

# H-Net Reviews

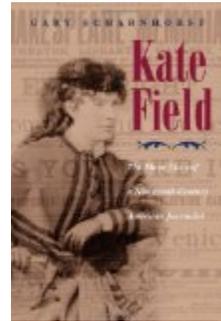
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gary Scharnhorst. *Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century American Journalist*. Writing American Women Series. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008. xiv + 306 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-0874-5.

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## Nineteenth-Century Zelig

Gary Scharnhorst, Distinguished Professor of English at the University of New Mexico, does not exaggerate in his initial claims for Kate Field, the subject of his biography: “she was ubiquitous in late-nineteenth century American appearing Zelig-like in the background of some of the most significant literary and historical events of the period” and “almost no one these days has ever heard of her.” In its May 1896 obituary, the *New York Times* described Field as “one of the most versatile of her sex in this country” in her roles as “litterateur, lecturer, actress, drama critic, author, newspaper woman in all that the title implies.” The *New York Tribune* called her “one of the best-known women in America” (p. xi).

Field was born in St. Louis in 1838, the daughter of two well-known actors and, especially important, the niece of a very wealthy Massachusetts society lady who underwrote her education and her stay in Florence from 1859 to 1861. In Italy, Field’s striking beauty, charm, and intelligence enabled her to flourish in a distinguished artistic and literary crowd, which included Walter Savage Landor, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Anthony Trollope, “who later modeled several of his heroines on Field” (pp. 20-21). She also began her writing career in earnest, sending articles to several American newspapers and, in 1861, a memoir on Barrett Browning published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

From the mid-1860s on, Field wrote for a wide range of publications. She contributed more than one hundred

pieces to the *New York Herald Tribune*, covering literature, theater performances, exhibitions, and a host of other topics. By the end of the decade, Field had become a celebrity, in good part because of her coverage of the American tour of Charles Dickens, then the world’s most famous author. Newspaper and magazine writing brought recognition to Field but lecturing was more lucrative, and for the rest of her life she fell back on what “was one of the few well-paying careers available to American women during the Gilded Age” (p. 73).

Field moved to London for more than four years in the 1870s, in part to indulge in her aspirations as an actor and playwright, an effort that was only partially successful. In Europe she continued to report on political and social events for American newspapers. She also became a publicist for Alexander Graham Bell and his British telephone company, an arrangement that enhanced both her public visibility and her purse.

On assignment for the *Chicago Tribune* in Hawaii, Field continued a whirlwind of travel, writing, and speaking until her death in 1896. In these roles, she took on a host of public causes but opposition to Mormon polygamy and theocracy was “the greatest reform campaign of her career” (p. 160). Field’s opinions were often contentious. She opposed prohibition, briefly promoting California wines on behalf of the State Viticultural Commission, and she long opposed universal suffrage for women and men on the grounds that voters should meet

some basic qualifications.

Field's last major undertaking was a sixteen-page weekly newspaper that she edited and published from 1890 to 1895. Although it never enjoyed more than a few thousand readers and produced a major financial loss for her, according to Scharnhorst, *Kate Field's Washington* "exercised an influence on American politics far out of proportion to the number of its subscribers" (p. 204). Although the evidence for this assertion is thin, Scharnhorst neatly summarizes the typical editorial content of the paper, most of it provided by Field herself from her old files, constant travels, and active role in Washington's social life. Among the political causes she espoused in her publication were civil service reform, international intervention to stop genocide in the Congo, opposition to the admission of New Mexico as a state (because many residents spoke only Spanish), and immigrant voting rights.

For all her prominence during her lifetime, Field's life has received little historical notice. In 1899 Lilian Whiting, Field's friend and literary executor, published *Kate Field: A Record*. The biography consists largely of excerpts from Field's letters that Whiting apparently later destroyed along with a lifetime of diaries. Nearly one hundred years later, Southern Illinois University Press published Carolyn Moss's one-volume edition of Field's correspondence drawn from collections in more than thirty archival repositories.

*Kate Field: The Many Lives of a Nineteenth-Century*

*American Journalist* uses footnotes generously to document quotations and sources but it employs shorthand citation form that is a disservice to readers. Further, the bibliography fails to describe the location and nature of the manuscript sources cited. The result is citations, such as "KF to Stedman, 21 June 1895 (Baylor)," with no indication of which manuscript collection contains the item and where this collection can be found.

Scharnhorst's biography, part of the series *Writing American Women*, brings us a wealth of information about Field in a very readable style. Drawing on Field's published writings, letters collected by Moss, and primary sources in several repositories, Scharnhorst leads us year by year, often month by month, through Field's remarkable life. In following his subject so closely, Scharnhorst gives little time to a broader interpretation of Field. For example, he does not elaborate on the observation that "more than almost any other American woman of her generation, she was adept at self-promotion" (pp. 98). Similarly, there is no attempt to set the social and political scene of life in Washington when Field arrives in 1890 to begin her new enterprise. Even the history of journalism, which the subtitle of the book suggests is a primary perspective, gets little attention. How did *Kate Field's Washington* fit into the larger print world of its time? Field's strikingly modern narrative as self-created media celebrity, her mixture of journalism with advocacy and commercial promotion, and her gender offer many opportunities for retelling her story to twenty-first-century audiences.

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