

Re-membering Michael Field:
Scenes from a Biographical Praxis



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Rachel Morley

BA(Hons), Macquarie University; MA, University of Western Sydney

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Abstract

THIS thesis comprises a collection of published and submitted essays presented in the form of the thesis by publication model. The essays explore the experience of researching and writing biography in order to develop an understanding of the effects of that experience on both the subject who is written, and on the subject who writes. The project takes as its starting point the idea that ‘doing biography’ is not purely an intellectual endeavour, as some critics would have it, but that it is also a deeply personal and affective one too. To this effect the project deploys theories of affect and cognition, combined with a literary/ethnographic approach, in order to document and analyse some of the ways in which the researching/writing experience influences how and what biographers learn, and how such experiences might be productively harnessed for conscious inclusion within the final work. Where biographical theorists have tended to focus on interpretive studies of the already produced biographical text, this project sees the processes leading to that production as both an important and generative subject for study itself.

Here, critical theory is enhanced through creative discourse, much of which is drawn from a series of biographical explorations based on my own research into the English-born couple Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913), two Victorian poet/dramatists better known by their joint pen-name ‘Michael Field’. The critical/creative framework provides the opportunity to discuss (and reveal) through praxis, some of the mechanical and philosophical questions pertinent to the study. Matters of praxis include the choice of subject, the identity of the biographer, the use of certain biographical materials and sources, the biographical pilgrimage as journey/quest, the act of writing/rewriting, and the final production itself. These issues inevitably lead to an exploration of more complex matters such as the cultural/social/historical impulse/s that connect biographers to particular subjects, and the impact of that relationship (whether ‘positive’ or not) on writing; the relationship between the researcher and the archive; the function of life-writing; and questions and issues pertaining to postmodern writing techniques. The challenge is to develop a writing technique that engages with the experience of doing and making biography in such a way as not to diminish or detract from the primary task – to tell the story of the other.

For my parents, Malle and Michael Morley

acknowledgements

GENE Fowler once said that ‘Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.’ While I have had my share of octane-fuelled moments of inspiration in preparing this PhD, much time has also been spent staring at the flickering cursor on the computer screen. For helping me get through those darker moments I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the people who have supported me throughout my PhD candidature.

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Let us write it over,
O my lover,
For the far Time to discover
(Michael Field)

(A Palimpsest, *Wild Honey*, 1908)