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Locomotive in Petticoats

By BEN DOWNING
Published: May 18, 2008

In 1878, Queen Victoria used a telephone for the first time, after Alexander Graham Bell arranged a demonstration. A phone was placed on a piano and a series of songs played and sung for the curious monarch, who listened intently. In retrospect, this little incident seems charged with symbolism, a marker of the old age touching the new. But who had the honor of performing for the queen, albeit telephonically? Not a famous musician, nor even a Briton, but rather an American journalist named Kate Field who'd been moonlighting for Bell as what we would now call a P.R. flack. With her knack for job-juggling, eye for the main chance and limitless energy, Field (1838-96) was herself a pure product of modernity, a self-invented dynamo chugging across the later 19th century like a locomotive in petticoats.



Courtesy of Boston Public Library
Kate Field

KATE FIELD The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist.

By Gary Scharnhorst.
Illustrated. 306 pp.
Syracuse University
Press. \$27.95.

Gary Scharnhorst's biography of Field, the first in over a century, is exactly what it should be: an articulate, no-nonsense account. Though Scharnhorst makes some effort to depict her as an "unorthodox feminist," he's mostly content to pick his way through her long, various, roller-coaster career.

That career got off to a precocious start in Florence, where Field lived from 1859 to 1861. These were among the most volatile and dramatic years of the Risorgimento, and Field, who had gone to Florence to train as a singer but was thwarted by bronchial illness, quickly established herself as a frontline authority on the Italian struggle for unification, which she wrote about, in tones of strident sympathy, for American newspapers.

She also made quick conquests among the city's Anglophone literary colony. George Eliot took a liking to Field, while the Brownings became firm friends. [Anthony Trollope](#) developed a protracted crush on her and used her as the model for several of his characters. Though these relationships were no doubt meaningful

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to Field, she was also swift to capitalize on them, writing essays and profiles. One such was “English Authors in Florence” for *The Atlantic Monthly*. ([Henry James](#) was also publishing in *The Atlantic* at that time, and although they never met, he is believed to have used Field as a model for Henrietta Stackpole, the spirited American journalist in “The Portrait of a Lady.”)

Back in the States, Field worked for several years as a freelance journalist before grabbing another set of literary coattails: those of [Charles Dickens](#). Field covered his 1867-68 American reading tour with such rhapsodic brio that she earned “wide, spasmodic notoriety,” as [Mark Twain](#) put it, becoming “a celebrity at once.” Her articles on Dickens were packaged as a book and converted into one of the lectures she later delivered at lyceums around the country, to popular acclaim.

But Field had even grander ambitions. Descended from a theatrical family, she, too, was determined to make her name on stage. In 1874-75 she appeared in a series of plays — mostly to lukewarm or savage reviews. Undaunted, she moved to England, where she found greater success as an actress and playwright. She also continued to work as a journalist and even wrote an epistolary novel, in addition to touting telephones for Bell and raising money for Stratford’s new [Shakespeare Memorial Theater](#). At the theater’s opening night gala in 1879, Field was “literally the first person to appear on the stage,” Scharnhorst writes. As with her phone call to Queen Victoria, it was quite a coup, especially for an American.

Confident that her one-woman play “Eyes and Ears in London” would allow her at last to triumph at home, Field returned to the States and took her show on a tour of the Northeast. Its popularity and good reviews made for sweet vindication, but she soon squandered her riches and reputation in an ill-conceived fashion-import venture that left its investors empty-handed.

Seeking yet another fresh start, she headed west, writing a series of anti-Mormon articles and lectures and another series in praise of Alaska. She also won a lucrative contract to promote California wines — to preach “the gospel of the grape,” as she put it. Eventually Field swung back east, this time to Washington, which she predicted was “destined to be the social, literary and artistic center of this country.” (Alas, the lady was no prophet.) There she founded an influential weekly paper, *Kate Field’s Washington*, which ran from 1890 to 1895. But the following year, while stumping for annexation in Hawaii, she took ill and died. That Field managed to contract pneumonia in the tropics speaks to the punishing pace she set for herself.

As Scharnhorst’s subtitle suggests, Field had many lives, but they were all outward. Nomadic, unreflective and, despite having turned some heads, probably a virgin to the end of her days, Field had no private or inner life to speak of — or at least none that can be recovered, and Scharnhorst was wise not to try. “I need a clear head to accomplish the work I must do in this world,” Field once stated, “and nothing so unfits a sensitive nature for mental exertion as emotional intensities.” Scharnhorst was also wise not to make big claims for Field’s writing. Her description of, say, Dickens unleashing “a sunlit shower of smiles and tears” may have melted readers in 1868 but hardly has the same effect in 2008. What continues to impress, however, is the woman’s sheer undeflectable force. Thomas Carlyle once labeled John Stuart Mill’s self-accounting “the autobiography of a

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steam engine." In this book, Kate Field comes across as an equally well-oiled piece of human machinery.

Ben Downing is a co-editor of Parnassus: Poetry in Review.

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