

PETER O'CONNOR	ENGLISH PLUS: BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING
WEEK 3	THE DIARIES OF FRANCIS KILVERT: 1840-1879
<div data-bbox="220 363 492 779" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="506 401 1472 772" data-label="Text"> <p>Once you know Kilvert, then have him on your bedside table and dip in. You will find him the best, most modest, sympathetic, sometimes melancholy and lonely, always charitable of companions, wonderful company for any mood, always good for an anecdote, a detail of observation, a profound thought. The diary reveals, also like nothing else I have ever come across, the daily life, the common round, the duties, the responsibilities, the commitment and the spirit, of a conscientious Victorian Church of England parson. And if you ever go to the places in which Kilvert lived, the countryside about which he walked for miles on parish visits, you will see them through Francis Kilvert's eyes."</p> </div> <div data-bbox="217 770 1472 1064" data-label="Text"> <p>Rev. Kilvert chronicled life in the Radnorshire, Brecknock & Herefordshire countryside in the diaries he kept of the minutiae of his daily rounds of his parishes, when serving as a curate in the mid-Wales border area from 1870 to 1879. Kilvert wrote of the big houses and small houses and of the rolling hills and lush green pastures of the Wye Valley, which have changed little since his day. The Prices, Proberts, Lewises, Jones , the Pugh's, the Venables and the Gwilliams, amongst others, are the stars of the show in the context of their lives in Clyro, Glasbury, Bredwardine, Llantony, the Radnor Hills, the Black Mountains , Hay-on-Wye and just about every town, village and hamlet between Hereford and Builth Wells."</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1015 1062 1445 1096" data-label="Text"> <p><i>- Playwright and author, Susan Hill</i></p> </div>	
<div data-bbox="217 1098 925 1795" data-label="Text"> <p>Robert Francis Kilvert 1840-1879 was born at The Rectory, Hardenhuish Lane, near Chippenham, Wiltshire, to the Rev. Robert Kilvert, Rector of Langley Burrell, Wiltshire, and Thermuthis, daughter of Walter Coleman and Thermuthis Ashe. He is remembered for his diaries, reflecting rural life in the 1870s, which were published several years after his death. Kilvert was educated privately in Bath by his uncle, Francis Kilvert, before going up to Wadham College, Oxford. He then entered the Church of England and became a rural curate, working primarily in the Welsh Marches between Hereford and Hay on Wye. Initially from 1863 to 1864 he was Curate to his father at Langley Burrell, and in 1865 he became Curate of Clyro, Radnorshire; he remained there until 1872 when he rejoined his father at Langley Burrell. From 1876 to 1877 he was Vicar of St Harmon, Radnorshire, and from 1877 to his death in 1879 he was Vicar of Bredwardine, Herefordshire.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="964 1142 1395 1434" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="935 1444 1427 1782" data-label="Image"> </div>	
<p>In August 1879 he married Elizabeth Ann Rowland (1846-1911), whom he had met on a visit</p>	

to Paris, but died a few days after returning from his honeymoon in Scotland. Now there is a Francis Kilvert Society which holds meetings looking around places where Francis went and where he lived.

The Diaries

Kilvert is best known as the author of voluminous diaries describing rural life. After his death from peritonitis, his frank and open diaries came into the possession of censorious relatives and his wife, and only three of the twenty or more volumes are known to have survived deliberate burning. These three volumes have since been used as the source for published collections. His Diaries are considered to be classics, and also of historical importance for the study of remote rural life and Victorian society.

Poet William Plomer published the most widely-known selection of the diaries, as *Kilvert's Diary, 1870-1879* (Penguin, 1938—corrected in the 1960s, and with an abridged and illustrated version for children published as *Ardizzone's Kilvert* in 1976). A somewhat different selection from that of Plomer was published as *Journal of a Country Curate: Selections from the Diary of Francis Kilvert* by The Folio Society in 1960. In 1992 a new selection was published under the editorship of David Lockwood, *Kilvert, the Victorian: A New Selection from Kilvert's Diaries* (Seren Books, 1992). Out of print since 1970, the 3 volume indexed edition was reprinted in 2006 by O'Donoghue Books of Hay-on-Wye.

The Cornish Diary: Journal No.4, 1870 - From July 19th to August 6th, Cornwall was published by Alison Hodge in 1989. The National Library of Wales, which holds two of the three surviving volumes, published *The diary of Francis Kilvert: April-June 1870* in 1982 and *The Diary of Francis Kilvert: June-July 1870* in 1989.



