

After Emily: An Interview with Biographer Julie Dobrow

By Marta Werner

“What are these drives, so compelling that they warp people’s lives?”
– Millicent Todd Bingham, reflecting on her own life editing Dickinson’s poems.

After Emily illuminates more fully than ever before the intricate net of desires, both conscious and unconscious, that led Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham to undertake the editing of Emily Dickinson’s writings that secured their place in literary history while irreversibly altering the trajectory of their own lives. For me, the force of Dobrow’s portrait of Todd, the better known and more mythologized (sometimes demonized) of her two subjects, lies in its embrace of the conflicting aspects of Todd without denying any of them; while the power of her depiction of Bingham issues from the probing analysis of Bingham’s profoundly conflicted feelings about her brilliant, transgressing parents and the impact of those sentiments on her connection to Dickinson. Indeed, in her rendering of Millicent Todd Bingham, last in a long line of Wilder women, Dobrow’s biography fuses with American tragedy.

But After Emily is also a book for and of our time: a meditation on the nature of agency and the role of affect in women’s lives and writing; a story of the archives we create during, and sometimes even in lieu of, our lives; of the archives that represent us after our deaths; and of the abyss at the heart of all archives. Looking back from the far horizon of Dobrow’s meticulously researched and absorbing biography, we should not be surprised that while Todd and Bingham come ever more sharply into focus, Dickinson herself flickers in and out of the light, at last receding to an unfathomable distance.

MW: In the preface to *After Emily* you speak of both Mabel Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham’s fundamentally archival natures – they quite literally saved every scrap of paper they ever wrote on. One of the aspects of your work I find so compelling is the depth of your engagement with this vast and unruly archive. Can you tell us a little more about how it felt to encounter and then sift through the “seven hundred plus boxes of primary source materials” at Yale’s Sterling Library?

JD: It felt overwhelming in the beginning! I began by reading Mabel’s diaries and journals on microfilm because these were the only parts of the collection I could get on interlibrary loan (and none of it has been digitized). This actually turned out to be a good strategy because it gave me insights about Mabel’s life through her eyes and it enabled me to start putting together a timeline. I tried to triangulate things I was learning about her life with information from secondary sources, and ultimately also with primary sources from Millicent. I made many visits to Yale, basically camping out in the reading room of Manuscripts and Archives for two or three day stretches, trying to get through as many boxes as I could. It took me months to develop what

seemed a logical plan for trying to go through the boxes, and the plan shifted as I learned about Mabel and Millicent. That took me in different directions – and to different boxes.

MW: In the archives, we are sometimes surprised – even startled – by a document that we didn’t expect to find – indeed, didn’t know existed – and that reveals something hitherto unknown about our subject(s). I was curious, for example, to learn from your work that Bingham had preserved her handwritten notes documenting her sessions with a psychiatrist she consulted in the late 1920s. What was it like to read these very clearly private notes? Did Bingham disclose anything in them that touches on her relationship to her work on Dickinson’s papers?

JD: Some of these “psychiatric notes,” as she called them, were handwritten, but one of the extraordinary things about Millicent was that she was so meticulous about almost everything in her life that she not only wrote out notes right after the sessions, but she actually took the time to type many of them. I have to believe that an awful lot of the paper trail that Millicent left behind she left behind in a very deliberate way. So in one sense these notes

were private, but in another, I believe she curated at least some of them, knowing – or at least hoping – that someday someone would go through them to tell her story, something she ran out of time to do in her own lifetime. Though I felt a little uncomfortable reading some of these raw issues at times, I ultimately believe that she left these papers as part of the collection for a reason. I feel my understanding of her, and consequently my ability to write about her fairly as a complex but whole person, greatly increased with these glimpses into some of her deepest thoughts and fears.

Millicent had wildly mixed feelings about taking on her mother’s Dickinson work. Some of these feelings about the combination of obligation and opportunity came through in what she wrote about these appointments.

MW: Polly Longworth’s path-breaking work on Mabel Todd’s diaries opens one important – many would say central – dimension of Todd’s life: her life with Austin Dickinson. How does your work further our understanding of Todd, both as the first editor of Dickinson’s writing and as a woman in and out of her time and place? Is she – or does she become – for you a sympathetic figure?



