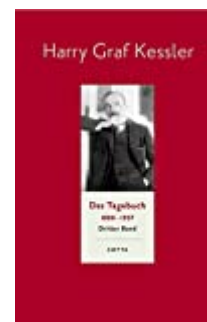




Harry Graf Kessler. *Das Tagebuch 1880-1937: volume 3: Das Tagebuch 1897-1905.* Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004. 1198 pp. EUR 63.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7681-9813-4.



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Journal Writing: A Window into Wilhelmine Culture

On September 5, 1901, the lyric poet Richard Dehmel turned to his traveling companion, Count Harry Kessler, and declared, “you will write the memoirs of our time.... I envy our grandchildren who will be able to read them” (vol. 3, p. 435). Dehmel’s prophesy is being fulfilled a century later with an ambitious publication that transforms Kessler’s fifty-seven diaries with around 10,300 handwritten pages covering the years 1880 to 1937 into nine hefty volumes. Harry Kessler (1868-1937) has long been recognized for his incisive daily chronicles about political, social and cultural events and crises during the Weimar Republic. At home in Berlin, London and Paris, he served as an unofficial diplomat in various time and countries. Supporting artists and writers and attending exhibitions, theater and concerts, Kessler embodied the urbane cosmopolitanism of the prewar aristocracy. Constantly on the move, his social, cultural and political contacts from London to Warsaw were legion; over twelve thousand names in his diaries record the eminent people he visited, entertained or was entertained by and traveled or worked with.

Before his death in 1937, Kessler, drawing on his di-

aries, managed to write and publish the first volume of his autobiography, which was promptly banned in Germany. The first publication of his actual diaries came in 1961, with a seriously abridged edition spanning the years from 1918 to 1937; less than half of the entries were included.[1] Since then the German National Literature Archive in Marbach has been able to acquire all fifty-seven bound diaries, including the most recently found volumes, which were discovered in 1938 and cover the years from 1880 to 1914. Taken together, these now constitute, to use the editors’ words, “a masterpiece of European diarists” (vol. 2, p. 9).

The journals are being published by Klett-Cotta under the aegis of the Deutsche Schillergesellschaft. The editorial plan calls for all nine volumes to be fully transcribed and published by 2008. Three volumes have been published, covering the years 1892 to 1914: both volume 2 (1892-1897) and volume 3 (1897-1905) appeared in 2004; volume 4 (1906-1914) came out in 2005. The remaining volumes are scheduled to appear beginning in spring 2006, although the earliest materials will not be published until 2008. The volumes range from 400 to 1,200 pages.

In addition, the press is providing, by subscription, two CD-ROMs that contain the entire text: the first CD issued with Volume 3 has the full texts; the second one will include the fully edited text with the indexes consolidated for electronic searching.

The basic format for each volume begins with a concise, but thorough biographical overview for the years covered, followed by the transcribed text (vol. 2, pp. 75-525; vol. 3, pp. 53-827).[2] Interspersed in the text are several photographic reproductions of original handwritten pages. Valuable aids for access into the text follow: a name index that identifies all the persons, works (art, literature, music, theater), important places, institutions and periodicals mentioned in the text of each volume and that gives all the entry dates relevant for that volume. These indexes (vol. 2, pp. 527-765; vol. 3, pp. 829-1187) are invaluable—not only in relation to Kessler's text, but also as a gold mine of condensed biographical information about wide circles of friends and acquaintances who represented a cross-section of the cultural, social and political life of Germany (as well as of France and England) over these years. Each volume ends with an index of Kessler's publications, talks and projects and a nine to ten page index of all the sites where entries were written for the specific years of each volume.

In approaching these volumes, an essential factor is to understand that Kessler's focus in his entries was not upon his own life. He focused, instead, on the events and people that he encountered daily and on issues that occupied his attention. In a very real sense, these are not personal diaries, but journals that record his curiosity and lively reflections about his world and his times. Kessler's daily entries tend to fall into brief naming of events and people or long descriptions and analyses of current projects, visits and travel. Given the paucity of or often oblique references to personal information in the journals, Laird M. Easton's excellent biography of Kessler and the introductory essays for each volume are essential companions.[3]

In the first years of his entry into Berlin society in the 1890s, however, Kessler's entries provided concise, pithy descriptions of people he met and events he attended with friends. During these years, the extensive friendships made during his military service, his wide contacts in high Berlin society where he was well received and his continuing interest in music and theater all allowed him to record a valuable view into the life of the upper classes in Wilhelmine Germany. See, for example, his evocative descriptions of court balls in Berlin (vol. 2, entries for

January 23 and 30, 1895), which are virtually verbal versions of Menzel's painting, "Supper at the Ball." He also recorded remarkably sensitive analyses of cities and cultures abroad during his extended travels in the 1890s in France, England, Italy, the United States, Mexico, Japan, South East Asia, India, Greece and Asia Minor.

