



PROJECT MUSE®

The Writerly Life of Eva Frances Douglas

Randi Lynn Tanglen

Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, Volume 26, Number 2, Fall 2007,
pp. 331-337 (Article)

Published by The University of Tulsa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsw.2007.a232430>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232430>

The Writerly Life of Eva Frances Douglas

Randi Lynn Tanglen

University of Arizona

As a graduate student writing a dissertation on nineteenth-century American women writers, I am grateful to the feminist literary scholars of the generations before mine who spent hours and years, if not entire careers, in archives searching for the legacies of literary foremothers. Their archival recovery work provides us not only with forgotten literature produced by women but also neglected stories of the writers themselves. My recent work with the Frances Douglas Papers, 1892-1963, housed in Special Collections of the University of Arizona Library in Tucson, has made me realize that archival and recovery work is still relevant for those of us just now entering the field of women's writing.¹ It is especially vital because so many stories of women writers, like their work itself, remain to be recovered. When she donated her papers to the University of Arizona in 1963, Eva Frances Douglas (1870-1969), a translator of Spanish novels and author of many short stories, articles, and book reviews, left not only the legacy of her work, but also the story of a woman who tenaciously labored throughout her life to develop and exude a writerly identity.

Douglas was born in Connecticut in 1870. She moved to Isleta, New Mexico, as a teenager to live with her older sister, who was married to an English trader. In Isleta, Douglas started to teach herself Spanish and eventually became fluent. Through her sister and brother-in-law, Douglas met Charles Fletcher Lummis, who had a national reputation as an author, adventurer, and activist for American Indians.² Douglas and Lummis fell in love, but at the time he was married to his first wife, Dorothea Rhodes.³ Rhodes and Lummis divorced in February 1891, however, and Douglas and Lummis subsequently married on 27 March 1891. Their daughter, Turbesé, was born in June 1892. The couple soon settled in Los Angeles, where they had three more children. Lummis pursued a literary career there as the head city librarian and as editor of the literary magazine *Land of Sunshine*. Although she had just an eighth-grade education, Douglas found ways to further her intellectual and literary pursuits. She continued to practice Spanish by translating documents and teaching the language. The author Mary Austin intimates in her autobiography that Charles Lummis's literary success depended heavily upon Douglas's translations of Spanish texts.⁴ Douglas left Lummis in 1909, and their marriage ended in a bitter and very public divorce in 1911. In 1913 Douglas married mining engineer Courtenay DeKalb and moved to Tucson, Arizona, where her career as a translator of Spanish fiction

really began to flourish.⁵

In 1963, when Douglas moved back to California with her daughter, she donated her papers, along with her own library of 1,100 Spanish books, to the University of Arizona in Tucson.⁶ The donation of her papers suggests that Douglas saw her work as worthy of future examination and was hoping to be remembered as a literary woman. The papers themselves, including a bibliography of her published work that she updated regularly, exhibit her scrupulous efforts to document her writerly life and accomplishments. The self-maintained list of her published writing—which includes short stories, articles, translations, and literary reviews—is fourteen pages long and spans the years 1896-1937.⁷ Early in her career as a writer, Douglas wrote several short stories about New Mexico for Lummis's literary magazine *Land of Sunshine*. Titles include "The Blonde Wizard" (March 1896), "The Padre's Story" (September 1896), and "The Will of God" (December 1899). Throughout her life she published several articles and short stories in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Evening Post*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, and the scholarly journal *Hispania*. She kept copies of all of her published work and, later on, the manuscripts and drafts of her book reviews and articles. Her papers also contain working drafts of her translations from Spanish, particularly of novels by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez and Concha Espina de Serna.⁸ Douglas is also noted for translating the eighteenth-century diary of Father Junípero Serra, the Spanish Franciscan friar known for establishing several California missions. This document had been considered undecipherable by other translators and scholars.⁹

I first came into contact with the Douglas Papers when I was a student in Professor Judy Temple's "Women's Diaries" graduate seminar at the University of Arizona in the fall of 2004. Douglas kept a diary for most of her life, and our class studied the portion she kept during the winter of 1892-1893 when she was a new wife and mother. The Douglas Papers contain several of her diaries, intact.¹⁰ The 1892-1893 diary is written in a small, lined "Memorandum" notebook. Since the paper of the diary is starting to crack and the ink is beginning to fade, the Special Collections librarians made a photocopy of the diary for members of the class to read. In my later research, I was able to read from the original 1892-1893 diary, as none of Douglas's diaries or personal correspondence have been transcribed. Many of the entries are written in Spanish, indicating that Douglas used her diary as a site to practice her language skills. After visiting Special Collections on our own to read the diary, each student prepared a report documenting the events, people, and issues that seemed to matter the most to Douglas. Professor Temple asked us to interpret the diary by thinking about Douglas's self-portrayal as well as the diary's "plot" or recurring patterns. As I read the entries, I noticed that in spite of the domestic distractions of running a household and caring for an infant, Douglas made a point not only of developing herself as a liter-

ary woman but also of *portraying* herself as one in her diary.