Mother and daughter in 1931. Todd-Bingham picture collection, 1837-1966. Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University

JD: First I want to say how incredibly foundational Polly Longworth’s work has been for me, not just in helping me understand Mabel and Austin’s relationship, but more broadly, in thinking about how the Wilder family ethos loomed so large for both Mabel and Millicent.

I hope that my book enlarges our understanding of Mabel’s roles in editing and marketing Dickinson’s work. Some have assumed that she agreed with Higginson in all of his editorial choices and practices; I have presented information I believe shows that while she more often than not acceded to his ideas, she didn’t always agree with them. And Millicent certainly didn’t.

I also hope that Mabel becomes known as more than “just” Emily’s editor or Austin’s lover, because she was a multi-talented, multi-faceted woman. She was most certainly someone who in many ways was a product of the time in which she lived, but in many ways she was more forward thinking – and acting. She believed, emphatically, that she had been born in the wrong era. I think there are many ways in which she would probably be more comfortable living in the 21st century than in her own time.

I’ve tried very hard to paint an accurate and even-handed portrait of Mabel. I do find her to be an amazing and in some ways sympathetic character, especially later in her life. But there are many aspects of her that I found to be off-putting or troubling. I have tried to call her out when I thought she was being unfair, self-centered or misguided, and I have cited some of the scholarship that is critical of both her persona and her editorial efforts.

MW: I don’t think too many people still believe that Todd was responsible for mutilating some of Dickinson’s MSS containing references to Susan Dickinson; but, more generally speaking, do you think Todd was able to view Sue in a neutral way? Her own relationship with the Dickinson family really began with her fascination with Sue, didn’t it?

JD: It’s certainly true both that Mabel’s connection to the Dickinson family began with Sue, and also that in the beginning, Mabel was completely entranced by Sue. Even after Mabel’s own relationship with Austin commenced, she was deeply concerned about Sue’s opinions. But this shifted when her alliance to Austin became stronger than her alliance to anyone else in the Dickinson family. I do not believe that Mabel was able to view her in a neutral way after that, and I have tried to point this out in my book.

MW: *After Emily* tells an almost archetypal story of a profoundly conflicted mother-daughter relationship. Is it possible to trace the origins of this conflict that never found resolution during their earthly lives? Why – how – did these two “Wilder women” come to possess such radically opposed senses of themselves that Bingham at last reflected, “We inhabited – except for our industriousness – a different world”?

JD: This is one of the major themes of my book. I believe that Mabel and Millicent’s fraught relationship had its origins in its origin, when Mabel didn’t want to have a baby in the first place. Millicent spent the majority of her

first eight years of life – years when we know that important bonding and attachment goes on in parent/child relationships – living with her grandparents. Apart from structural separations, there were also gulfs between Mabel and Millicent’s personalities and predilections. And of course Mabel’s relationship with Austin didn’t help matters.

MW: David Peck Todd appears as a brilliant, troubled and troubling figure in your work. Is there another story of fathers and daughters to be told? What, intellectually and psychologically, does Bingham inherit from her astronomer-father? Can we detect his influence in her geographical studies or editorial work?

JD: Millicent clearly inherited from her father a penchant for doing work precisely and meticulously. David’s influence on his daughter was profound in terms of her interest in science and her initial decision to study geography. The scrupulous ways in which Millicent pursued her Dickinson work, documenting everything, vowing that “all the data” had to be known so that readers could get the fullest sense of Emily Dickinson, also clearly emanated from her father’s influence.

MW: I was moved by your account of Bingham’s response to NASA’s 1960 launch of Pioneer V, a space probe created to explore interplanetary space between Earth and Venus. Bingham seems at her most poetic when she writes, “I wish I had all day to write about the profound emotions that have swept over me during the last twenty-four hours. . . . With my mind full of these fairy tales, and what it would all have meant to my father, I went out into the moonlit night, dazzlingly bright reflected from the snow.” David Todd seemed to have a connection with these interplanetary spaces – to feel agency in the non-human, even inorganic world. Did the presence of this vast, interplanetary world give Millicent Bingham a sense of perspective on her editorial work – or her life choices?

