

Winter 2014

## **Giving Voice to a 19th Century Girl**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Kernberger, Katherine (2014) "Giving Voice to a 19th Century Girl," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 10 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield\\_magazine/vol10/iss3/6](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol10/iss3/6)

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# Giving voice to a 19th century girl

**O**n Tuesday, Aug. 7, 1877, Marie Bashkirtseff complains to fate: “To die! My God, to die! To die without leaving anything behind me? To die like a dog, like hundreds of thousands of women whose names are barely engraved on their tombs?”

Born into the minor provincial aristocracy of the Ukraine under the Czars, Marie moved to France with her family when she was 12. Her family indulged her, supported her ambitions without understanding them and fostered her desire for fame. She did become famous, but only after her death, with the first publication of her *Journal* in 1887. Widely acclaimed, it became fashionable reading throughout Europe.

When my mother, Phyllis Howard Kernberger, retired from teaching in 1973, she came across an 1890 English translation of Marie’s *Journal* and discovered a new passion that became the focus of her efforts over the next two decades. Comparing microfilms of the original *Journal* she had obtained from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris with published versions, she realized how completely Marie’s true voice had been suppressed. She found a new Marie. She saw the vitality, honesty and desperation in Marie and wanted to alter the false picture given by the earlier editions. My mother never lost her commitment to presenting Marie without analysis or interpretation, simply providing the text as it stands. I have tried to do the same.

*This photo of 16-year-old Marie Bashkirtseff taken in Paris, France, in August 1875 by the famous photographer Walery was featured in a catalog for two exhibits held in Nice in 1995. English Professor Katherine Kernberger recently published the second volume of the Bashkirtseff journals, which are available as e-books. Kernberger worked on The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff: I Am The Most Interesting Book of All, Volume I & Lust For Glory, Volume II for over two decades and was assisted by 17 Linfield students. Kernberger used the journals in her classes and also taught January Term classes in Nice, Rome and Paris that focused on Bashkirtseff.*

*Opposite page: Katherine Kernberger, professor of English, with a bust sculpted by her husband, Charles Strong, and donated to the Fondation pour la Renaissance de la mémoire de Marie Bashkirtseff.*



Taking on this project after my mother's death in 1991, I set out to edit the manuscript of her translation for publication. I had always followed her labors from the sidelines, but now I needed to shape the narrative myself.

Our first volume came out in 1997, just as other scholars were beginning a complete transcription of the Journal in French. This opened unexpected paths, leading to exciting opportunities and friendships with many people who have contributed to the revival of interest in Marie and her Journal.

I have met with some of those scholars in France and in the Ukraine, at conferences on Marie, and at celebrations of her life and art.

At Linfield, I have taught several courses using Marie's Journal, together with autobiographies like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, collections of letters like those of Mme de Sévigné, and novels like Maupassant's *A Woman's Life* and Henry James's *Daisy Miller*. Students have traveled with me on January Term classes to Nice, Rome and Paris to study Marie in the cities where she lived and to visit the museums that display her art works. For me, the highlight of these journeys has been seeing Marie's actual notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Her last notebook stops 10 days before her death from tuberculosis at the age of 25. The handwriting just ends, with all the unfilled – but already numbered – pages stretching away before her.

Many women students at Linfield have collaborated with me at various stages of my editing of Marie's notebooks over more than 20 years (see page 16). I encouraged them to join me because they had read Marie in a class I had taught, showed an interest in women's

lives, or were themselves studying one of the myriad subjects Marie set out to master. Many have become fast friends and colleagues. Some share with me the events of their lives after Linfield. A few have written or presented papers of their own on Marie, or have helped me as I have wrestled with conference presentations. I have been grateful for the insights and contributions they made to the project my mother began four decades ago.

Modern readers are still drawn to Marie's Journal for three main reasons: it has some of the soap-opera quality of a sprawling Russian novel, along with a varied cast of characters with a bewildering variety of nicknames. It shows us life, mainly in France, Italy and Russia, as experienced by a privileged girl growing up in the early years of the Belle Époque. And it reveals the challenges Marie faced: her insistence on getting an education, on being recognized for more than her dress and appearance, and on finding a career that would lead to fame. Those who might have dismissed the expurgated Marie of the earlier versions can now see her uncensored, fighting against the restraints imposed on her, demanding an equal place with the men of her generation. Marie was a girl born too early, at a time when what she aspired to was not proper or possible for respectable females.

Though Marie escaped the fate of those hundreds of thousands of women whose names are barely engraved on their tombs – she has, after all, a magnificent monument in Paris inscribed both with her name and the titles of her works of art – her real story unfolds in the pages of her Journal. 🍂

-Katherine Kernberger



Katherine Kernberger has been a professor of English at Linfield since 1979 whose teaching interests include the study of autobiography, British literature from *Beowulf* to Byron, as well as linguistics and the history of the English language. She regularly presents papers at international meetings of the Byron Society and serves on the board of the Byron Society of America. The translated journals of Marie Bashkirtseff were published by Fonthill Press and are available in e-books.

