

**“see if I don’t you poor old book”:  
Repositioning the Reader in Mary  
Cholmondeley’s Diaries**

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The New Woman writer Mary Cholmondeley (1859–1925) spent much of the twentieth century in a sort of critical vacuum, from which she has only recently begun to emerge. But in the last months of the nineteenth century she was the subject of unrelenting critical attention as the author of the bestselling novel *Red Pottage*—“Have you read Pottage?” ran the inevitable catchphrase among younger writers. Cholmondeley was notably reticent in her dealings with both friends and the press, and it was only in 1928 that Percy Lubbock’s *Mary Cholmondeley: A Sketch from Memory* gave the first intimate account of her life, crucially revealing that she had kept a personal diary for almost forty years, from 1872 to 1911.

Significantly, the three volumes of this diary cover the period of Cholmondeley’s adolescence in the 1870s, when she first expressed a desire to become a writer, through the period of her fame as a best-selling author in middle age, ending at a time when she half expected to be forgotten by a new generation of writers and readers. Over this period of almost four decades the diaries reveal a complex response to an assumed reader, as Cholmondeley increasingly struggles to balance control over her public image with her right to a private self. The ways in which these tensions are internalized in the diary will form the basis of this article.

As a writer Cholmondeley continues to resist any simple interpretation, and there are moments in many of the published texts where the reader may

feel uncertain, almost unhinged by the narrator's persistent ambiguity. In a discussion of Cholmondeley's short story, "The Lowest Rung" (which does in fact contain strongly autobiographical elements), Christine Bayles Kortsch (2009) has demonstrated ways in which, for instance, Cholmondeley uses metafiction to unbalance the reader, "calling into question the truth of the story itself" (54). On the borders of the fictional text, the professional woman author is careful to assert control over her own public identity. In Linda Peterson's account, Cholmondeley's prefaces to her collections of short stories, *The Lowest Rung* (1908) and *The Romance of His Life and Other Romances* (1921) are seen as a deliberate strategy that both correct earlier accounts of her life and work, and serve "as a site for asserting her authorial identity and views on art" (83). It is perhaps ironic that while the paratexts Peterson identifies are used to establish a public perception of the author, Cholmondeley's private diaries consistently deploy more oblique strategies, as when she justifies her literary ambition through the assumption that she will not marry, or valorizes her own ill health as a condition of her talent.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, oblique representation is as much a feature of her first biography as of her diaries themselves. Lubbock's (1928) *Mary Cholmondeley: A Sketch from Memory* is based on the author's personal memories, which themselves come into conflict with what he would have read in his friend's diaries after her death. Uncomfortably, Lubbock is both the imagined reader of the diaries and an informed interpreter of Cholmondeley's life and work, constrained by her desire for privacy even as he is impelled to write her biography at her own implied request. This dilemma is partially resolved by the strategy of relative narration, as Cholmondeley becomes one of a series (of Lubbock's biographical subjects) and one of a group (of friends including Rhoda Broughton and Howard Sturgis).

Before the first page is reached Lubbock has already undercut the unique status of his recollections by reusing one of his own titles (*George Calderon: A Sketch from Memory* had appeared in 1921). But the apparent detachment invoked by the title is quickly belied by his engagement with Cholmondeley as first a revered acquaintance and later a close personal friend. The memoir itself works hard to establish Cholmondeley within the literary circle of friends of whom Lubbock himself was one, with chapters being devoted to Broughton and Sturgis, respectively.

It is only once this framework has been established that he goes on to present a number of excerpts from the three volumes of her personal journal, notably deviating from the traditional pattern of biography, in which archival sources are constantly drawn upon to inform the presentation of the subject.

Indeed Lubbock appears almost confused by the complexities of the material confronting him, relaying his own memories of Cholmondeley since their first meeting in the 1890s, before offering the reader brief extracts from her diary written during these years up until 1911, when the last diary finishes. It is sometimes unclear whether Lubbock intends to flaunt his knowledge of his friend's secrets, or whether he is simply losing control of the material, as when he quotes her admission that she had had an "unhappy love affair" (92) in her youth without offering any further comment or explanation.

