

**MICHAEL  
FIELD . .**

## PREFACE

SOME years ago the writer of this book discovered to herself the work of Michael Field, with fresh delight at every step of her adventure through the lyrics, the tragedies, and later devotional poems. But she was amazed to find that no one seemed to have heard about this large body of fine poetry; and she longed to spread the news, even before the further knowledge was gained that the life of Michael Field had itself been epical in romance and heroism. Then the theme was irresistible.

But although it has been a joy to try to retrieve something of this life and work from the limbo into which it appeared to be slipping, the matter may wear anything but a joyful aspect to all the long-suffering ones who were ruthlessly laid under tribute. The author remembers guiltily the many friends of the poets whom she has harried, and kindly library staffs (in particular at the Bodleian) who gave generous and patient help. To each one she offers sincere gratitude; and though it is impossible to name them all, she desires especially to record her debt to Mr Sturge Moore and Miss Fortey; Father Vincent McNabb, Mrs Berenson, and Mr Charles Ricketts; Dr Grenfell, Sir Herbert Warren, and Mr and Mrs Algernon Warren; Miss S. J. Tanner, Mr Havelock Ellis and Miss Louie Ellis; the Misses Sturge; Professor F. Brooks and the Rev. C. L. Bradley; Professor and Mrs William Rothenstein; Mr Gordon Bottomley and Mr Arthur Symons—;who will all understand her regret that this book is so unworthy a tribute to their friend and that the scheme of it, designed primarily to introduce the poetry of Michael

Field, rendered impossible a fuller use of the material for a Life which they supplied.

To the courtesy of Mr Sydney C. Cockerell, the Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, the author owes the copy of Edith Cooper's portrait. This portrait is a miniature set in a jewelled pendant (both drawing and setting the work of Mr Charles Ricketts) which was bequeathed to the Fitzwilliam Museum on the death of Katharine Bradley.

Warm thanks are also tendered to the publishers who have kindly given permission to use extracts from the poets' works, including Messrs G. Bell and Sons, the Vale Press, the Poetry Bookshop (for *Borgia*, *Queen Mariamne*, *Deirdre*, and *In the Name of Time*); to Mr T. Fisher Unwin, Messrs Sands and Company, and Mr Eveleigh Nash; and to Mr Heinemann for Mr Arthur Symons's poem *At Fontainebleau*.

A Bibliography is appended of all the Michael Field books which have been published to date; but there still remain some unpublished MSS.

MARY STURGEON

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Yea, gold is son of Zeus: no rust  
Its timeless light can stain;  
The worm that brings man's flesh to dust  
Assaults its strength in vain:  
More gold than gold the love I sing,  
A hard, inviolable thing.  
Men say the passions should grow old  
With waning years; my heart  
Is incorruptible as gold,  
'Tis my immortal part:  
Nor is there any god can lay  
On love the finger of decay.  
*Long Ago, XXXVI*

## I. BIOGRAPHICAL

ONE evening, probably in the spring of 1885, Browning was at a dinner-party given by Stopford Brooke. He had recently met for the first time two quiet ladies who had come up to the metropolis from Bristol to visit art galleries and talk business with publishers, and he suddenly announced to the company in a lull of conversation, "I have found a new poet." But others of the party had made a similar discovery: it had jumped to the eye of the intelligent about a year before, when a tragedy called *Callirhoë* had been published; and several voices cried simultaneously to the challenge, "Michael Field!"

Only Browning, however, and a few intimate friends of the poets, knew that Michael Field was not a man, but two women, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. They were an aunt and niece, and came of a Derbyshire family settled at Ashbourne. Joseph Bradley, its representative there in 1749, with his son and grandson after him, were merchants of substance and culture. They were men of intellect as well as business men, and seem to have possessed between them all the elements which ultimately became concentrated in our two poets. There is evidence of a leaning to philosophy, a feeling for the arts, an interest in drama; and, more significant still, there is one Charles Bradley who was "a prolific and meditative writer both of prose and song."