In 1892, when Lummis went to Peru for an archaeological expedition, he relocated Douglas and their baby daughter, Turbesé, from Isleta, New Mexico to Los Angeles to live near his first wife, Dorothea Rhodes.¹¹ Douglas set up house with Turbesé and Maria, a maid from Isleta, in October 1892. She started writing in her diary on 22 October 1892—the day after Lummis left on his trip—and continued until 27 April 1893, very soon after his return. A typical journal entry during this six-month span records how much time each day she could spend away from domestic tasks in order to engage in her own literary work. On most mornings Douglas would watch Turbesé while Maria cleaned the house. When Maria finished cleaning, she would then watch the baby, and Douglas would have time for herself. On 4 November she writes, “The day is lovely and Maria is out with the baby. We try to have her out from 10 till four every day.”¹² Douglas hoped Maria would finish her work every morning by ten o’clock so that Maria could take the baby off her hands. Douglas would then have until four o’clock to study Spanish or write letters to her husband. Domestic concerns sometimes disrupted this time, to her great frustration. On 7 November she reports, “We got up early, but Maria was so slow with her work she didn’t get thro’ till eleven;” and on 11 November Douglas “swept then took care of the baby while Maria drizzled around in her usual style.”¹³ Douglas’s dependence on Maria, a Native woman from Isleta, to provide domestic work and child care is a reminder to present-day feminist scholars that the accomplishments of white women writers often relied on race and class privilege that, at the time, went unquestioned.

One way in which Douglas portrays herself as a literary woman in her diary is by tracing her entrée into the literary scene of Los Angeles. She made friends and was eventually admitted into the inner circle of literati, probably through the introductions that a friend named Mrs. Spalding provided her. Douglas worked to meet people like Spalding by showing them souvenirs and pictures from Isleta and by impressing them with her fluency in Spanish.¹⁴ She was eventually invited to join literary groups such as the women’s Friday Morning Club, in which, according to Douglas’s diary, women had the opportunity to practice public speaking by debating issues of the day.

Her desire to become part of the literary scene in Los Angeles is best illustrated in an entry from 31 December 1892. The author Hamlin Garland was in town lecturing for three days, and on 29 December, Douglas reports going to his lecture on “Americanism in Fiction.”¹⁵ She was invited to a luncheon in Garland’s honor at the home of Mrs. Spalding, where many of the cultural and literary elite of Los Angeles were in attendance. She reports:

I got there at twelve and met Mrs. Graham, one of the California literati. Mr. Garland arrived about 12.30, and we talked about every body. He had heard of

Charlie from Dr. Emil Blum, and said he was very sorry not to meet him. We had a long pleasant visit, and when he left he pressed my hand, and said, "Mrs. Lummis, I am very glad to see that you are one of "our kind.""¹⁶

The passage is striking for the satisfaction Douglas conveys over her validation by an eminent writer, signalling her apparent admission to the ranks of an elite literary community. These words also are noteworthy for their positioning alongside accounts of the minutiae of life at home, where, for example, "After supper Maria and [Douglas] hemmed the baby some new diapers."¹⁷ Domestic attentiveness is in close proximity to literary ambition throughout the diary, and not without resulting tensions. Although Lummis assured Douglas in a letter written before their marriage that she would be his companion, not his slave, the burdens of running a household and caring for their child delayed Douglas's writing in ways that did not burden her husband.¹⁸ It is significant that Douglas's first Spanish translation, *The Blood of the Arena*, was published in 1909, the year that she finally left Lummis.

