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Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist (review)

Sharon Harris

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REVIEWS

Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist. By Gary Scharnhorst. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008. 306 pp. Index. \$27.95.

Reviewed by
Sharon Harris
University of Connecticut, Storrs

"I do not hanker after posterity; I only desire to be myself," Kate Field asserted in 1886 (249). While she rejected living for immortality, Field had a decided desire for fame in her own time. Gary Scharnhorst's biography presents the fullest picture to date of a remarkably active woman writer, lecturer, actress, and—above all—self-promoter. The portrait that emerges is not always of an appealing individual, but it is one that demonstrates the ways in which Field moved beyond the supposed restrictions on female activities in the last half of the nineteenth century to live a truly self-defined life. A capitalist whose primary product was herself, Field marketed her talents on the stage, on lecture circuits, and as a spokesperson for corporations from Bell Telephone to Anheuser-Busch. Above all, Field was a skilled journalist for a wide range of periodicals, including her own short-lived but influential *Kate Field's Washington* (1890–95).

Aristocratic in spirit, if working-woman in reality, Field was adept at recognizing the power of periodical writing as a means of finding personal expression and of shaping public opinion. She began her career in journalism at the age of twenty, arranging to publish travel commentaries in the *Boston Courier* while on tour in Italy; and, in spite of years as an actress, dramatist, and lecturer in the States and abroad, she continued to contribute travel narratives, political exposés, product endorsements passing as essays, literary criticism, and insightful commentaries on American life to various periodicals until her death in 1896. Throughout her career she wrote for an impressive range of newspapers, including the *Springfield Republican*, *New York Tribune*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Although Field is known today for her work as publisher, editor, and writer of *Kate Field's Washington*, Scharnhorst astutely details the education she received in the trenches of periodical writing before embarking on her own publication.

Even more informative, however, is the paradoxical woman who emerges in the pages of this biography. Field lived an unconventional life, but embraced conservative politics. She argued against corsets and other body-distorting aspects of fashionable women's clothing, but most often dressed in highly feminine attire. She lived independently, never marrying nor wishing to do so, yet in many ways she was male-identified in her associations. She grudgingly came to woman's suffrage in the 1890s only because she was interested in the movement's argument for no taxation without representation, but she opposed universal suffrage and advocated literacy tests for voting. Most disturbing, however, are her xenophobic diatribes and her vocal support of Manifest Destiny and U.S. imperialism; she embraced annexation of Hawai'i because Hawaiians were "not fit to rule the loveliest islands of the Pacific" and strongly supported President Sanford Dole by publishing an interview with him that was widely printed in the States (235). If Scharnhorst's assertion that "[m]ore than any other American woman of her generation, Kate Field heeded her calling, spread her gospel of noble deeds," overstates her status, he correctly concludes that she "deserves to be resurrected from the footnote" (249). The inclusion of Field in our understanding of nineteenth-century women activists broadens our understanding of activism and breaks free of the romanticized status that is often accorded to activists. It further challenges scholars to think in new terms about what constitutes a New Woman in this era, especially when that New Woman works largely for conservative agendas.

There are aspects of this biography that, in minor ways, limit its success. The early sections of *Kate Field* are as much about the writing of biography as they are about the life of Kate Field. Numerous intrusive comments about "biographical blindspots" or the repeated use of "for the record" to comment on what biographical information is available are problematic; yet they reveal the very real challenges of piecing together a life from the fragments that remain a century after. So, too, would greater contextualization of Field in terms of other women activists of the era—especially women journalists, lecturers, editors, businesswomen, and political activists—have enriched our understanding of Field's balancing of progressiveness and conservatism. But what Scharnhorst's biography most successfully accomplishes is whetting the scholarly appetite for more comparative work in relation to Field's life and her keen negotiation of periodical writing and self-promotion. A life of Kate Field was long overdue, and Scharnhorst has given us the text that will place her more fully in the context of nineteenth-century literature.