

PENGUIN CLASSIC



THE DIARY OF ALICE JAMES





*The Diary of
Alice James*

Edited with an Introduction by

Leon Edel



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Preface



THE DIARY of Alice James, invalid sister of the psychologist William and of the novelist Henry, represents her modest claim on posterity beside the works of her famous brothers. She kept the record of her sickroom world in two closely-written scribbles during the final months of her abbreviated life, and bequeathed them to her loyal friend and companion, Katharine Peabody Loring, who had cared for her during the better part of a decade. Miss Loring brought the diary back to her home in Beverly, Massachussets, where she edited the manuscript by straightening its punctuation a little, altering an occasional word, deleting some passages, and introducing half-a-dozen footnotes. She then (in 1894) had four copies printed, one for each of the three surviving James brothers, and one for herself. It was her intention, if they approved, to publish the book. Alice had asked during the last six weeks of her life to have the diary typewritten, and "though she never said so, I understand that she would like to have it published."

Years later Miss Loring wrote that William James "never thanked me for his copy, simply acknowledged the receipt of it and certainly never made any suggestion as to its being read or not." Henry James urged Miss Loring to refrain from publishing the diary, and destroyed his privately printed copy. His reasons were expressed with unmistakable clarity in a series of letters to his brother. He was "terribly scared and disconcerted—I mean alarmed—by the sight of so many private names and allusions in print." Alice had never told him she kept a diary;

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and he had gossiped freely to her about London society and his daily life, often exaggerating in order to enliven the sickroom. He did not mind Alice's having written down so much of this talk—but it was quite another matter to give it the permanence of print. Miss Loring should have “sunk a few names,” he said, and used initials (she actually did in a few instances). “When I see that *I* say that Augustine Birrell has a self-satisfied smirk after he speaks—and see that Katharine felt no prompting to exercise a discretion about the name, I feel very unhappy and wonder at the strangeness of destiny.”

Henry James's immediate fear was that the youngest brother, Robertson, or his children, would through carelessness or indiscretion make the diary known. “I seem to see them showing it about Concord—and talking about it—with the fearful American newspaper lying in wait for every whisper, every echo.” And the novelist added: “I bow my head to fate, I am prepared for the worst.” The worst never occurred. Miss Loring respected Henry's wishes, even to not conveying a copy to Robertson. Almost half a century after Alice's death she presented the manuscript to Robertson's daughter, the late Mrs. Mary James Vaux, of Bryn Mawr. She did this she said, out of friendship and because Robertson's children were “the only grandchildren who have ever taken any interest in me, or have asked me about my relations with the James family.”

Mrs. Vaux had long felt that some memorial should be created for the less-known members of the James family: her own father, the gifted Robertson, who had never used his gifts, and his older brother, Garth Wilkinson James, generous spendthrift who died in his fortieth year. Thus the diary finally reached book form in 1934 not as Alice's “letter to the world,” but as part of a volume devoted also to Wilky and Robertson. It bore the title *Alice James: Her Brothers—Her Journal*. Alice remained posthumously—as she had been all her life—the mere younger sister; her claim to attention was still as an appendage to brothers.

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Mrs. Vaux entrusted the editing of the volume to Anna Robeson Burr. Mrs. Burr wrote an 82-page introduction devoted to the younger brothers. *Their* claim upon posterity, ironically, was largely derived from their kinship to William and Henry and Alice—although they had, like so many of their fellow-citizens, been ardent Abolitionists, had fought bravely in the Civil War and been broken by it. Wilky and Robertson had then, with more idealism than practical business sense, tried to run a plantation in the post-bellum South, and finally ended up working in the Midwest. They were honorable citizens in the American republic; but in that special republic of which they were “natives”—the James family—life had bestowed a kind of honorable second-class citizenship upon them. It was their uncommon fate to have genius for brotherhood and to experience (as Stanislaus Joyce was to feel in another century) the glow of the family pride in the achieving and creative brothers. Small wonder that Robertson fancied he was a foundling, and that Garth Wilkinson, badly wounded in the assault on Fort Wagner in 1863, found no career and died young.