This difficulty in interpreting her writing about herself was surely one that Cholmondeley herself had foreseen. Sharon Marcus (2009) crucially demonstrates that what is not defined from the outset becomes subject to any number of interpretations. In such an account language becomes in its semiautonomy almost threateningly alive, subject to undesired and unpredictable distortions and refigurings. In her own accounts of female friendship and desire, Cholmondeley displays an equal wariness about the paradoxical power of language to gesture towards the unsaid. This preoccupation with the tendency of language to reveal more than the writer wants to disclose or even intends, becomes a major feature in the diary entries from at least the 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

Cholmondeley was already writing regular entries in an almanac by the age of twelve,<sup>3</sup> but as the volume started to run out of space that Christmas, her governess Miss Parr presented her with a "beautiful diary" (ms diary 26.12.1872), undated and with no restrictions on the space of each entry. As she grew older Cholmondeley would insist to herself on the freedom this diary offered her to express her thoughts without censorship, positing herself as its sole intended reader. As Cinthia Gannett points out, "[t]exts are marks on the world; they are physical objects, and journals and diaries, while silent, are visible, potentially permanent markers of a life lived, even if just for the diarist herself" (136). Nonetheless, the very fact of its being a present from her governess, a fact acknowledged in the first entry on Boxing Day, surely compromises her assertion of independence. A diary cannot by definition be quite secret if it has been given by someone else.

This first diary spans the period from late December 1872, when Cholmondeley was thirteen, to late May 1878. The personal development of the adolescent writer herself is carefully articulated as a theme, particularly in relation to her status within her family and the county circles of Shropshire. On her return from a house party at Condoover Hall, her uncle's mansion on the far side of Shrewsbury, she writes, "[I]t seems as if from

being a grown up young lady I had gone back into a schoolgirl. The change is not pleasant” (22.8.1875). Throughout this first diary there are moments where Cholmondeley distances herself from her own emotions, although not always with the same wry humour. In the New Year of 1878 she remarks, that now her round of “dissipation” has come to an end, leaving her with nothing to look forward to for some time: “It ought to show one how unsatisfying pleasure is after all, and teach one not to hunt after it, and regret it, too much: even at eighteen” (21.1.1878).

Entries such as the one above give the impression that the diary presented by an old governess is being deployed as a sort of conduct manual, and certainly a number of the entries refer to appropriate codes of behavior on social occasions. But at this period Cholmondeley was also using her diary as a testing ground for her creative aspirations, as she confided her artistic aspirations to herself. As an adult she would describe “the yoke and the harness” (25.9.1886, cited in Lubbock 1928, 84) of her everyday life as being somehow necessary to her creative work. Even at sixteen she had expressed mixed feelings about the end of the holidays and her return to the schoolroom, because while she regretted the loss of freedom and leisure time, she thought that with fewer hours at her own disposal, she would value her available time all the more. This conflict between self-discipline and visionary daydreaming is nowhere more apparent than in the admission that follows:

I think it must be a bad thing to dream and build castles in the air as I have been doing lately, dreaming that I am a great painter, that beautiful forms rise on the parchment at my will, and fame smiles on me and beckons me on. Then I wake up and torture myself with doubts, whether I have enough talent. I cannot bear to answer myself that I have not. It is at present, and will be till I can put it to the proof, my one great hope, my first, my best hope, I cannot shiver it to atoms yet. . . . I still cling to my bright castle in the air, which always fades when I look straight at it. (5.9.1875)

In this formulation, the writer is both self-torturing and self-commiserating, “I cannot bear to answer myself”; she is reluctant to obey the implied voice that dictates that she should “shiver [her castle in the air] to atoms” and still “clings” to it, only to find that the promise of fame is illusory and the castle “always fades when I look straight at it.”