A.L. Rowse's Introduction to the Diaries: Kilvert is a real literary discovery. Just before the war there came to light some twenty-two note-books containing the diary of this young Victorian clergyman, and, from these, selections have been made for the present volume. I find it fascinating reading; for, even apart from a liking for diaries in general, this one has quite exceptional qualities. It gives an extraordinarily sensitive and observant picture of country

life in the seventies, mostly of Radnorshire and central Wales, where Kilvert was a curate, but also of the west country, for his home was in Wiltshire, and during this year, 1870-1, he visited a good deal in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset. But, more important, he wrote like an angel; his gift was for prose rather than verse --though his verses are quite charming too. The result is an addition to literature.

In an odd way, the discovery of this unknown curate reminds one of the resurrection of Gerard Hopkins, though Kilvert was a gentler, less striking genius than that. Kilvert came from a good old west country family; and, though he spent most of the years covered by his diary as a curate in a remote part of Wales, he did not think of it as exile, but lived a very full and enjoyable social

life. He was a welcome guest at all the country houses round, especially at Clyro Court, in his own parish, with the family at which he was on friendly, affectionate terms. He clearly had great social gifts, though he had a real gift for solitude too, and can say: “I have a peculiar dislike to meeting people, and a peculiar liking for a deserted road”. He was an out-of-doors man who liked riding, fishing, and, above all, walking -- that favourite pursuit of the intellectually-minded. Not that he was an intellectual; he does not appear to have been a great reader; his reactions to public events -- the Franco-German War, the Mordaunt case -- were conventional enough.

He was something more and better than that; he was an artist, with a passionate love of life. He noticed everything; and his position as parson opened all doors to him. It is safe to say that very few people could have kept such a diary. It was not only the life of the country gentry that he knew, but of all the country people -- farmers and their labourers, the villagers, the poor. He notes their superstitions and beliefs, their good looks--he was extraordinarily sensitive to physical beauty whether in women or men, though particularly in girls: a susceptibility which he shared with Lewis Carroll, whom he knew. He was no less attracted by natural beauty, by mountains and hills, birds and flowers. But he was an artist in expressing his passion. The Diary is full of such passages as this:

“The peewits were sweeping, rolling and tumbling in the hot blue air about the tall trees with a strange deep mysterious hustling and quavering sound from their great wings.”

Or this, which reminds one of Hopkins by its phrasing:

“Last night there was a sharp frost, the crescent moon hung cold and keen, and the stars glittered and flashed gloriously. Orion all in a move of brilliance.”

There is a beautiful passage describing what he calls the Easter Eve Idyll -- the custom of dressing the graves in the church yard with flowers on Easter Eve -- and concluding with an astonishingly imaginative phrase:

“As I walked down the Churchyard alone the decked graves had a strange effect in the moonlight and looked as if the people had laid down to sleep for the night out of doors, ready dressed to rise early on Easter morning.”

It was a very varied, pulsating, natural life in that Welsh countryside which he observed so lovingly. There was always something interesting happening in Clyro; there are stories enough in the Diary to make a short-story writer's reputation. And Kilvert's account of the funeral of his great-aunt, Miss Maria Kilvert, the house in the College Green at Worcester, the haughty, unfriendly servants who knew that the wilful old lady was leaving her money away from the family, the service, the Canons, the reading of the will, show that the diarist had the makings of a remarkable novelist in him -- perhaps a Trollope.

What would he have become had he lived? With his social gifts, perhaps a canon, or an archdeacon? But that we shall never know; he died when he was still under forty, leaving behind him this exquisite Diary and a few poems. But we are grateful for what we have, for he is a real addition to the Victorian age. And oh! what nostalgia that peaceful Victorian life gives one to read about -- archery and croquet on the lawn, tea under the trees, picnics on the unspoiled Cornish coast, grapes and claret on a grassy bank, pleasant dinner-parties at Clyro Court, the busy, kindly life centring upon the Church. The characters of the Diary have a greater reality than all but the best novels; they have the substance of life, and live in the imagination.

As you get further into Kilvert's Diary the impression is maintained and strengthened that here we have a really original work of great delicacy and beauty, a book that is an addition to our literature. The work to which it most closely approximates in character is Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals. That is a classic, and I have no doubt that this will be. Kilvert's Diary does not come behind hers in its quality of observing physical beauty of every kind, whether of landscape, sky, flowers, men, or women, and in the power of rendering it directly, sometimes with an acute nostalgic effect; in this respect he was not unlike a quieter, Victorian D. H. Lawrence.