Mrs. Burr showed less respect for the text than Miss Loring. In her preface she said that “the journal is printed here as written”; however, she excised French passages and certain others where the text could not be understood without explanation. She robbed the diary of much of its point by omitting Alice’s clippings from the English papers, “because they concern events long past, relating often to minor Parliamentary debates and English local politics, but also because they dilute the rich flow of her own observation and feeling.” This necessitated cutting out some of the allusions to the clippings. Thus truncated, the “journal” was given to the world. What Mrs. Burr was glossing over was the fact that the clippings served Alice more often than not as vivid text for some of her sharp comments on English manners; and the “minor Parliamentary debates” were still part and parcel of the Irish Home Rule issue which gave so much life—and acerbity—to the otherwise

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monotonous invalidical existence. Far from "diluting" Alice's journal, they are integral to it.

In publishing the full text of the diary for the first time, I have worked from photo copies of both the original manuscript and Miss Loring's privately printed version. From this it is clear that Mrs. Burr did not base her text on the manuscript, but on the privately printed version. Some of the clippings are missing in the original manuscript, having long ago dropped away from the pages to which they were pasted. For the text of these, I have relied upon the Loring edition, where they were reproduced in full. There has been some harmonizing of Alice's idiosyncratic punctuation and some of the abbreviations have been spelled out as an aid to the reader. In all other respects, however, the diary now conforms to the original manuscript. I am indebted to the late Mrs. Vaux, who first showed me the manuscript and who some years ago expressed the hope that I would bring out a new edition. Her son, Professor Henry James Vaux of Berkeley, California, gave me valuable assistance and I wish particularly to thank him and his daughter, Alice James Vaux, the present owner of the manuscript, for permitting it to be microfilmed. I am indebted, in the editing of this diary, to Donald G. Brien, a friend of many years; to William A. Jackson, director of the Houghton Library, and the librarian, Miss Carolyn E. Jakeman; and not least, to my former student, Dr. Gloria Glikin of Brooklyn College, who assisted me in the collation of the Loring edition with the manuscript and patiently searched the English newspapers and helped with the annotation. Finally I wish to express my thanks to Mr. John James of Cambridge and the President and Fellows of Harvard University for continued access to the James family papers in the Houghton Library. I am grateful to Mr. Rupert Hart-Davis for help with certain of the footnotes.

Almost a century has elapsed since Alice James wrote her diary. The annotation accordingly has been designed to place the writer's allusions in their proper historical context

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and to identify—especially for a new generation—some of the persons mentioned in the text. For those interested in the bibliographical side of my task, the manuscript of the diary is contained, as I have said, in two ordinary English scribblers. The first consists of some 232 numbered pages unruled (some pages carry duplicate numbers), $4\frac{1}{2}$ by 7 inches, and the second $6\frac{1}{4}$ by $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches, containing 201 pages ruled of which 71 are in Alice James's hand and the remainder are written by Katharine Loring. One other handwriting appears, though rarely, that of her nurse, Emily Bradford. The diarist began on page one, on the right-hand leaf at the front of each book, and continued on each successive right-hand leaf until the back of the book was reached. Then she turned it upside down; the blank pages were now on the right, and these were duly filled. Accordingly, when the diary is opened the text on the right-hand page is in the proper position, but that on the left is upside down.

Alice James also used the first scribbler for a time as a commonplace book. Some pages are blank in the second book, and into half a dozen of these has been copied a letter from the elder Henry James to Emerson (containing a description of Hawthorne) and a portion of a letter from William James of 1885, apparently written to Alice. The father's letter was published in 1936 in Ralph Barton Perry's *Thought and Character of William James* (I, 88-90).