The following summer she was exultant at having won a prize in a drawing club, but here again two competing voices, only partly reconciled by

the repeated use of the pronoun *I* as a unifying device, struggle for interpretation of this event. “I trust but I fear vainly, I shall one day do greater things than win a prize in a drawing club” (1.7.1876). This restraining element as one voice, “I fear vainly,” is brought in to comment on the other, “I trust,” suggests that already an imagined commentator or censor has been incorporated into the private text. Once again the diary form allows Cholmondeley both to record and critique her day-to-day experience and its implications for her future. She would soon decide, however, that writing rather than painting would be her career. Already by May 1877 she was in the throes of first-time authorship with the manuscript of *Her Evil Genius*, causing her to “wonder and speculate as to whether it will ever be published. I know I secretly hope it will, but I dare expect nothing” (156.5.1877).

To modern readers who know of Cholmondeley’s determination to write against all the odds, it may appear strange to find her confessing that in a previous entry about dances and balls, she had actually failed to mention that she was writing a book at all. As she puts it, “I fancy my head was rather turned just at that time and the dissipation of Aunt Percy’s dance put my story out of my head” (16.5.1877). But in its catalogue of such events the diary covertly gestures towards the monotony of her day-to-day routine. By this stage her mother’s long-term illness meant that she as the eldest daughter had been forced to take over the running of the household. As she was quick to acknowledge to herself, this domestic role was particularly frustrating in that it was unsatisfying in itself and allowed her little time for anything else. In one of her periodic comments on her writing ambition, she invokes the conservative justification that she may not marry, even as she articulates a rallying cry against the circumscribed role of women like herself:

I must strike out a line of some kind, and if I do not marry, (for at least that is hardly likely, as I possess neither beauty, nor cleverness) I should want some definite occupation, besides the home duties, though they certainly do engross far more of my time than I could have anticipated. (16.5.1877)

Cynthia Huff has shown how nineteenth-century women’s diaries are often dominated by daily occupations and domestic life, because women were consistently educated to chronicle precisely these themes. Furthermore, according to her account, female diarists were often the appointed chroniclers

of both family memoir and more particularly the achievements of their male relatives. For this reason “diaries are deeply contextualized, family-centered, multimedia discourses, and hence the ‘self’ projected in these documents, is multidimensional, not unified” (Huff 2000, 508). As Cinthia Gannett (1992) points out, however, “even in the most ‘other-directed’ of women’s journal traditions, women have for centuries also discovered in small but powerful ways that the journal was a place they could try to locate, and be, themselves” (Gannett 138). As an adult Cholmondeley would use her diary as a means of articulating a self that could be kept separate from her family, whose doings she had largely ceased to chronicle.

Linda Peterson (1999) has noted the ways in which *Under One Roof*, Cholmondeley’s 1918 memoir of family life, reworks the individualist bent of her novel *Red Pottage*, acknowledging the family itself as a locus of artistic development:

As she recalls the actual father, mother, and nanny who had raised her and her seven siblings, Cholmondeley rewrites the story of a woman artist’s development in relational rather than individual terms... *Under One Roof* is thus a corrective memoir, redrawing the portraits of the provincial clergyman and his family. . . . (188)

But her private diary, while it certainly reveals a multidimensional self identified with both domestic and literary preoccupations, increasingly seeks to reposition the focus of an assumed reader, from family to the personal self of the diarist. As Cholmondeley becomes increasingly committed to pursuing a career of her own, so her family is invoked largely in relation to this ambition, rather than the other way round. The second volume, including the period when her younger sister Hester was writing a number of stories and poems, is now missing. However a few letters from these years survive, and while Cholmondeley is clearly supportive of her sister’s intellectual aspirations, she nonetheless places her in a subordinate role, following up praise of her early efforts in one letter with the request, “I find I shall want so many extracts for headings that I should be glad if you would make a note of anything short and pointed which you read” (undated letter, 1880s). Where early diary entries are concerned with her brothers’ careers upon leaving school, the articulation of her own writing ambitions marks a subtle shift in Cholmondeley’s diary narrative, with family members being invoked largely as trusted critics of her work. In her final diary important family events, such as the births of children or

the separation of her sister Essex from her husband in 1906, are often not recorded at all.

