

Dimensions of the Daily in the Nineteenth-Century Diary

Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary. Rebecca Steinitz. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 272 pp.

Reviewed by **Cynthia Huff**, Illinois State University

<1>In *Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century Diary*, Rebecca Steinitz sets out to make a case for the importance of the diary as a vehicle for examining nineteenth-century British ideology and to rectify what she conceives of as scholarly blind spots in diary scholarship, specifically the lack of attention to materiality, the feminization of the diary, an emphasis on content rather than form, and a tendency not to historicize. To counter these problems as well as to project the place of the diary vis-à-vis new media, Steinitz situates the nineteenth-century diary historically by looking at it from the long eighteenth-century to the present. To place the diary as a genre, she considers its topical forms that focus on specific subject matter, such as religion or family, as well as the material manifestations of diaries, which run the gamut from self-constructed texts to commercially produced ones. Since one of her major arguments is that the current conceptual feminization of the diary is a result of both second-wave feminist scholar's emphasis on recovering and evaluating women's diaries as well as novelists' casting of the diary as a feminine form, Steinitz is at pains to emphasize that nineteenth-century men kept diaries just as much as women. This attention accounts for Steinitz's concentration on the plot device in novels where the diary is a repository of secrets and her examination of family diaries and the politics of their publication.

<2>As Steinitz's book title implies, she considers the topics of time, space, and gender and, consequently, these order her text, providing her chapter titles, along with her two major sections, "The Manuscript Diary" and "The Diary in Print." As a long-time diary scholar and someone whose work has concentrated on the recovery and analysis of nineteenth-century manuscript diaries, I particularly appreciate Steinitz devoting so much space to the analysis of manuscript diaries. Although, as Steinitz notes, scholarship on manuscript diaries is now coming into its own with a renewed interest in the history of the book, this is nonetheless an area where there is much work to be done. Steinitz uses two well-known figures, Elizabeth Barrett (as Steinitz refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and Arthur Munby, to anchor her case for considering the diary in relation to time and space, respectively; in so doing, she includes a host of other diarists to illuminate their diary practices. This range of examples has the effect of underscoring diary keeping as a common and important nineteenth-century activity for both men and women, whether artists or not. In addition, she parses time-centered diary practices such as anniversary entries that rely "upon the unit of the day, both repeating it and filling it up" (20).

Here Steinitz builds on the significant work of eighteenth-century diary scholar Stuart Sherman who likewise highlights how the diary as genre and practice segments time. She also argues that timekeeping is a particularly salient practice for many nineteenth-century people, namely those devoted to religion and self-improvement. By considering the actual manuscript practices of people who kept diaries in the nineteenth century we can provide an historical corrective to the prevailing notion of the diary as exemplary of Romantic interiority and the practice of most diary critics who reinforce this. Still, as Steinitz says, the “thorough representation of the diarist’s emotional life is not incompatible, despite Fothergill’s [a major diary critic] contention to the contrary, with the discourses of religion and self-improvement” (35), which she contends contributes to the nineteenth-century tendency toward totalizing representation.

<3>If dailiness is a formal feature of the diary genre, space is equally important to consider. Arthur Munby, the *literator* and long-time companion of lady’s maid, Hannah Cullwick, used his diary to map out the social geography of London which, in turn, suggests imperial and class configurations as well as the scopic representation which Munby and other *flâneurs* so famously practiced. Diary mapping connects with other nineteenth-century spatial representations, such as the sketch or photograph, as well as the travel log which Steinitz discusses at some length, linking the travel log to the nineteenth-century penchant for observing and collecting, famously exemplified by Charles Darwin’s scientific observations. By emphasizing the diary as collection, Steinitz ties its practice to Jean Baudrillard’s theories. By looking at its material construction, as manifested in commercially manufactured diaries, whether composed of blank pages or the highly mediated line of Lett’s volumes marketed for different classes and occupations, Steinitz shows how diary scholarship illuminates the theories of Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault. The final chapter rounding out the section on manuscript diaries focuses on the family, gender, and the diary as a “technology of intimacy” (95). Here Steinitz discusses audience, as she is at some pains to provide the necessary corrective to the diary as a secret document read only to oneself. Instead, she shows that diaries, whether written individually or jointly and by both men and women, commonly circulated among family members, romantic interests, and friends, and that the domestic emphasis of nineteenth-century British diaries was particular to that epoch. Steinitz cites the totalizing designation of separate spheres by Victorianists, and the elision of genre and gender by feminist scholars, as culprits in fostering the conception of the diary as feminized, which she argues is certainly not true in its manuscript iteration.