The four-copy edition has the following title page:

The Diary/ of / Alice James / Four Copies Printed./
Cambridge:/ John Wilson and Son. / University Press./ 1894

The Bancroft Library at Berkeley in California has the copy probably never given to Robertson James, but given by William James's son, Henry, to his sister Mary Margaret Porter. It is inscribed "Henry James [3rd] from Katharine P. Loring, October 1923." The third copy is in the Barrett collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, and on its title page,

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in Miss Loring's handwriting, is the following notation: "One copy destroyed by Author's brother Henry; one belongs to Katharine P. Loring; Two copies to Henry James (3) of which he placed one in the Harvard University Library." With the known destruction of Henry James's copy, this must be considered one of the rarest of nineteenth-century privately printed books in the United States.

Although I have told much of the story of Alice James's relationship to her brother in my *Life of Henry James*, the material is dispersed in various relevant chapters of the second and third parts, *The Conquest of London* and *The Middle Years*. The editing of her diary has afforded me the opportunity of unifying this material, and I have done so in the biographical essay which serves here as introduction. I have, however, used certain documents which were irrelevant in the other volumes. The correspondence of Alice James with members of her family is in the Houghton Library at Harvard, as are some of her letters to members of the Norton family. Some of Henry James's letters to Miss Loring are at Harvard; others are in the library at Beverly; some are in the National Library of Scotland. Others are in the Barrett Collection at the University of Virginia. I am indebted to C. Waller Barrett for access to these before they were added to the collection. The Vaux papers contained letters from various members of the James family to Robertson James. In this preface I have used a letter now at Harvard written by Miss Loring to William James's daughter, Mrs. Bruce Porter, on June 6, 1934, justifying publication of the diary. Lilla Cabot Perry's description of the household at 20 Quincy Street is contained in a letter to Van Wyck Brooks which he published in the third volume of his reminiscences, *From the Shadow of the Mountain*, in 1961. Other accounts of Alice James can be found in Henry James's autobiographies, Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, and F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family*. Mr. Augustus P. Loring of Boston kindly allowed me to quote from the

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unpublished Loring material. I wish finally to thank Jean Strouse, author of the admirable full-length *Alice James: A Biography* (1980), for helping me correct various slips and printer's errors she encountered in the diary during her extensive researches.

I have retold Alice James's life not as a part of her brothers' lives, as in these volumes, but as a life possessing its particular logic and its own—in this case distinctly muted—drama. The diary itself helps to complete the portrait.

L.E.

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Introduction:

A Portrait of Alice James

ALICE JAMES began to keep a commonplace book at the end of her second year in England. She had crossed the Atlantic in November 1884, and the first entries are dated "*December 1886.*" Into this book she copied verses, aphorisms, passages from novels, sentences culled from her wide and ever-curious readings. We encounter at the outset lines from the *Rubáiyát*—"the wine of life keeps oozing drop by drop, the leaves of life keep falling one by one." On the next page she sets down Hamlet's "I do not set my life at a pin's fee." Carlyle's "Everlasting Yea" follows—her father might have written it—"There is in a man a HIGHER than Love of Happiness: he can do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness," and immediately after this she copies (in the French in which she read *War and Peace*) Tolstoy's account of Prince Andrei at Austerlitz—the vivid moment when the wounded Prince, falling backward, discovers above him the blue immensity of the heavens and experiences, in the very midst of battle, a sense of exquisite peace. The pages of the commonplace book are filled with the words of famous writers. They seem to speak for Alice. In 1887 she is quoting Howells and Loti, La Bruyère, Flaubert, Edgar Quinet, George Sand, and again Tolstoy. In the following year Renan, Maupassant, her brothers William and Henry, Auguste Comte, George Eliot. But when she writes down the year 1889 it is to announce, in effect, that she will henceforth deal with her life in her own words: "I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about

what happens, or rather doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me."

She kept her diary faithfully thereafter, save on days when she was too ill; and she persisted even when she lost the strength to write. During the last months of her terminal illness, she dictated. Apparently the diary came to be much more than a substitute for loneliness and desolation. On one of the pages she set down words from Cotton Mather, "so the character of his daily conversation was a trembling walk with God." In a certain sense Alice's diary, with its mixture of stoicism and doubt, its laughter at death—and its fear of death—its renunciation and its protest, represented her particular and frequent "trembling walk with God."

