

## Berrong on Loti ed. Quella-Villéger and Vercier (2017)

Loti, Pierre. *Journal*, Vol. V: 1903–1913. Edited by Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier, Les Indes Savantes, 2017, pp. 671, ISBN 978-2-84654-411-5

Richard M. Berrong, Kent State University

With this volume, Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier complete their edition of Loti's diary, which began almost twenty years ago with the appearance of *Soldats bleus: Journal intime 1914–1918* (La Table ronde, 1998), covering the last pages of the diary, and then went back to the beginning, 1868, for the first of the five volumes that have appeared with Les Indes savantes since then. (For reviews of those four previous volumes, see: *NCFS*, 35.3-4 [2007], 37.3-4 [2009], 45.1-2 [2016].)

Loti wrote only two novels and four travel narratives during this period. The second of the two novels, *Les Désenchantées* (1906), one of his most critically successful, was also a best-seller. Loti was convinced to undertake it by three young women who met with him while he was serving as a naval officer posted to Istanbul in 1903–05. They wanted a spokesperson well-known in Europe who could explain the plight of the modern Turkish woman to a large audience in a sympathetic way. The three approached him because he was widely read and, since the appearance of his first novel, *Aziyadé*, in 1879, the French writer most closely associated with Turkey and its harem-dwelling women.

One of the three women, "Leyla," was actually the French feminist journalist Marc Hélys [Marie Léra]. She had convinced two Turkish sisters to undertake this ruse to get the well-known French author to plead widely a case Hélys herself had not been able to make successfully with her own more limited readership. Loti was fifty-four at the time and extremely worried about getting old. The attentions of the three attractive young women and the letters Hélys wrote him while he was still in Istanbul, and then after he returned to France, evidently succeeded in pulling the wool over his eyes. They certainly inspired him to write a moving novel that even academics who dismiss Loti as anti-feminist have conceded to be "a milestone in feminist thought for the early twentieth century because it pleads for equal rights for women at a time when they were mostly regarded as second-class citizens" (Irene L. Szyliowicz, *Pierre Loti and the Oriental Woman*. St. Martin's Press, 1988, p. 94). So great was its success with feminists of the time that Loti, back in France, was asked to give lectures on "the Turkish woman" sponsored by the new journal *Femina*.

What these pages of the diary make clear is that, at least while he was working on the novel and for some time afterward, the author evidently had no suspicions regarding "Leyla's" true identity. They do not reveal Loti's reasons for transforming the young women's story into a novel, other than those having to do with the author's personal concerns, which he had already conveyed in the play *Judith Renaudin* (1898) and the important novel, *Ramuncho* (1897). It is one of the frustrations of this diary in general that it seldom conveys the author's thoughts about his literary work, a point particularly true in this latest tome.

Previous volumes included extensive descriptions and occasional reflections recorded during the author's trips to exotic and foreign lands. This fifth volume covers his 1907 trip to Egypt, which led to the creation of his most popular and one of his most artistic travel narratives, *The Death of Philae* (1909), but the entries for that excursion are very brief. (The trips to Istanbul in 1910 and 1913 get more extensive coverage.) As even the more elaborate entries on the previous voyages had suggested, a great deal in the travel narratives seems to have been as much a product of Loti's painterly imagination as of his memory. Because the author spent more time in France during the years covered here, and because he had become very famous, a larger portion of this volume is devoted to recording his social calendar, which consisted primarily of meetings with European royalty, but also encounters with figures in the theater and the arts.

The only fault I find with this volume is that the indexing is selective: if Loti only met an individual once or twice, that name does not appear in it. As a result, those who consult only the index would not know that this volume mentions meetings with Gabriele d'Annunzio, the physical culture specialist Edmond Desbonnet, popular song writer Théodore Botrel, and others. Especially in the case of someone like Loti who knew so many famous people and moved in so many circles, a diary index should be complete. If there is a subsequent edition of all these volumes, as the editors wish, I hope the indexing will be rethought.

Anyone interested in the works of Pierre Loti will find this volume, like its predecessors, enlightening. It is also likely to appeal to a broader audience interested in French cultural life during the decade leading up to World War I.

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