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Biography

We Are Michael Field
Emma Donoghue
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Of all the poetry and fiction that Michael Field created, none was as interesting as the creation of Field himself. The fictitious author was the front of two eccentric spinsters, Katherine Bradley, and her niece, Edith Cooper. Lovers as well as relatives, the pair collaborated on eleven volumes of poetry as well as thirty historical tragedies which, although "Field's" work was celebrated in its heyday of the late 1800s, has fallen into contemporary neglect. Before the publication of this work, the story of the two women who called themselves "The Michaels" might also have suffered the same fate. With Donoghue's careful attention and impeccable research, however, The Michaels presented here are vibrant, fascinating and worth noting.

The central light in Donoghue's illuminative exploration of these women is a diary the two shared for over a quarter of a century. Rich in wit, honesty and passion, the diary illustrates not just The Michaels, but also artfully captures the obstacles of all Victorian women and the attitude of society that put those blocks into place. Although Bradley and Cooper are unmistakably arrogant and snobbish, lavishly preferring their dog to any and all humans (even each other at times), it is difficult to truly dislike them.

The precision with which Donoghue, an Irish novelist, chooses each entry and explains the circumstances surrounding events is exemplary. Her straightforward chronological account sparkles with bits of poetry, drawings, photographs and gentle asides that betray her contagious admiration of two women who triumphed over social judgement, serious illness and domestic squabbles. Although Michael Field's books may be almost forgotten, The Michaels live on in this impressive work.

Elizabeth Millard