Katharine Harris Bradley, the elder of the two poets, was born at Birmingham on October 27, 1846. Her grandfather had migrated there from Ashbourne in 1810, and her father, Charles Bradley,

was a tobacco-manufacturer of that city. He had married in 1834 a Miss Emma Harris of Birmingham, and, in the simpler fashion of those times, he and his wife were living in a house adjoining their place of business in the old quarter of the town. There, at 10 Digbeth, Katharine was born, The only other child of the union was a daughter who was eleven years old at Katharine's birth. She was named Emma, and was of first importance in the lives of the Michael Fields. For, being a thoughtful creature, of rare sweetness and strength of character, she largely shaped the life of the little sister who was so much younger than herself; and, still more vital fact, she afterward became the mother of our second poet. She married, about 1860, James Robert Cooper, and went with him to live at Kenilworth. Her daughter, Edith Emma Cooper, was born there, at their house in the High Street, on January 12, 1862.

Both poets, therefore, took their origin in the heart of a Midland city and came of merchant stock. These facts may have larger significance than their bearing on environment and nurture, though that was important. But regarded more widely, they seem to relate Michael Field and her fine contribution to English literature to that movement in our modern civilization which, in the last two or three generations, has drawn commerce into intimate connexion with our art and letters. Such names as Horniman, Fry, Beecham (and there are others of similar import) suggest at once drama, art, music. They are associated in one's mind with new impulse, energy, initiative, and above all with disinterested service of the arts; and they are connected chiefly with Midland towns. In like manner Michael Field, with her gift of tragic vision sublimated from fierce Derbyshire elements, may be seen spending a strenuous life and a moderate fortune, without reward or encouragement, to enrich English poetry.

Neither poet ever attended school, or swotted to gain certificates; which is probably one reason why they both became highly educated and cultured people. When Katharine was two years old her father died from cancer—a disease which afterward carried off her mother, and from which both our poets died. Mrs Bradley removed to a suburb of Birmingham, and was careful to provide that the lessons which she gave her little girls should be supplemented, as the need arose, by other and more advanced teaching. But the children were allowed to follow their bent, and authority took the form of a wise and kindly directing influence. We hear in those early days of eager studies in French, painting, and Italian. We hear, too, of friendships with a group of lively cousins. One of them remembers Katharine's vivid childhood, and speaks of her as a gay and frolicsome creature, highly imaginative and emotional, with whom he used to act and recite. She adored poetry, would write even her letters in rhyme, and had, as a small child, a particular fondness for Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. And she joined with the greatest delight in the dramatic ventures which the group from time to time attempted, such as the representation at Christmas of the passage of the Old Year and the coming of the New.

It is probable that such conditions were ideally suited to a child of great natural gifts and buoyant temperament. Katharine evidently thrived under them both in mind and body; and by the time of her sister's marriage to Mr Cooper she was not only the healthy, happy, and well-developed young animal who was the potential of all she afterward became, but she had already embarked upon the classics and was beginning to interest herself in German language and literature. Thus it happened that when, about 1861, she and her mother made their home with the Coopers at



Kenilworth, Katharine became the natural companion of the little Edith, born in the following year, when Katharine was sixteen. But she was, from the first, much more than that. Mrs Cooper remained an invalid for life after the birth of her second daughter, Amy, and Katharine fostered Edith as a mother. She lavished on her an eager and rather imperious affection. She led her, as the child grew old enough, along the paths that she herself had adventurously gone, and although Edith was always shy and more hesitating than Katharine, poetic genius was dormant in her too, only waiting to be stimulated by Katharine's exuberance and led by her audacity. Edith, stepping delicately, followed the daring lead of her elder with a steadiness of mental power which was her proper gift; and she reaped from Katharine's educational harvest (won in all sorts of fields, from literatures ancient and modern, from the Collège de France, Newnham, University College, Bristol, and numerous private tutors) fruits more solid and mature than even Katharine herself.