As Peterson perceptively points out in her discussion of *Under One Roof*,

[a]s Cholmondeley recalls growing up in Hodnet Rectory, her memory encompasses a group of sisters with intellectual and literary aspirations, at least one of whom besides herself produced an enormous quantity of literary work. In retrospect Cholmondeley comes up against the fact that she was not alone in wishing to pursue an artistic career. (191)

Specifically she comes up against her own unsolicited reading of Hester's *diary*, with its own account of the period where they were both aspiring but as yet unpublished authors.

But in the early days Cholmondeley herself could not be sure that she would succeed as a writer, even given the unquestioned support of her family. The problem of her future troubled her persistently, and perhaps for this reason almost her final entry in the first volume of her diary invokes the memory of past pleasures as a kind of bulwark against future disappointment. After a visit to her brother at Cambridge she notes "a whole week of perfect enjoyment, a week that never had its equal before, and will probably remain as one of the brightest places, in a not very eventful life" (28.5.1878). By describing this week of "perfect enjoyment," Cholmondeley is able to give it a kind of permanence. Unlike the Christmas and New Year entertainments she had admonished herself not to regret earlier in the year, the Cambridge interlude can be revisited, even superimposed on the rather dismal future she projects onto the opening lines.

In the 1870s she was still confident that "[n]o one but myself will ever read these pages, so I can honestly write the truth, and when I look back at it, read myself a little lecture, if I feel so inclined." This particular lecture would be concerned with the vanity of enjoying young men's attentions, which makes it all the more extraordinary that she then goes on to warn herself against dreaming of a suitable marriage:

It would raise me very much in my own estimation to have someone who could love me enough to ask me to marry him. But that seems such a difficult case to imagine, when I think of what I am. I could not fall in love with myself I was a man. I have nothing outside to fall in love with. I know I could love truly and steadfastly in return, but who

on earth is to find that out. No no! Miss Mary I shall remain to the end of my days; see if I don't you poor old book, which so many years have only been able to half fill. (undated, summer 1877)

This assumption of failure is set up almost as a challenge to the blank pages of her diary, that both reflect the lack of incident in her life up to this point, and hold the potential for a different story entirely to be enacted in the future. Why Cholmondeley should defiantly claim that this narrative was already written for her is not clear. But if she felt that the marriage she desired was beyond her power to attain, this assumption that she would remain unsought surely served to justify her determined belief that there were other stories she could write.

The excerpts from the second diary, quoted in Lubbock's (1928) *Mary Cholmondeley: A Sketch from Memory*, include an entry from Christmas Day 1882, which she had stayed up late to write, and which may well have referred to the abortive love affair begun some time after her last entry of 1878. In it she writes that "I am learning to expect very little," but to set against this is her tentative satisfaction at having had a story accepted for publication.<sup>4</sup> Again this present accomplishment is measured against past expectation; it is surely significant that on that same day she revisited the first volume of her diary containing her description of writing *Her Evil Genius* (which in the event was never published). The given excerpt itself sets up a tension between past, present and future, as Cholmondeley comments:

It is a little painful to me to look back now at my anxiety about the first story I wrote. I was seventeen then—five years, a lifetime ago. I suppose it would have given me great pleasure if I could have known that by this time I should have had a "small thing but mine own" published, and handsomely paid for, and an opening for the disposal of fresh work. So it is now, and I seem to think little of it, though I am very anxious really to work at it, if I only knew how. I sometimes wonder what I should do if that interest were taken from me, if I found I had no power at all. At the present time I feel I have power, but I cannot test it, and I have a great fear that when I do it will turn out very small. In the meantime this next year I will do my best, and see next Christmas whether I can put down any distinct mark of progress. (25 December 1882, cited in Lubbock 1928, 79–80).