Kilvert even surpasses Dorothy Wordsworth, exquisite writer that she was, in the humanity of his diary: he had an extraordinary quality of sympathy for people, as great as that which he had for flowers and animals; it is clear that they loved him, and the result is in the breathing lifelike ness of his book, the stories of their lives simple people tell him, the intimate apprehension of character, the delicious portraits of the people of his Welsh and Wiltshire countrysides, his susceptibility of the charm of women, especially of young women and girls, which, held in as it had to be by the restraints of his position as a Victorian clergyman, went near at times to overwhelming him. It is clear in this volume that he was spoiling for marriage. That he was not already married was not his fault: it was due to the difficulty of his social position; after seven and a half years of his curacy at Clyro, to the lovely Brecon and Radnorshire background of which the Diary owes so much, he was still without a living. He does not seem to have had any push; he was a man of extreme sensibility and charm, an artist, and, there can be no doubt, a man with a touch of genius.

The one advantage which Dorothy Wordsworth has over him is that she lived among men of genius. Kilvert, though he was of good family and passed his life with the best of country society, knew nobody in the literary world; we have a visit to William Barnes, the Dorsetshire poet, also a clergyman – and that was his highest flight in this sphere. In a sense he lived ultimately to himself, and wrote for himself; hence the integrity, the transparent sincerity, the perfection -- it is not too high a word -- of his Diary. Is there not a romance in the discovery of this unknown figure, a young Victorian clergyman whom nobody knew, yet who wrote as well as Dorothy Wordsworth? It makes one think what inexhaustible reserves of talent, of gifts of mind and character, of genius, there have been among our countrymen. The discovery of Kilvert is on a par with the discovery of the poet Gerard Hopkins in our time, forty years after his death; but even Hopkins knew Coventry Patmore, R. W. Dixon, Robert Bridges. Kilvert knew nobody, except plain people.

I should place his Diary among the best half-dozen or dozen ever written in England. It is the quintessence of England, and the English attitude to life, to the country, to people, even though most of it, and the best part of it too, was written against that beautiful background of central Wales, the Brecon shire Beacons, the lovely mountains and valleys in view. Kilvert died, still in the thirties, only a few years after the end of this volume, it is pathetic to think -- he had such a thirst for life and loveliness in every form. But the Diary in the end is his *raison d'être*, and for that he had every qualification: a subtle ear and eye, a nostalgic memory -- like Proust, he remembered every thing -- an interest in folklore, he took down the stories and beliefs of the old people, he noted their sayings and looks and songs. No need to illustrate now how well he wrote, the direct physical impact of things:

"The oatladen waggon came creaking and swaying and sweeping the hedge

along the edge of a brow high above the house and then down a steep rough path into the rickyard”.

Or again:

“A group of people were sitting in the churchyard among the graves, and one woman was dressing a green grave with scarlet and white flowers near one of the vast black yews.”

Or:

“The western sky was in a splendour and every branch and twig stood out clear against the glow and the two twin sister silver birches leaned towards each other and kissed each other in the dusk.”

What is the secret of Kilvert? Ah! -- if only one knew that, one would have the clue to so much more of life than one has. But there, Kilvert has this mark of genius, among others, that he has the faculty of making us insatiably curious about him. We want to know all about him, as we long to know what sort of man Tennyson was at heart, or Newman, or what was it that happened to Gerard Manley Hopkins? We should like to know so much more about what went on in him, and what happened to all the girls he was so much in love with, and what to him in the end. Alas! we shall never know: he has the attraction of holding a secret for us. It is partly what makes his fascination, his spell so complete: there is something mysterious and elusive about him. At the same time as we are in such close touch with him, share his own intimate and tremulous sensibility, there remains something withdrawn.



Kilvert was that very rare creature, a diarist who was not in the least egoistic, nor even introspective. What he shares with us is his own apprehension of life, completely and without any reserves; but life viewed always in its aesthetic aspect, qua beauty, as one who was essentially an artist saw it. There remains something about the inner man that escapes us, to which we have not the key. Kilvert's is not the usual clergyman's diary at all; nor even like Parson Woodforde, who was so much concerned about eating. There is very little in Kilvert's Diary about eating: only the dinner he gave to his farmers his first year at Bredwardine. (But that sounds a good one: “white soup, roast beef, boiled chickens and ham, curried rabbit, stewed wood-pigeons, beef-steak pie, potatoes and stewed celery, plum pudding, custard, plum tart, mince pies, apricot jam tart”.) No, the point about Kilvert is that he was the master of a most exquisite and lovely prose, and the Diary that he kept is not merely a revealing document of the social life of the countryside in his time -- it is certainly that -- but one of the first half-dozen diaries, and that not the least moving, in our literature.