When the poets removed to Stoke Bishop, Bristol, in 1878 it was with intellectual appetites still unsatisfied, and determined to pursue at University College their beloved classics and philosophy. They were already, in the opinion of a scholar who knew them at that time, fair latinists: they possessed considerable German and French, and some Italian, while Edith's enthusiasm for philosophy was balanced by Katharine's for Greek. Edith, docile in so much else, yet "could not be coaxed on" in Greek; not even later, when Browning, who used to speak affectionately of her as "our little Francesca," one day gently pressed her hand and said "in honied accents, '*Do learn Greek.*'" What could a young poet do, overwhelmed by the courtly old master's flattery, except promise softly, "I will try"? But it is not recorded that the effort took her

very far. Katharine the Dionysian (always a little over-zealous for her divinities, whether Thracian or Hebrew) did not cease from coaxing; and perhaps did not perceive, for she could be obtuse now and then, how radical was Edith's austere latinity. A poem of this period, addressed by Katharine to Edith, and called *An Invitation*, throws a gleam on their student days. Through it one sees as in morning sunlight their strenuous happy existence, their eager welcome to the best that life could offer, and their fortunate freedom to grasp it, whether it were in books or art, in sunny aspects or beautiful new Morris designs and textures. For they were, from the first, artists in life.

Come and sing, my room is south;  
Come with thy sun-governed mouth,  
Thou wilt never suffer drouth,  
Long as dwelling  
In my chamber of the south.

Three stanzas describe the woodbine and the myrtles outside the window, and the cushioned settee inside. Then:

Books I have of long ago  
And to-day; I shall not know  
Some, unless thou read them, so  
Their excelling  
Music needs thy voice's flow:  
Campion, with a noble ring  
Of choice spirits; count this wing  
Sacred! All the songs I sing  
Welling, welling  
From Elizabethan spring.  
French, that corner of primrose!

Flaubert, Verlaine, with all those  
Precious, little things in prose,  
Bliss-compelling,  
Howsoe'er the story goes:  
All the Latins *thou* dost prize!  
Cynthia's lover by thee lies;  
Note Catullus, type and size  
Least repelling  
To thy weariable eyes.  
And for Greek! Too sluggishly  
Thou dost toil; but Sappho, see!  
And the dear Anthology  
For thy spelling.  
Come, it shall be well with thee.

It is clear from all the testimony that Katharine and Edith were extremely serious persons in those first years at Stoke Bishop, a fact which seems to have borne rather hard on the young men of their acquaintance. Thus, a member of their college, launching a small conversational craft with a light phrase, might have his barque swamped by the inquiry of one who really wanted to know: "Which do you truly think is the greater poem, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*?" It was an era when Higher Education and Women's Rights and Anti-Vivisection were being indignantly championed, and when 'aesthetic dress' was being very consciously worn—all by the same kind of people. Katharine and Edith were of that kind. They joined the debating society of the college and plunged into the questions of the moment. They spoke eloquently in favour of the suffrage for women, and were deeply interested in ethical matters. They were devotees of reason, and would subscribe to no creed. Katharine was a prime mover of the Anti-Vivisection

Society in Clifton, and was its secretary till 1887. She was, too, in correspondence with Ruskin, was strongly influenced by him in moral and artistic questions, and was a companion of the Guild of St George—;though that was as far as she ever went in Ruskinian economics. Both of the friends adored pictures, worked at water-colour drawing, wore wonderful flowing garments in ‘art’ colours, and dressed their hair in a loose knot at the nape of the neck.

But more than all that, they were already dedicated to poetry, and sworn in fellowship. That was in secret, however. Student friends might guess, thrillingly, but no one had yet been told that Katharine had published in 1875 a volume of lyrics which she signed as Arran Leigh, nor that Edith had timidly produced for her fellow’s inspection, as the experiment of a girl of sixteen, several scenes of a powerful tragedy; nor that the two of them together were at that moment working on their *Bellerophôn* (with the accent, please), which they published in 1881, signed “Arran and Isla Leigh.” But such portentous facts kept them very grave; and their solemnity naturally provoked the mirth of the irreverent, especially of undergraduate friends down from Oxford, who knew something on their own account about æsthetic crazes and the leaders of them. Thus a certain Herbert Warren came down during one vacation and poked bracing fun at them. The story makes one suppose that he must have disliked the colour blue in women and the colour green in every one—;possibly because he was then in his own salad days. For when somebody mischievously asked him in Katharine’s presence, “Who *are* this æsthetic crowd?” he promptly replied, “They’re people as green as their dresses.”