Other evidence in the papers suggests that Douglas's concern with maintaining a writerly identity continued after she was established as a woman of letters. A series of cover letters for reviews she submitted to *The New York Times Book Review* between 1928 and 1940 illustrates how she presented herself as a professional writer and translator while also making use of her social identity as wife to Courtenay DeKalb, a successful businessman. In the by-line to her reviews, she identified herself as "Frances Douglas," but she signed her letters to J. Donald Adams, *The New York Times Book Review* editor and a friend of her husband, as "Frances DeKalb."¹⁹ Douglas established herself as a *writer* through the tone she employed in the letters to Adams. They almost always open with the sentence, "I take pleasure in submitting a new letter upon recent literary matter in Spain."²⁰ At times she notes how she incorporated suggestions Adams had made for previous pieces into her current reviews. Assertively taking ownership of her work, she also gives specific directives and recommendations for where to cut the reviews if Adams finds them to be too long. The letters function additionally as an opportunity for Douglas to remind Adams that others think of her as a writer, when she includes references and descriptions of her accomplishments. She goes so far as to send him a newspaper clipping about the honorary doctorate she received from the University of Arizona.

But although she highlights her accomplishments, she is careful to balance her writerly and wifely personae. In a letter of 11 November 1933, she notes the pleasure that her deceased husband would have felt over her publication in *The New York Times Book Review*:

Nothing gives me more satisfaction than publication in your Book Review. I appreciate it more than anything. My friends unite in expressing the wish that the honor might have come while Mr. DeKalb was still living; it would have

given him such satisfaction. . . . However, Mr. DeKalb felt also that publication in your Book Review was a distinction, and I am glad that through you he enjoyed that satisfaction.²¹

Here a widow's wistful recollection of her husband is coupled with writerly self-promotion, as Douglas cements her relationship with a powerful editor.

In tracing the development and portrayal of Eva Frances Douglas's writerly persona, I examined just one of her diaries and some of her letters left in her papers. While several scholars have mined the Douglas Papers for information about Lummis, the papers are worthy of further examination by scholars in the fields of women's history, women's life writing and autobiography, comparative literature, and Spanish literature. The papers could easily serve as the source of a literary biography on this accomplished and determined writer. It is clear that Douglas was waiting, even upon the gift of her books and her papers to the University of Arizona Library, to be recovered and recognized for her work as a writer and translator. She clearly merits such attention. Her desire to transform herself into an accomplished woman of letters, in spite of her minimal formal education and the demands placed on her as wife and mother, makes Eva Frances Douglas's writerly life a fascinating story waiting to be told.

NOTES

I am extremely grateful to Professor Judy Temple for introducing me to the Frances Douglas Papers and for encouraging my study of the lives and work of women writers.

¹ The "Frances Douglas Papers, 1892-1963" (hereafter referred to as the Douglas Papers) are housed in Special Collections at the University of Arizona Library and are listed under MS 037. The finding aid can be accessed through the catalog on the University of Arizona Library website <www.library.arizona.edu>.

² By the time Douglas would have met Lummis, he was already a literary sensation, especially on the West coast. His weekly dispatches from his famous 1884 trek across the country eventually became his well-known book, *A Tramp Across the Continent* (1892). In 1888, prior to moving to Isleta, Lummis had been partially paralyzed with a stroke. In 1889, his political activism on behalf of American Indians in New Mexico resulted in his attempted assassination while living in Isleta. Douglas and her sister nursed Lummis after the attempt on his life. The most recent and comprehensive biographical information on Lummis can be found in Mark Thompson, *American Character: The Curious Life of Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Rediscovery of the Southwest* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001); subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. Some of Lummis's papers are also housed at the University of Arizona Library's Special Collections, listed under MS 039.

³ The relationship between Charles Fletcher Lummis, his first wife Dorothea, and Douglas was unusually amicable and, as Thompson writes, "curious" (p. 135). Douglas lived with Dorothea in Los Angeles while Douglas and Lummis were engaged but

before his divorce to Dorothea was finalized. Later, they lived nearby, and Douglas and Dorothea met several times a week. Lummis and Douglas even called their baby daughter "Dorothea." Several of Douglas's friends in Los Angeles asked her about this, and on 18 November 1892, she wrote in her diary, "O, I'm so tired of hearing people always wondering about our relations!"

⁴ In *Earth Horizon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), p. 292, Mary Austin wrote that Lummis's success as a writer was not much of a success at all because his work relied upon excessive drinking, insufficient sleep, and "his wife's translations of Spanish manuscripts." Lummis sometimes published Austin's work in *Land of Sunshine*, the literary magazine he edited.

⁵ The most complete biographical information on Douglas can be found in the "Biographical Note" attached to the finding aid of the Douglas Papers. On her relationship with Lummis, see Thompson, pp. 121-22, 133-37.