JD: What a wonderful question! I think astronomy gave Millicent perspective in at least

two ways. First, a lot of David Todd's work centered on making calculations of solar activity. He knew – and Millicent learned – that solar activity and the path of solar and lunar eclipses were both cyclical and predictable. Knowing this not only gives the astronomer a sense of what he or she needs to do to measure this activity and where to go to try to get the best view of an eclipse, but also, I think, a sense that in the skies above us there is some kind of order. For Millicent, order and predictability was something she tried to achieve in both her personal and professional selves; since the former wasn't always so successful, she really craved the latter to be. So in her Dickinson work we can see this sensibility, in the ways she tried to be so rigorous and meticulous.

And the other sense in which the vast interplanetary world gave Millicent some kind of perspective that she brought to bear in her editorial work was, I believe, the opposite of the kind of order and predictability of solar movement – it was a sense that there's almost indescribable beauty up there. I've read some other wonderfully poetic observations Millicent penned, often when she was at the Todds' camp on Hog Island off the coast of Maine. There were times she would return after a night of star gazing and write prose passages that are so beautifully crafted you want to read them twice. I think it was this sense of wonder in trying to capture the natural world in words that characterized so much of Emily Dickinson; Millicent's appreciation of the celestial world and her attempts to celebrate it in literary ways made her all the more appreciative of Dickinson's brilliance.

MW: In *After Emily* Austin appears as both a figure of great power and great passivity. Do you think Mabel Todd had any sense of how her relationship with Austin affected Millicent? Did she care?

JD: Austin and Mabel's relationship profoundly affected Millicent throughout her life. I discuss this at length in the book. His death marked the end of her childhood because it



Todd Bingham at the Hog Island Dedication Ceremony, 1960. Credit: Friends of Hog Island.

was at that point that Mabel transferred her dependence on Austin, to Millicent.

JD: I did not get the sense that Mabel had more than a superficial sense of how her relationship with Austin affected her daughter. Millicent knew, and wrote in her personal writings later in life, that her own silence and reticence to engage with her mother along many dimensions might have contributed to how little sense Mabel seemed to have about Millicent's extreme discomfort; Millicent also denied for many, many years having known about the relationship, at all. Mabel, too, was in many ways inside of a Mabel-and-Austin bubble, but I'm not absolving her. I think she should have been much more sensitive to those around her, especially her very sensitive daughter.

MW: One way in which Mabel Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham certainly seem to foretell 21st century concerns is in their concern for the natural world – and especially the destructive effect of human action on this world. Mabel Todd's early involvement with the Audubon Society and her efforts to preserve the natural biomes of the Everglades and Hog Island; Bingham's touching concern for the nesting sites of warblers on the Amherst property she wished to donate, along with her share of Dickinson's papers, to Amherst College and her late friendship with Rachel Carson feel especially timely to those of us living in the age of the Sixth Extinction. Can you tell us a little more about Todd and Bingham's environmental work? How did Bingham, who lived to read *Silent Spring*, image the future of

the planet whose surface she once dreamed of mapping?

JD: This is an area of their lives in which I feel both women were quite progressive. Both had a deep love for the natural world, both pursued this love through their avocations and professions (Mabel in her art, Millicent in her studies). Though she never met John Muir, Mabel was influenced by his writing and philosophy of preserving land for its own sake (as opposed to the idea that started to gain currency in the Theodore Roosevelt administration of preserving land for the sake of cultivating and procuring resources that could be used by humans). As soon as she was able to, Mabel started putting this preservationist philosophy into action by making land purchases. Millicent's view was that land preservation was something that needed to be pursued not only through putting aside acres but also by educating people about why it was necessary to do. You read some of what she wrote early in the 20th century and it seems incredibly prescient; she was worrying about climate change and its effects on the planet.

MW: Turning to other progressive ventures, today we are making some progress towards drawing together – at least digitally – Dickinson's sundered archive while also moving at last towards an abandonment of all institutional claims of copyright over Dickinson's writings. But is this late redress of institutional wrongs of any solace to Bingham, who suffered a brutal and protracted assault on her work and character by, among others, the collector Gilbert Montague; the director (and "Grand Acquisitor") of Harvard's Houghton Library, William Jackson; and, perhaps saddest of all, the textual scholar and Harvard protégé, Thomas H. Johnson? Can you describe the cost to Bingham of her editorial work? Was there a reward in persisting? What were Bingham's singular gifts as an editor?