But their women friends were more favourably impressed. To them the two eager girls who walked over the downs for lectures every morning were persons of a certain distinction who, despite

careless hair and untidy feet, could be “perfectly fascinating.” Their manner of speech had been shaped by old books, and was a little archaic. Later it became a “mighty jargon,” understood only of the initiate. Their style of dress was daringly clinging and graceful in an age of ugly protuberances. And though these things might suggest a pose to the satirical, they were very attractive to the ingenuous, who saw them simply as the naïve signs they were of budding individuality. Their friendship, too, was clearly on the grand scale and in the romantic manner. They were, indeed, absorbed in each other to an extent which exasperated those who would have liked to engage the affections of one or the other in another direction. Yet they were companionable souls in a sympathetic circle, Katharine with abounding vitality and love of fun and keen joy in life, expansive and forthcoming despite an occasional haughtiness of manner; and Edith lighting up more slowly, to a rarer, finer, more delicate exaltation.

Yet, in spite of many friends and a genuine interest in affairs, one perceives that they constantly gave a sense of seclusion from life, of natures set a little way apart. It was an impression conveyed unwittingly, and in spite of themselves; and one is reminded by it of their sonnet called *The Poet*, written, I believe, about this time, but not published until 1907, in *Wild Honey*:

Within his eyes are hung lamps of the sanctuary:  
A wind, from whence none knows, can set in sway  
And spill their light by fits; but yet their ray  
Returns, deep-boled, to its obscurity.  
The world as from a dullard turns annoyed  
To stir the days with show or deeds or voices;  
But if one spies him justly one rejoices,  
With silence that the careful lips avoid.

He is a plan, a work of some strange passion  
Life has conceived apart from Time's harsh drill,  
A thing it hides and cherishes to fashion  
At odd bright moments to its secret will:  
Holy and foolish, ever set apart,  
He waits the leisure of his god's free heart.

Consciously or not, the poem is a portrait. More than one touch is recognizable, and there can be no doubt that the opening lines give a glimpse of Edith. They suggest for this reason that the sonnet was written by Katharine; and if that is so, her use of the word *dullard* sweetly turns the edge of the complaint of critical friends that Katharine could be thoroughly stupid. Of course she could!—;why not? though, to be sure, it was very provoking of her. Returning, however, to the resemblance to Edith. She had never the good health of Katharine, and her beauty, which was of the large, regular, blonde type, suffered in consequence. One of her friends says: “She was as if touched by a cloud—;crystalline and fragile as flowers that love the shade.” All who knew her speak of the extraordinary look of vision in her eyes: time after time one hears of the ‘inspiration’ in her face, which is visible in no matter how poor a photograph or hasty a sketch. Katharine had intensity of another kind: warm, rich, glowing, a lyric and almost bacchic expression. But in Edith there was “a Tuscan quality of refinement, the outward expression of an inward beauty of thought.”

One cannot but associate those “lamps of the sanctuary” with the psychic power which Edith undoubtedly possessed. An incident attested by their cousin, Professor F. Brooks, may be given to illustrate this. It was occasioned by the death of Edith's father in the Alps. He and his younger daughter Amy were there on holiday in 1897, and had planned to climb the Riffelalp. They

wrote of their plan to Katharine and Edith, who received the letter at home in England on the day that the ascent was being made. Edith read the letter and passed it to Katharine with the remark: "If they go to the Riffelalp they will go to their doom." And, probably about the time she was speaking, Mr Cooper met his death, for he was lost in the ascent, and his body was not recovered for many months.