In this crucial entry from the now-missing diary, her written account of the past continues to exercise an influence on her experience of the present and her projection of a possible future.

In later life Cholmondeley would become increasingly preoccupied, as a successful writer, with the dangers of her own language as it circulated among an unseen audience. In the early years of the next century the importance of the “secret life” would become central to the diary project, as she became more troubled by her own celebrity status and as personal events caused a level of unhappiness that she felt obliged to conceal from her family. But paradoxically, if writing a diary asserts the central place of the inner or secret life, it is inescapably linked to revelation and display. By implication a manuscript has a reader, even if only in the writer’s imagination, and as Lynn Z. Bloom (1996) has aptly put it, “for a professional writer there are no private writings” (24).

Already by 1882, as Cholmondeley was beginning to publish her first short stories in national journals, the sense of an external audience is becoming apparent. It was probably on this same Christmas Day that she excised a number of pages from the earlier diary, which she then dated and annotated, explaining that she had gone into “a love tirade” ending with a eulogy on a friend of her brother’s. The inconsistency of this action, cutting pages out of the diary and then explaining what they contained, suggests a certain ambivalence about her imagined readership. Whether Cholmondeley actually expected at this point that her diaries would be read by others remains unclear. But the existence of such a passage, even in manuscript, inevitably raises such a possibility—and it should not be forgotten that Cholmondeley had been brought up on novels such as *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Moonstone*, in which carefully hidden manuscripts have a habit of resurfacing at unexpected moments. In editing and annotating her previous diaries, the published writer was seeking a level of control over her own representation of past events.

This fear of language as disclosure would reach crisis point with the publication of her most important novel in 1899, and in time she would come to figure her very success as a writer as a form of self-mutilation. Days before the publication of *Red Pottage*, Cholmondeley wrote in her diary of the violation she felt she had inflicted on herself. “I wonder how I could write so plainly how I could say so many personal things, telling the passer in the street, and the people who dont like me what in real life I hardly tell to my intimate friends” (9.10.1899). Shortly after its publication she was happy to acknowledge, as Dickens had done before her, the personal responsiveness

aroused in her readers. “I think this last book rouses in people a sense of relationship with me. I seem to see it in their eyes”(4.11.1899).

However, Cholmondeley’s desire for control over this “sense of relationship” was perpetually threatened by the act of writing itself. It is for this reason that after the huge success of *Red Pottage* (1899), the diary itself becomes a site of conflict with an imagined reader. In the novel Hester is furious that her brother has read the manuscript of her new novel without her permission, and the “right” reader is supposed to dismiss as grossly insensitive James’s response that “I do not see any difference between reading a book in manuscript or in print. I don’t pretend to quibble on a point like that” (275). But this distinction between manuscript and print, assumed by both Hester and the narrator, is by definition highly unstable—private language will deliberately be made public, as the original manuscript is translated by strange eyes into proof copy and thereafter into published text.

Cholmondeley’s anxiety about the reception of her novel is rooted in a fear that she has offered up for public consumption material that rightly belongs in the confines of a private manuscript. In later entries the act of writing at all becomes fraught with tension.

Specifically, she was troubled by the shifting line between personal experience and artistic vision as events in her own life became subsumed within a fictional narrative. In an entry from 1902, a period of severe nervous illness when she was also trying to write the opening chapters of her new novel *Prisoners*, she writes,

I have known and felt, things that I shall never forget. But why write them down. They are a part of my life, but they at least are mine only. So much of me belongs by a kind of right to other people. The result of what I have felt during this year especially will not remain mine. It will turn in some way I don’t understand into thought and closer knowledge of things I have never experienced. All I have felt will live again in another form, a form as different as the seed differs from the flower. Then it will cease to be my own. It will be as it were to love again, and will be mine to give - not mine to keep. (1902, top of page cut out).