I

Alice James was born in New York City on August 7, 1848, the fifth and last child of Henry and Mary James. The father, who came from Albany, was a man of leisure in a country where leisure was almost unknown; while his fellow-Americans were pushing farther westward in their conquest of the continent, the elder Henry James dreamed of Utopias and of a Swedenborgian Heaven on Earth. With a comfortable income inherited from his Irish immigrant father, and a large house at 58 West Fourteenth Street, he provided his four boys and his daughter with a wide, far-ranging, but deeply troubled childhood. There were long stays in Europe, *pensions*, experimental private schools, a train of tutors and governesses. The elder Henry was a dreamer in his library and a maker of paradoxes on the lecture platform. A friend of Emerson, Carlyle, Thackeray, and most of the Boston Brahmins, he limped through life (he had lost a leg in a boyhood accident), cheerfully and gregariously, but also, his children were to feel, with a certain ineffectuality and vagueness. His wife, a plain, unimaginative woman (considerably transfigured in the imaginative prose of her novelist-son), provided the practical down-to-earth management required in a

household otherwise volatile. Her children in later years spoke of her "self-effacement." This masked a strong will and a vigorous guiding hand. Not the least of the family's paradoxes thus was a father who was in reality maternal, and a mother inclined to be gubernatorial, as Henry James implied and Alice's recollections in her diary suggest.

Alice grew up in a family circle almost entirely masculine, save for the hovering figures of her mother and her mother's sister, Catherine Walsh, the "Aunt Kate" of the family. Five men, the father and the two older sons (who were half-a-dozen years older than Alice), and the younger brothers of her own age, Garth and Robertson, dominated her early years. Her elder brothers cultivated a courtliness with her that was really a form of self-display and teasing, and her younger brothers, when they did not ignore her, heaped the usual petty indignities small boys have in reserve for baby sisters—"the anguish," Alice remembers (recalling a childhood outing), "greater even than usual of Wilky's and Bob's heels grinding into my shins." The "greater even than usual" sums up chapters of childhood history. Even the great Thackeray teased, when he joined the family at dinner in Paris. From his towering height he looked down on the eight-year-old Alice, in her pretty frock, and in a high, shocked voice said, "Crinoline—I was suspecting it! So young and so depraved!"

Alice may not have known what the word "depraved" meant, but she knew she was the butt of laughter—as she was in countless family episodes. She found ways of defending herself; her mother's letters record that she often effectively "sasséd" her father and brothers. A family friend in Newport later spoke of the "unhappy" James children, fighting "like cats and dogs"; and if Alice was not in the thick of the battles, she constantly sought to raise her feminine voice among the stronger male voices around her, which means she learned how to be aggressive, like them, with words.

Alice's education seems to have been as casual as that of her

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brothers: a modicum of home-learning; French taught by the same governess who taught her brother Henry; certain struggles with arithmetic, when the family was in Geneva and the boys had been farmed out to various schools. "Our Alice is still under discipline," writes the father to a friend, "preparing to fulfil some high destiny or other in the future by reducing decimal fractions to their least possible rate of subsistence." The European experiences of the young William and Henry, which played so large a role in their development, touched Alice much less, perhaps because she was only seven when the family went abroad in 1855. The Jameses were constantly on the move; and later the sons and daughter complained they had had an "hotel" childhood. They were swept from Geneva to London, London to Paris, Paris to Boulogne-sur-Mer, a sweep across the Atlantic for a brief stay in Newport, and, just as they were restoring their American roots, a sweep eastward again to schools and *pensions* in Geneva and later in Germany. Small wonder that Alice, in adult life, warned William against repeating the same pattern with his children. "What enrichment of mind and memory can children have without continuity and if they are torn up by the roots every little while as we were? Of all things don't make the mistake which brought about our rootless and accidental childhood." Europe should be left for his children "until they are old enough to have the Grand Emotion, undiluted by vague memories."