When the first volume came out, I described it as the nearest thing to Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals. It is pleasing to find here Kilvert's mother presenting him with Dorothy Wordsworth on his birthday, and her name invoked on his very last page. He pays a visit to Brinsop Court and the sitting-room where “dear Dorothy Wordsworth spent much of her time”.

Having returned from Clyro in Wales, Kilvert acts for a time as curate to his father at Langley Burrell in Wiltshire. The change of scene does not break the spell upon us. Here is Seagry Mill in May, Kilvert lying back on the river bank while his father fishes:

“It was a glorious afternoon, unclouded, and the meadows shone dazzling like a golden sea in the glory of the sheets of buttercups. The deep, dark river, still and glassy, seemed to be asleep and motionless except when a leaf or blossom floated slowly by. The cattle by the mill plashed and trampled among the rushes and river flags and water lilies in the shallow places, and the miller Godwin came down with a bucket to draw water from the pool.”

It is a perfect little landscape, like a Constable; and that is the kind of thing that Kilvert can do on every page. More often, he is rendering life, from close-up observation and with the tenderest, most exquisite sympathy for every sort of human being. It was here that his being a parson was such an advantage: it meant that every door was open to him, not only the squire's and the surrounding gentry and clergy, but the farmers and their labourers, the poor, the wretched and derelict. Still, the world they all inhabited was a secure and a quiet one: their greatest disasters an occasional railway accident, or a shipwreck.

What occupied much more of the foreground were such matters as the Squire's dismissal of old George Jefferies from leading the singing in church, the installation of a harmonium which almost led to a breach between manorhouse and rectory. “How strange it is that the Squire is such a distant man about music”, says Alice Matthews. It is a world of rural deans, and tea on rectory lawns under the trees, and, after tea, archery or croquet, or picking flowers in the flowery meads of Wiltshire for decorating the church, of pretty Victorian girls looking over the parapet of the bridge while the river flows by. And all the while there is one, a little apart, watching life itself flowing by, trying to catch it on the wing, to ensnare a momentary aspect of its beauty, with what quivering sensibility, with what nostalgia for what is passing, even as it passes, in a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase.

Here is Christmas Day, 1874:

“This morning we plainly heard the six beautiful fatal bells of Bremhill ringing a Christmas peal through the frosty air.”

Next day, St. Stephen's Day, he goes to visit a sick child who is in great pain, hoping to read her to sleep:

“The light shone through the night from the sick girl's chamber window, the night was still, an owl hooted out of the South and the mighty hunter Orion with his glittering sword silently overstrode the earth.”

On Childermas Day:

“As I came home the sky was black and thick with snow, but through the gloom one great lone star was burning in the East. We have seen His star in the East.”

There is, however, more to Kilvert than this lonely recording of natural beauty. It is when he gets back to Wales that his Diary quickens with an intenser life; he loved the Welsh, their warm, sharper, more precipient, more emotional life -- so much so that he fancied he had Welsh blood.

The characters become more vivid, more strange; there is Priscilla Price, who lived with her idiot stepdaughter, could remember the coronation of George IV and tell him all sorts of human oddities such as he loved. He once asked James Meredith:

“James, tell me the truth, did you ever see the oxen kneel on old Christmas Eve at the Weston?” And he said, ‘No, I never saw them kneel at the Weston but when I was at Hinton at Staunton-on-Wye I saw them. I was watching them on

old Christmas Eve and at 12 o'clock the oxen that were standing knelt down upon their knees and those that were lying down rose up on their knees and there they stayed kneeling and moaning, the tears running down their faces.'"

It is like Thomas Hardy: curious to think that these two who were so near each other in spirit, and writing at the same time, should have known nothing of each other. But then, it is part of the romance of Kilvert that nobody should have known of him as a writer, and then within the last few years a new figure should have been added to English letters from that vanished world of the seventies.

A. L. ROWSE

Links: <http://www.glgarden.org/ocg/archive1/kilvert.html>