

Binary Star: Leaves From the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846 – 1914. Chosen, annotated, but not edited by Ivor C. Treby. London: De Blackland Press, 2006. 222 p, 13 b/w illustrations. ISBN: 0-907404-09-X. AU\$43.00 (paperback).

It was the English astronomer Sir William Herschel who first discovered the binary star system in the late 1700's. After observing the movement of a pair of stars orbiting around a central mass he concluded that they represented 'a real double star - the union of two stars...formed together [in] one system by the laws of attraction.' Viewed in this way, each star, Herschel declared, could be said to be in partnership with a 'companion star' based on a permanent gravitational pull.

Some one hundred years later Robert Browning drew on Herschel's term in his 1886 letter to Edith Cooper, the English poet/dramatist who, together with her aunt Katharine Bradley, wrote for three decades under the pen name of 'Michael Field'. Browning, a great admirer of the couple's work - and one of the first literary figures to know the true identity behind the collaboration - was writing to invite 'Miss Cooper' to lunch: 'I make haste to beg that you will mention any day next week when you can - ("you" being the "binary star") come and take luncheon here at 1 o'clock: there will be nobody to meet you, as I want as much of you for myself as I can...' (i).

The Browning epigraph, which forms the title of Ivor Treby's fifth book on Michael Field, aptly describes the complex professional and personal relationship of the two collaborators. Like a binary or double star, Katharine and Edith - or 'Michael' and 'Henry' as they preferred to be known - forged an energetic alliance which came to be expressed under the single creative 'system' of 'Michael Field'. Together, they wrote some 1725 poems (both published and unpublished) on a wide range of subjects ranging from re-interpretations of the classics and Greek mythology, to religion and art.

While the aforementioned themes have been dealt with in some detail in Michael Field scholarship, it is the intricate expression of a shared erotic love in the poetry and in the couple's correspondence and joint journal, 'Works and Days', that has taken centre stage, particularly within queer theory and writings on same-sex desire. The issue of the pair's sexual identity and the relationship of this identity to poetic expression has been extensively explored by Lillian Faderman, Chris White, Angela Leighton, Virginia Blain and Yopie Prins, to name but a few of the leading contributors to the field.

Treby has had a vexed and controversial relationship within this debate. Despite having played an instrumental role in the Field recovery project, his work rarely features in critical discussions. It is possible that this neglect stems from his staunch and occasionally invective attacks on lesbian interpretations of the Michael Field oeuvre, a position he maintains in *Binary Star*. Towards the end of his introduction he writes, 'Female interest in their private lives, in the worst scenario they [the Michaels] could possibly have imagined, has all but eclipsed that in their works (except as a peg on which to hang a thesis or a theory)' (70).

In many ways this latest book, which consists of chronologically arranged excerpts from the Michael Fields' journals and letters, represents a rejoinder to that 'female

interest', and to what Treby sees as politically motivated interpretations of the Michael Fields' lives and work. Based on the view that writings on the couple have suffered from 'amorphous distillation', and the 'darkly dubious lens of a "critical" interpretation', Treby announces his aim to present them in their 'own words' using a series of selected extracts in order to build a limited biographical account (27).

It is here that *Binary Star* comes into its own. For while the introductory notes frequently show Treby at his vitriolic best, (see his imagined scene between the 'ladies' and the merino on page 62), to cast it aside on this basis would be to miss the enormous contribution this book and its researcher make to Michael Field scholarship. This is particularly evident in his seminal research text *The Michael Field Catalogue*. An excellent research tool, the *Catalogue* exhaustively lists the Fields' oeuvre alongside biographical material, manuscript collection data, and a bibliography of historical and contemporary criticism.

Binary Star is designed to complement this material, particularly the biographical calendar mapped out in the *Catalogue*. Like Thomas Sturge Moore's 1933 collection of Field journals and letters (published under the title *Works and Days*), *Binary Star* is replete with tantalising extracts from the couple's archives, offering an intimate insight into their public and private lives. While Treby duplicates several passages from Sturge Moore's edition, in particular to correct errors such as the typographical slip which saw George Meredith *pause* rather the *pass* by their railway carriage (115), the book consists largely of unpublished material which, hitherto, has only been available to scholars working with the archives in England. Material such as the Browning correspondence, the Ruskin letters, the Dresden episode, and the production of *A Question of Memory* are glossed over due to Sturge Moore's already extensive accounts, as are Henry's lengthy forays into studies of paintings, the death of her father, and her devotion to both God and Bernard Berenson. Instead the voices of family players such as James, Lissie and Amy Cooper (Henry's father, mother and sister) are given more attention, as are the early days of both women's lives, and the various creative tensions they faced during the collaborative process. It begins in 1846, the year of Michael's birth, and includes genealogical information, much of which has been sourced from Ursula Bridge's unpublished biography.

The use of Michael and Henry's early letters and diaries, held in the Bodleian Library, is also a welcome inclusion given the scholarly propensity to focus on the material at the British Library which covers their later days. Presented in this way, the collection fleshes out a fuller account of the writing partnership, as well as the individual characters of its collaborators. While the Michael Fields were keen to present themselves as a single voice, they each played a particular role within the partnership, which becomes increasingly apparent in the selected extracts. As Treby notes, the journal entries are dominated by Henry's voice, whereas the letters were primarily written by Michael (23).

The book also features a series of new photographs, namely images from the family home in Reigate, a probable photo of Henry's father, James Cooper, and an image of their 'married home' The Paragon (circa 1900). Several poems are also reprinted alongside Treby's always illuminating annotations. Particularly noteworthy are 'Mary's song at Craigmillar' (121) and 'Love in the greenwood' (p 157).

For the Michael Field scholar, the introductory notes provide advice on deciphering Michael and Henry's occasionally erratic handwriting, as well as useful tips for working with undated and unattributed material, most of which Treby has tirelessly sourced.

This book will appeal primarily to readers already familiar with Michael Fields' work. As Treby himself notes it is, in a sense, a companion text to Sturge Moore's edition. Read on its own, which is not the intention of the author, it is unlikely to inspire a new breed of readers. However, as both a research tool and a commentary that expresses an opinion outside mainstream debate, it represents an excellent and challenging resource for future Michael Field scholarship.

Rachel Morley
University of Western Sydney