That is only one of several psychic experiences which incontestably occurred to Edith Cooper, the most impressive being the vision which appeared to her as her mother was dying. Edith, who was helping to nurse her mother, had gone into another room to rest, as it was not believed that the end was near. She afterward told her friend Miss Helen Sturge that in the moment of death her mother's spirit passed through the room and lingered for an instant beside the bed on which Edith was lying. The event is recorded explicitly in a poem published in *Underneath the Bough* (first edition):

When thou to death, fond one, wouldst fain be starting,  
I did not pray  
That thou shouldst stay;  
Alone I lay  
And dreamed and wept and watched thee on thy way.  
But now thou dost return, yea, after parting,  
And me embrace,  
Our souls enlace;  
Ask thou no grace;  
Thou shalt be aye confinèd to this place.  
Alone, alone I lie. Ah! bitter smarting!  
Thou to the last  
Didst cling, kiss fast,

Yet art thou past  
Beyond me, in the hollow of a blast.

\* \* \*

‘Michael Field’ did not come into existence until the publication of *Callirrhoe* in 1884. The poets put behind them, as experimental work, the two volumes which they had already published, and began afresh, changing their pen-names the better to close the past. The pseudonym under which they now hid themselves was chosen somewhat arbitrarily, ‘Michael’ because they liked the name and its associations, ‘Field’ because it went well with ‘Michael.’ But it is true also that they had a great admiration for the work of William Michael Rossetti, whom, Katharine says in one of her letters, they regarded as “a kind of god-father”; and it is true, too, that ‘Field’ had been an old nickname of Edith. Their family indulged freely in pet names, and Edith was teased by a nurse, from her boyish appearance during a fever in Dresden, as the “little Heinrich.” Thenceforth she became Henry for Katharine, and Katharine was Michael to her and to their intimates.

*Callirrhoe* was well received, and went to a second edition in November of the same year. It is amusing now to read the praises that were lavished upon ‘Mr Field’ upon his first appearance. Thus the *Saturday Review* talked of “the immutable attributes of poetry ... beauty of conception ... strength and purity of language ... brilliant distinction and consistent development of the characters ... a poet of distinguished powers”—;all of which is very true. The *Spectator* announced “the ring of a new voice which is likely to be heard far and wide among the English-speaking peoples”—;and that may yet become true, if the English-speaking peoples are



allowed to hear the voice. The *Athenæum* saw “something almost of Shakespearean penetration”; the *Academy* rejoiced in “a gospel of ecstasy ... a fresh poetic ring ... a fresh gift of song ... a picturesque and vivid style.” The *Pall Mall Gazette* quoted a lyric which “Drayton would not have refused to sign”; and, not to multiply these perfectly just remarks, the *Liverpool Mercury* crowned them all in a flash of real perception, by noting that which I believe to be Michael Field’s first virtue as a dramatist in these terms: “A really imaginative creator ... will often make his dialogue proceed by abrupt starts, which seem at first like breaches of continuity, but are in reality true to a higher though more occult logic of evolution. This last characteristic we have remarked in Mr Field, and it is one he shares with Shakespeare.”

But alas for irony! These pæans of welcome died out and were replaced as time went on by an indifference which, at its nadir in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, could dismiss Michael Field in six lines, and commit the ineptitude of describing the collaboration as a “curious fancy.” Yet the poets continued to reveal the “immutable attributes of poetry”; their “ecstasy” grew and deepened; their “Shakespearean penetration” became a thing almost uncanny in its swift rightness; their “creative imagination” called up creatures of fierce energy; their “fresh gift of song” played gracefully about their drama, and lived on, amazingly young, into their latest years—;which is simply to say that, having the root of the matter in them, and fostering it by sheer toil, they developed as the intelligent reviewers had predicted, and became highly accomplished dramatic poets. But in the meantime the critics learned that Michael Field was not a man, and work much finer than *Callirrhoë* passed unnoticed or was reviled; while on the other hand *Borgia*, published *anonymously*, was noticed and

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