In the mid-1890s, Kessler's contacts in Berlin's salon society led to the passionate engagement with modern art that dominated his life in the next decade. Herein lies one of the great gifts in these two volumes for art and cultural historians: Kessler's extraordinary recounting of conversations that took place during visits to the studios and homes of major living modernist artists in France, Germany and England. He recorded these informal conversations in apparently almost verbatim detail written in French, German or English. The visits to artists began in December 1894 as an essential part of his work on the journal *Pan* and continued throughout his life. One of his first visits set the pattern for his genuine concern for the artists and their work: accompanied by Julius Meier-Graefe, Kessler traveled to Leipzig to meet Max Klinger in his studio in a former industrial warehouse (vol. 2, entry for December 28, 1894). Writing at length, Kessler carefully described the studio with its display of paintings and sculptures, comparing them with works he had studied in museums. He provided an incisive verbal portrait of the artist and recorded the artist's comments about his own work and the work of other artists. Countless visits followed with—to name only a few—Claude Monet, Edvard Munch, Adolf Menzel, Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol, Constantine Meunier, Henry van de Velde, Max Liebermann, Franz von Stuck, Fritz von Uhde, Odilon Redon, Paul Signac, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis and William Morris. He also sought out writers such as Paul Verlaine, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gerhard Hauptmann, André Gide, Theodor Mommsen, Georg Simmel and Friedrich Nietzsche in the last years before his death.

Supporting the publication of *Pan* was the first significant art project that Kessler undertook. It was followed by various cultural projects, including the following: his efforts from 1902 through 1906 to turn the city of Weimar into an exemplary center for modern art; his work with Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche to establish the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar; his crucial role in organizing the Deutsche Kunstlerbund in 1903; and his opposition to governmental policies concerning the German art exhibition at the St. Louis World's Fair. The entries in volumes 2 and 3 provide valuable glimpses, albeit often brief or incomplete, into personalities and actions taken in connection with these complicated affairs be-

tween 1892 and 1905.

Through all of this, Kessler's journal records his constant motion, traveling restlessly between Weimar, Berlin, Paris and London. What marks his writing during these years, beginning with his Italian trip in 1898, is the shift to multiple-page entries devoted to aesthetic and historic consideration of art from ancient civilizations to the present. Visits to monasteries and churches in Italy were accompanied by notes on the viability of Christian art in the modern age that eventually resulted in his article on "Art and Religion" in *Pan* (February 1900). A four-month trip begun in October 1900 took Kessler to the major archaeological sites in Greece and Asia Minor. His lyrical descriptions of the landscapes in which ruins were being excavated are testimony to his immersion in classical literature, even as they reveal the imperial backdrop to these efforts. An episode that illustrates well Kessler's superb verbal ability to replicate complex visual and emotional experiences occurred in Smyrna in December 1900, in which he described celebrations of whirling dervishes, comparing them to the Gralsfeier in Parsifal (vol. 3, pp. 355-58).

In the following five years, Kessler spent months at a time in Paris and London, studying works of art in museums and private collections, both to consider art for exhibitions in Weimar and also for his own collection of impressionist and neo-impressionist art. Continuously considering the function of art at a time when, as he put it

frequently, everything intellectual was being challenged by advances in science and scholarship, Kessler's voluminous notes sought to create a new understanding of art suitable for a new century. These lengthy entries, based on observations taken from whatever monument or museum he was visiting, are densely written meditations upon issues that he was struggling with and also preparing for public presentations or publication. They form a richly textured source for historians seeking to understand the intellectual and aesthetic ideas of one of the significant participants in Wilhelmine culture whose life and work moved beyond national boundaries.

Notes

[1]. Harry Graf Kessler, *Tagebücher, 1918-1937*, ed. Wolfgang Pfeiffer-Belli (Frankfurt am Main: Insel-Verlag, 1961).

[2]. Although this is formally a review of volume 3, I have taken the liberty of including volume 2 in my discussion.

[3]. Laird McLeod Easton, *The Red Count: The Life and Times of Harry Kessler* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002). For a review of Easton's book and further biographical citations, see my review in H-German, H-Net Reviews, June 2004 <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=33731087267323>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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