

## 'A special place at a special time': Françoise Henry's diaries on Inishkea North (Ireland)

Review of:

Janet T. Marquardt (ed.), *Françoise Henry in Co. Mayo. The Inishkea Journals*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012, 176 pp., 14 col. plates, 83 b. & w. illus., £35.00 hdbk, £17.50 pbk. ISBN 987-1-84682-324-4 / 978-1-84682-374-9.

This volume compiles the texts of Françoise Henry's (1902-1982) hand-written notebooks, which the book's editor, Janet T. Marquardt, found by chance at the Royal Irish Academy in 2010. A French art historian and archaeologist who specialized in early medieval Ireland, Henry recorded in diaries her experiences while excavating in the remote island of Inishkea North in 1937 and 1938. It is to the publication's credit that the discoverer of such a treasure was Marquardt, an authority on medieval historiography.<sup>1</sup> She was, as she explains in the introduction, immediately impressed by the quality of Henry's descriptions, which inspired her to publish the notebooks, along with her diaries from 1946 and 1950, with the help of Huw Duffy who translated the text into English, and Barbara Wright who has also published the original French text.<sup>2</sup> The result is a fascinating book that relates Françoise Henry's astute impressions of what surrounded her in that corner of the world, the rural landscape, and people who inhabited it.

The publication speaks to the growing interest in the study of women's roles in the development of art history as a discipline, which has seen a significant rise in recent years linked to increased awareness of female participation in the making of material culture, whether as patrons or as artists. This tendency was already evident with the publication of *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*, edited by Claire Richter and Adele M. Holcomb in 1981 and has steadily continued and increased since then.<sup>3</sup> Lately, further analysis of the contributions of other observers of art, such as the nineteenth-century tourists and antiquarians or more modern archaeologists, have joined those studies of art historians in this restoration of female academics. Together, this research has expanded our understanding of how women participated in the making, use and study of material culture. New volumes have brought to light the investigations of these pioneering women, as they are often suitably described, or illustrated their extraordinary lives. The most instructive

<sup>1</sup> A good example of her work is: Janet T. Marquardt, 'Un romantique à la recherche du passé: K. J. Conant à Cluny', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, vol. 48, no. 192, October-December 2005, 327-340.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Wright, *Les îles d'Inishkea: carnets personnels*, Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Richter Sherman and Adele M. Holcomb, eds, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981.

of these publications, however, are those that divulge the women's own writings, often in the form of personal diaries or travel notes that reveal inner thoughts and struggles faced through the investigating process, as is the case here. The experiences of those specializing in the art of the early Middle Ages seem to elicit a particular appeal because they often required researchers to travel to remote, foreign areas to access their objects, thus leaving them displaced from what they knew and confronted with strange situations. Their accounts therefore usually represent a combination of judgements emerging from their academic background, together with personal impressions of the landscape and society, narrations of daily events and compilations of folklore. This type of content is especially evident in personal notebooks, such as these by Françoise Henry or, for example, those written by the American photographer Ruth Matilda Anderson (1893-1983) during her trip to Galicia (north-west Spain) which have only recently come to light.<sup>4</sup> Their amalgam of intimate and analytical stances can be seen in many erudite and well-known publications from the beginning of the twentieth century, including *The Way of Saint James* written by Georgiana Goddard King (1871-1939),<sup>5</sup> who did not just record her theories around the buildings she studied but recounted her experiences so that the books could even work as a travel guide. Françoise Henry's situation resembles those of the aforementioned Americans, who transcribed their observations as they travelled through a remote corner of Spain, in that her notebooks convey the impressions of an urban woman working in the distant and isolated community of Co. Mayo.<sup>6</sup>

Henry's academic background was impressive. She had the good fortune to study with the influential art historians Emile Mâle and Henry Focillon at the Sorbonne, who each represented different ways of approaching the discipline, which she would combine in her own academic development. She had also studied archaeology, which proved a perfect companion to her knowledge of primitive Christian sculpture. In 1948, she began working at University College in Dublin, where she remained until her retirement.

The island of Inishkea North is the setting of her journals, where she sought to excavate the remains of an early medieval Christian abbey. In 1937, she visited to survey the possibilities, and returned in 1938, 1946 and 1950 to carry out the actual work. However, in this book, there is no evidence of her findings, as the editor has decided to restrict the publication to her personal accounts alone. The allure of

<sup>4</sup> Anderson's notes have been published as an annex to a catalogue of a recent exhibition of her photographs in this Spanish region: Ruth Matilda Anderson, *Unha mirada de antano: fotografías de Ruth Matilda Anderson en Galicia*, A Coruña: Fundación Caixa Galicia, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Georgiana Goddard King, *The Way of Saint James*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920.

