians, and Women's and Genders studies scholars when approaching the topics of conversion to Catholicism, the experiences of queer men and women, and the production of art at the end of the 19th century.

Previous scholarship has often been stunted by the lack of queer female voices, due to the censorship of artistic work by women and the censorship of the queer experience. As well, the diaries' exclusive existence in print has served as a barrier for scholars to access these first-hand accounts and use them for deeper research. These first-hand accounts of the large influx of artistic minds into the Catholic church may now be studied more widely by theologians, granting

them a wider perspective on why the mass conversion began and who converted. Art historians, as well, will benefit from this research to contextualize the art created by queer painters in the fin-de-siècle period and the religiosity infused into those works. It is our hope that the work on this project will create new opportunities for the study of queer female voices in the late 19th century, and give Michael Field the notoriety they deserve as historical and literary figures. Their diaries and the published works they produced during their lifetime are intrinsic to the study of 19th century British culture and the movements within art. These unpublished personal accounts are the next step to expanding the canon and to understanding the perspectives of queer women throughout history. This research, we believe, will pave the way for the work begun by feminists and queer activists who aimed to fully represent history, not simply through the eyes of those accepted, but also through the accounts of often marginalized communities.

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7. Works Cited

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