⁶ "Mrs. Courtenay DeKalb Gives UA 1100 Books," *Arizona Daily Star*, 10 March 1963 (clipping in "Frances Douglas Papers, 1892-1963," Box 1, Folder 1).

⁷ Douglas Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.

⁸ Concha Espina de Serna (1877-1955) was a Spanish novelist who tended to portray her female characters as "forbearing, long-suffering, and tragically doomed to unhappiness." Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (1867-1928) was a political activist as well as famous novelist who spoke out against the Spanish monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. Translations of his novels were very popular in the United States, and some were adapted for the motion picture screen. See *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature*, Jean-Albert Bédé and William B. Edgerton, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), *Literature Online* (accessed 21 August 2007). The finding aid for the Douglas Papers notes that the films *Sangre y arena* (*Blood in the Arena*) and *Los Cuatro Jinetes del Apocalipsis* (*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*) were based on Douglas's translations of his novels.

⁹ The biographical note in the Douglas Papers finding aid reports, "She is also credited with transcribing and translating the diary of Junipero Serra, which had been considered undecipherable" (p. 3). Douglas's obituary in the *Arizona Daily Star* claims that Douglas was responsible for "the translation of the hitherto undeciphered diary of Junipero Serra, the fundamental document of California history"; see "Ex-Tucsonan Was Noted Blasco Ibáñez Translator," *Arizona Daily Star*, 31 March 1969 (clipping in "Frances Douglas Papers, 1892-1963," Box 1, Folder 1). Similarly, the proof of Douglas's 1932-1933 "Who's Who in America" entry reports that she "transcribed hitherto undeciphered diary of Padre Junipero Serra" (clipping in "Frances Douglas Papers, 1892-1963," Box 1, Folder 1).

¹⁰ The diaries in the Douglas Papers represent the years 1892-1893 and 1910-1935. Other than the 1892-1893 diary, all diaries that Douglas may have kept during the years that she was married to and living with Lummis are possibly missing. The finding aid explains that after 1893, "there is a huge gap in the diaries represented here, with the next diary dated 1910, after Douglas' relocation to San Francisco." Thompson reports that Douglas took two volumes of Lummis's diaries to use as evidence of her husband's extramarital affairs with up to fifty other women (p. 278). It is conceivable that Douglas destroyed her own diaries to protect herself from retaliation or that Lummis confiscated them in order to bring forward his own claims of his wife's infidelity. In any case, it is not certain if these diaries ever existed at all.

¹¹ See n. 3 above for information on the living arrangements between Dorothea and Douglas during the winter of 1892-1893.

¹² Douglas Papers, Diary 1892-1893, Box 2, Folder 1.

¹³ Douglas Papers, Diary 1892-1893, Box 2, Folder 1.

¹⁴ On 5 November 1892, Douglas notes of her pictures and souvenirs from Isleta, "Every one is interested in them, and they really make me quite a heroine!"; see the Douglas Papers, Diary 1892-1893, Box 2, Folder 1.

¹⁵ The entry on Hamlin Garland in the *Literature Online Biography* (accessed 21 August 2007) states that when he died in 1940, Garland was "a respected elder statesman of American letters" and was in constant demand for speaking engagements at literary events. When Douglas met him in 1892, he had published *Well-Traveled Roads: Six Mississippi Valley Stories* (1891); *Jason Edwards: An Average Man* (1892); *A Member of the Third House* (1892); and *A Spoil of Office* (1892).

¹⁶ Douglas Papers, Diary 1892-1893, Box 2, Folder 1.

¹⁷ Douglas Papers, Diary 1892-1893, Box 2, Folder 1.

¹⁸ Thompson cites a January 1891 letter from Lummis to Douglas in which he writes, "You will be not only my bedfellow which is the extent of some marriages and a very sweet and lovely and pure thing when love is pure but my little chum and companera and confident and helper. Not my slave or my housekeeper but my wife" (p. 136).

¹⁹ Douglas had been going by "Eva Lummis" while married to Lummis, but in her 1911 divorce, she demanded the right to resume use of her maiden name. Copies of the divorce agreements are in the Douglas Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.

²⁰ Douglas Papers, Letter to J. Donald Adams, 5 April 1928, Box 15, Folder 1.

²¹ Douglas Papers, Letter to J. Donald Adams, 11 November 1933. Box 15, Folder 1.