<sup>6</sup> Another very interesting example is the recently discovered diary of the American novelist Edith Wharton (1862-1937), written during her trip to Santiago de Compostela in 1925. Edith Wharton, *Back to Compostela / Regreso a Compostela*, Patricia Fra López, ed., Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2011.

faraway places had captivated many since the last half of the nineteenth century, which, imbued in the romanticist movement, held a special regard for the Middle Ages. Travellers, writers, archaeologists, ethnologists and art historians searched for the primitive that, according to their ideas, still lingered in unexplored places and among remote, isolated populations, some of which were within the confines of Europe.

The Americans Georgiana Goddard King and Arthur Kingsley Porter (1883-1933) were seduced by the promise of new discoveries into exploring the medieval art of Spain, which was still largely unknown outside the country at the time. The pair distanced themselves from the romantic views common among scholars of the previous century by adopting scientific approaches to newly documented works of art.<sup>7</sup> Upon deciding that a country was too well-known, they both sought out unexplored territories, so King went to Portugal and Porter to Ireland. Thanks to the latter, Irish art had received some foreign attention before Françoise Henry decided to make it her dissertation subject. Both British and American specialists, including women such as the antiquarian Margaret Stokes (1832-1900), in addition to others of Henry's contemporaries like her friend Marie Duport, had all dedicated attention to medieval Irish art. The Inishkea islands, on the other hand, had yet to be the subject of thoroughly academic consideration.

As we have seen, this book contains the transcription and translation of Henry's journals. Her observations used vivid metaphors to depict the maritime landscape that surrounded her on the island, which changed with the frequent violent storms common to that part of the world. But she also described the faces and characters of the Mullet Peninsula's people, frequently in a caricaturist style, as well as their traditions, superstitions and stories. As Marquardt very becomingly says, 'We feel that these journals represent a special place captured at a special time'.<sup>8</sup> That could not be more true. The inhabitants of the Inishkea Islands had been relocated on the mainland only a few years earlier, with the help of the government, and many still missed their lives on the island and were adjusting to their new ones.

The text exhibits an agile rhythm due to the use of short phrases that articulate her thought flow, revealing that the diaries were conceived as a collection of personal notes. Owing to their intimate nature, Henry often included obscure references to people or places, which Marquardt has carefully disentangled and outlined in her notes. The arduous process of deciphering such personal communications even took the editor to the Mullet Peninsula where she had firsthand experience on Inishkea North and interviewed the people living there about their memories of Henry, throwing light on the many she mentioned in her

<sup>7</sup> Janice Mann, 'Georgiana Goddard King and A. Kingsley Porter Discover the Art of Medieval Spain', Richard L. Kagan, ed., *Spain in America. The Origins of Hispanism in the United States*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002, 174-175.

<sup>8</sup> Janet T. Marquardt, ed., *Françoise Henry in Co. Mayo. The Inishkea Journals*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012, 2.

records and captured in photographs. The details of Marquardt's research, accompanied by a biography of Henry and an exhaustive contextualization of her work at Inishkea North compose the book's introduction. It is a brief but concentrated chapter, full of crucial information necessary for understanding the French art historian's writings, as well as some bibliographic recommendations to reinforce the study of Henry's labour, the territory she excavated, and even updated readings on the art itself. The text is further accompanied by three maps that prove indispensable when reading Henry's account. Two are of the Mullet Peninsula and another visualizes Inishkea North itself, pinpointing the location of the events Henry described.

The book is divided into chronological sections, with one chapter for each year she worked on the island. As the editor points out, the texts were collected from various notebooks and scattered loose pages since Henry did not keep a regular account of her activities. There are likewise periods when she writes every day, but also interruptions lasting more than a week. Some entries are undated, while others consist only of a couple lines reporting the weather. The longest diary corresponds to 1938, and spans for a little more than one month, whereas the shorter diary from 1937 goes from April to September and narrates her scouting trip to the island. The last journal, from 1950, on the other hand is composed of fragments extracted from her archaeological notes.

The editor has illustrated Henry's texts throughout with related photographs she found conserved in the School of Archaeology. Most were taken by Henry herself, and some she even mentioned in her journals. Marquardt succeeded in identifying some of their protagonists through comparison with descriptions in the notebooks or by asking current Mullet Peninsula inhabitants. The pictures thereby serve as invaluable counterparts to the words by allowing readers to observe the appearance of the people that accompanied the art historian, as well as the landscape. The editor took some additional snapshots during her own visit to the island and, by comparison of new and old images, it is possible to see how the landscape has altered, thanks especially to the abandonment of the houses on Inishkea North, and yet remained unchanged over the past sixty decades.