In similar vein, she writes of the death of her friend Mrs. Arthur Lyttleton in 1907, with an almost aggressive insistence on her right to silence: “I could write pages about her and her wonderful dealings with me. But why should I. I shall never forget them, and surely these things are mine, and mine only.” But ultimately she cannot resist writing around this apparent

denial of language. The refusal to write down her feelings is actually preceded by a lament: "I wish, oh! how I wish I might have kept her. But it is purely selfish to wish that. She longed to go." This is immediately followed by another few lines: "I never thought she would die, but I acted as if I did. I took every opportunity of seeing her. I took every chance. And she did the same. I am told she cared for me, much. I think I may believe it" (14.4.1907).

This final diary, written between 1895 and 1911, gives little indication as to whether Cholmondeley had already decided to hand over the three volumes on her death. But in another entry from 1907, she admits, "I sometimes wonder if my social experiences could have the least interest for anyone. Perhaps if they were bottled up for a hundred years they might" (11.6.1907), before trailing off with another judicious cut taking out most of the page. Whatever came next might or might not have held interest for readers a century later, but for the writer herself something was clearly at stake that made her decide on second thought to withhold it.

This ambivalence about her projected reader continues towards the end of the third volume, where she writes,

my interesting years are over. Life has become peaceful and in a way happier than it has ever been. But I have very little to say about it. and I am afraid my own feelings are altogether commonplace: just those of every middle aged woman. I will not take a formal leave of this book. But I do not think there will be anything more to record in it. For the things I feel now most deeply, are the things I cannot write; like Father's death which I think of often. And it seems foolish to go on writing it if it is no record. And it is ceasing to be one. (15.3.1911)

The final entry suggests a further reason why the diary had ceased to be a site of conflict with herself:

I daresay sorrow and suffering may come again but I feel sure if they do I shall be sustained. Oh! if I had only started life with faith even as a grain of mustard seed. Fifty two long years has it taken me to trust my Friend. And the lesson is not fully learnt yet. But I think I am more ready to be taught, less stubborn, and self willed. And at any rate I know God is my friend. (Christmas Eve 1911)

This sense of peace was subject to disruption, as Cholmondeley's letters from the war years make quite clear. But she seems never to have considered recording her experience in diary form.

It is not known when she made the decision to leave her diaries to a close friend who was also known as a writer of memoir. In doing so she finally relinquished all further control over the editing and framing of her text. Lubbock's response was to set his own memories of Cholmondeley firmly within the "relational" setting identified by critics of women's life writing as typical of both their own accounts and others' retelling of their stories. Having got through the preamble and a brief character sketch of Cholmondeley in her later years, he actually begins his chronological account with the words (describing her flat in Albert Gate Mansions, Knightsbridge) with the sentence, "It was not the right setting for her, I never thought it was" (Lubbock 1928, 19), before moving on to an account of Cholmondeley's relationships with other writers at the time when he first knew her. The diaries themselves are kept at arm's length, appearing towards the end of the book as a series of annotated fragments. Lubbock both appropriates and distances himself from this material, commenting in the course of various hints and veiled revelations that "[h]er journal [in the years before he first met her] is full of things to be remembered by her friend—things that she never said aloud, things to be left now where she set them down" (87). Clearly Cholmondeley herself was ambivalent about the use to be made after her death of these "things that she never said aloud," leaving no definite instructions to Lubbock himself. His own decision as to which things "should be left" where she had written them, was itself impossible to enforce, given that he subsequently returned the volumes to Cholmondeley's family. But in the jagged edges of a number of pages, she reminds this trusted friend and any subsequent reader, that the scrutiny of her diaries cannot after all be undertaken without her consent.

#### NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of Cholmondeley's illness as both impeding and paradoxically enabling her writing, see Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, "'The Shadow Which I Call Pain': Mary Cholmondeley and the Dilemma of Bodily Weakness," *Life Writing* 7 (December 2009): 303–312.

2. Cholmondeley's diary written between the summer of 1878 and the spring of 1895 is still missing.

3. For further discussion of Cholmondeley's diaries between 1878 and 1911, see Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Let the Flowers Go: a Life of Mary Cholmondeley* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009).

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