<4>The second part of Steinitz’s book, which deals with the diary in print, is subdivided into “The Politics of Publication” and “Fiction and the Feminization of the Diary” as well as a short postscript on the correlation between blogs and the diary. Steinitz explores the history of the diary in print, arguing that until the end of the nineteenth century diaries were not marketed or read “as diaries *per se*” (101). To situate the publication of diaries historically, Steinitz begins with a lengthy discussion of Pepys’s diary and its popularity in the nineteenth century, due largely to the century’s emphasis on historiography and social history. Toward century’s end, she claims, Robert Louis Stevenson reframes Pepys’s diary as literature, thus imbuing it and the diary genre more generally with artistic interiority. After considering the scandal propagated by Lady Charlotte Campbell Bury’s bestselling diary detailing the Queen Caroline case, Steinitz turns to the immensely popular *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1858) composed by Queen Victoria and skillfully marketed to represent the ideal Victorian family. What I find particularly interesting in Steinitz’s discussion of Queen Victoria’s *Leaves* is the

distinction she makes between manuscript and published diaries as the latter “necessarily and dramatically compromise the text’s generic status” (148). Finally, investigating how diaries figure in fiction, Steinitz contends that “fiction feminized the diary” (155). Citing recent critics’ use of Modernist literary values such as interiority as well as writers, including the Brontës, Wilkie Collins, and Oscar Wilde, who cast diary writing as feminine even if the characters writing are men, Steinitz claims, “Promulgating the diary as a feminine genre subsumed a multitude of diarists and diary practices into a seemingly monolithic phenomenon, yet fiction reveals the fissures in that monolith” (182).

<5>Steinitz’s wide-ranging consideration of the diary as genre and material product provides a necessary corrective to much scholarship which has traditionally focused on the diary as a repository for content to illuminate a life rather than as a form worthy of study. Likewise, by emphasizing the materiality of the diary and its construction personally as well as commercially, Steinitz calls our attention to the making of a diary as an activity within the history of the book. Through the breadth and depth of her extensive scholarship and her connections to related areas of study such as the history of the book and the novel, Steinitz legitimates the diary as a rich resource for scholars working in the nineteenth century as well as other historical periods. Missing from Steinitz’s otherwise robust study is a link to the extensive current research in life writing/narrative studies. Nancy K. Miller wrote in *PMLA* that she predicts memoir will be the primary genre of the twenty-first century, given the current spate in the production and reading of memoirs.⁽¹⁾ Why not, then, go beyond a short chapter entitled “Diaries, Blogs, and Gender” to locate the diary as a twenty-first century genre in a network of life writing/narrative practices as well as the innovative and provocative scholarship in this area? Doing so has several advantages, not the least of which is to supply the historical connectives that legitimate periodization and the study of earlier literature and culture in an age of increasing attack on the humanities. By connecting historical scholarship with areas of study such as life writing/narrative that tend to be weighted toward contemporary texts, we outline the necessity for a tradition that locates the changing materiality of forms. To do this would underscore Steinitz’s championing of the importance of materiality and correct a blind spot.

Endnotes

(1) Nancy K. Miller, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir.” *PMLA* 122.2 (March 2007): 537-48.(^)