As we have seen, the book's first chapter is dedicated to Henry's writings in 1937, beginning around April 10th (the first entry is undated) and continuing through September 20th of that same year. The art historian narrates her contact with former Inishkea residents upon arrival on the Mullet Peninsula, a territory mainly devoted to fishing and characterized by a high rate of emigration. Henry describes her attempts to integrate in the daily life of the community through associations with the local population and by taking interest in their customs and folklore. She even transcribes a legend linked to the island, the history of the Naomhóg, a miraculous statue said to be brought to Inishkea North by an early Irish saint. She also travelled to the island itself that year, to assess the amount of work to be done, and excavate part of the oratory of Saint Colum Cille.

In 1938, there are entries from June 7th to July 11th in which Henry reports the arrangements made for her stay on the island, from organizing provisions to finding men to work on the excavations. In these endeavours she was helped by Ann Cawley, a local woman who would be her assistant during the expedition, and accompanied by Maureen O'Daly (1908-1994), an Irish language scholar, thus making her efforts to communicate with the local population less problematic. Henry herself mentions the resemblance of their enterprise to Robinson Crusoe's, and her text definitely conveys an atmosphere of solitude and self-sufficiency. Her notes are filled with descriptions of a landscape dominated by the sea, and an ever-changing weather, paired with chronicles of their daily routine, the visits they received, and her frequent problems with the employees. She often had to struggle just to be heard, a matter she attributed to her status as both a foreigner and a woman. Interestingly, these claims resonate within other early twentieth-century women's accounts of their travels; Georgiana Goddard King, for instance, repeatedly stated how difficult it was to be obeyed in the, then, male centred culture of Northern Spain.<sup>9</sup> Galicia, where King spent long periods, would have been very similar to Henry's Co. Mayo in their isolation and dependence of the sea, and both women struggled with the regional languages, sometimes making communication arduous.

The diary of 1946 contains longer passages; it starts on the 3rd of August with her visits to two islands, Caher and Achill, and ends on the 8th of September of the same year. By that time, her experience from previous visits paid off and the excavations advanced more smoothly, with no further opposition from the workers.

Finally, the last journal from 1950, dated between June 1st to July 20th, is written in English and describes a well-organized trip, devoid of great calamity. She does, however, express frustration at seeing some visitors from the mainland walking around the excavation incautiously. Henry had already written to Adolf Mahr (1887-1951), director of the National Museum of Ireland,<sup>10</sup> to explain the difficulties she experienced when trying to send him objects retrieved in her excavations because of the opposition of Inishkea inhabitants to the removal of their patrimony. Nevertheless, her excavations were successful and she was able to collect

<sup>9</sup> 'A woman alone will meet, from time to time, a little personal annoyance, even from priests, that however inevitable, yet leaves her hurt', Georgiana Goddard King, *The Way*, vol. 2, 262. For further information on Goddard King's experiences in Northern Spain: Ana Hernández Ferreirós, 'Saint Mary of Melón por Georgiana Goddard King', *Quintana*, 7, 2008, 203-222; Ana Hernández Ferreirós, 'Georgiana Goddard King (1871-1939), pionera de la Historia del Arte medieval en Galicia', *As Mulleres na Historia de Galicia. Actas do I Encontro Interdisciplinar de Historia de Xénero*, Miguel García-Fernández, Silvia Cernadas Martínez, Aurora Ballesteros Fernández, eds, Santiago de Compostela: Andavira, 2012, CD-ROM.

<sup>10</sup> Adolf Mahr, an Austrian archaeologist, was appointed head of the National Museum of Ireland in 1934. He was also the leader of the Nazi party in the country, and recruited many members for the cause. He left Dublin for Germany in 1939 at the outbreak of war and never returned to Ireland. Gerry Mullins, *Dublin Nazi No. 1. The life of Adolf Mahr*, Dublin: Liberties Press, 2007.

a significant amount of valuable information.

In conclusion, this volume stands out as an insightful and amusing first-person account of an art historian's struggles to carry on her work in a remote island during the first half of the twentieth century. It offers a singular perspective through Henry's experiences relating to a rural Irish population, often characterized and hindered by her condition as a woman. It stands therefore as the portrait of an encounter between science and rural folklore, between a traditional society and a modern women who broke away from conventional roles. This and other women's accounts that have recently come to light are evidence of the steady entrance of women into the academy at the beginning of the last century, and, with them, the expansion of the subject matter within such a young discipline as the history of art.

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