JD: Pursuing her work cost Millicent dearly. Not only did the ongoing negotiations with Harvard (she would have referred to them

in more confrontational terms) over the publication of her own books and the copyright of Dickinson's poems eat up years of her life, she also felt that they were responsible for the decline of her husband's, Walter Van Dyke Bingham's, health. For Millicent this wasn't just a transactional relationship with Harvard; it was, for her, a moral issue, pursuit of a promise she felt she had made to her mother and above all, an issue of academic freedom – she wanted ALL of Dickinson available to the world. I think she would have been enormously gratified to see the online Emily Dickinson Archive, to know about Amherst College's ongoing efforts to digitize additional materials and about the ways in which Harvard, Amherst, and other institutions have worked collaboratively to provide access through digitization.

MW: In reading *After Emily* I was very often struck by Bingham's aloneness. At the end of her life her parents were dead; her husband was dead; and she had neither siblings nor children of her own to mourn her passing. But really it seems to me she was alone all her life, from beginning to end. Can you trace the history – or, since she was, after all, a geographer, plot the coordinates – of this aloneness? Did Dickinson's poems accompany her in the end, or had they too deserted her during her long struggle with the forces of Harvard?

JD: I do think that Millicent felt profoundly alone all her life. She did not have close relationships with very many people during her lifetime. I think if you were to trace the coordinates of her aloneness they certainly would go back to her earliest years of childhood, in which she did have close relationships with the grandparents and great-grandmother with whom she lived, but not with her parents. She was also shy and felt awkward in most social settings her entire life. This is perhaps one of the reasons she felt a kinship with Dickinson and her poetry; they were both outsiders looking in.

And I do think that the poetry stayed with her, always. After she had outlived most of those

people who'd been important, if not close, to her, she still had the poetry. Even the "battles with Harvard," as she so epically called them, could not remove Millicent's alignment with Dickinson's poems. She quoted them right up to the end of her life, using individual lines as emblematic of thoughts she had or issues she was facing.

MW: Both Mabel Todd and Millicent Bingham claimed an intimacy with Dickinson. In what ways are their claims to this intimacy warranted? In what ways might you imagine Dickinson slipping through the fingers of these women who, in different ways, gave up their lives to guarantee her work life? Can any editor, biographer, literary critic or reader ever know Dickinson?

JD: Again, this is a topic about which I speculate in the book at some length. Let me just say that for whatever acquaintance Mabel and Millicent might or might not have had with Dickinson during her life, both of them certainly believed that they understood her even better through their relationships with other members of the Dickinson family, through their deep familiarity with Amherst and through their ongoing study of and engagement with her writings. But I also believe that despite the hundreds – even thousands – of books that have been published about aspects of Dickinson and her work, there are many ways in which she remains an enigma. And that's why we keep trying to know her.

MW: The camphorwood chest appears in your work both as an actual material artifact and as the immaterial – symbolic – space of a mystery. This was of course the box in which Todd secreted those Dickinson manuscripts that remained in her possession after the lawsuit with Lavinia over the deed of a little piece of land brought Todd's editorial work to its first end. And it was this box that Bingham remembers dutifully carrying from Amherst to Springfield to New York before at last opening it in 1929 and beginning her own new life in service to its contents. After Bingham's death, though, the camphorwood chest disappears. Where

might it have gone? And what message might this box – long since emptied of Dickinson's MSS – have contained? Is there not something strange and beautiful about its vanishing – as if, like Thoreau's allegorical hound, bay horse, and turtle dove, it would keep us always on the trail of its recovery, while always just eluding our grasp?

JD: I have tried to find that camphorwood chest, following clues across three different states! I even looked at various chests that one of Richard Sewall's sons inherited and stored in the attic of an old house, to no avail. Its whereabouts remain unknown. And yet, as you suggest, there are ways in which I do feel that this is appropriate. Just as the essence of Dickinson always seems to be just beyond our ability to know her, that chest which long hid her poems from the world itself remains hidden, an emblem suggesting that there are still things about the world of Dickinson we do not know, and perhaps never will.

Note: *Julie Dobrow's* *After Emily: Two Remarkable Women and the Legacy of America's Greatest Poet is available from W. W. Norton as of 30 October 2018.*

Marta Werner's books include Emily Dickinson's Open Folios, Radical Scatters: An Electronic Archive of Dickinson's Late Fragments; Ordinary Mysteries: The Common Journal of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne; and The Gorgeous Nothings. Werner is a member of the EDIS Board and editor of the journal Textual Cultures. She teaches American literature at D'Youville College.

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