On the eve of the Civil War the Jameses finally ended their wanderings and settled in Newport. Here Alice passed the early years of adolescence. Her younger brothers disappeared from her life; they became soldiers—but then they had always disappeared to play games not for girls. Her older brothers remained at home, but went through a long period of self-absorption and invalidism, suffering deeply from the fratricidal war. Alice was much alone. She describes in her diary how she took gloomy walks around Newport, "absorbing into the bone

that the better part is to clothe oneself in neutral tints, walk by still waters and possess one's soul in silence." That was "woman's place" in the genteel society of her time; but neutrality was impossible: there remained in Alice the long-formed need to assert herself. The old articulateness could not, in reality, be silenced. "The only thing which survives," she concluded, "is the resistance we bring to life, and not the strain life brings to us."

Alice brought a full measure of defense rather than resistance. Increasingly it took the form of a struggle between body and mind. When she was fifteen there were attacks of "neuralgia" and William James writes in a letter that he hopes Alice is "back at school instead of languishing and lolling about the house." At this school Alice remembered a struggle between doing her lessons and "shrieking or wiggling through the most impossible sensations of upheaval."

By the time the family moved to Cambridge at the end of the Civil War the upheavals took serious form. When a conversation proved too exciting, Alice had a fainting spell. At the moment of falling asleep she experienced terror. And the house in Cambridge provided a melancholy environment. In one of his letters Henry speaks of their home as being "as lively as an inner sepulchre." And the backward glance of an eyewitness, Lilla Cabot Perry, who married a boyhood friend of the Jameses, is eloquent. Recalling various households in Cambridge, she speaks of "the poky banality of the James house, ruled by Mrs. James, where Henry James's father used to limp in and out and never seemed really to 'belong' to his wife or Miss Walsh [Aunt Kate], large florid stupid-seeming ladies, or to his clever but coldly self-absorbed daughter, who was his youngest child. . . . Henry James's mother (even to my own perception as a child) was the very incarnation of *banality* and his aunt, Miss Walsh, who lived with them, not much better. His father always seemed to me genial and de-

lightful . . . but he seemed to me out of place in that stiff stupid house in Cambridge."

We must allow for possible limitations of a Cabot-eye view of the James household in Cambridge, so at variance with most of the pictures offered by the Jameses themselves. There is much in it, however, that corresponds to the content of the mother's letters to her children. The truth was that 20 Quincy Street harbored during the late 1860's three disturbed young adults, the two older brothers and Alice, with her illnesses which set the stage for her invalidism. Her breakdowns, particularly that of 1868, when she was in her twentieth year, are documented in letters written by her parents to the youngest son, Robertson, who was living in the Midwest. She had "violent turns of hysteria." "Alice," the father wrote, "is half the time, indeed much more than half, on the verge of insanity and suicide." During this period she had violent impulses to "knock off the head of the benignant pater." The controlling of such impulses imposed upon her a burden which she described with insight: that of being "doctor, nurse and straitjacket, all in one." And by being ill, she rendered herself powerless to execute the violence. At the same time she could hold those around her in bondage. "Father is bearing Alice's calls upon him in a most miraculous way," the mother writes. Alice demanded indeed that he be at her bedside day and night. During certain of these hours she told him of her wish to commit suicide. Was it a sin? she asked. The elder Henry coped with this in a shrewd but self-exalting way. He did not see that Alice needed some expression of being wanted and loved. He did not think suicide was a sin. It might be, he said, if a person did this as a consequence of drink or opium and "the utter degradation of his faculties." But it was absurd to believe it sinful if Alice wished release from her suffering. He gave her his fatherly permission to end her life whenever it pleased her, beseeching her only to "do it in a perfectly gentle way in order not to distress her friends."

In subsequent conversations Alice rationalized that her asser-