Scribbling Women as Entrepreneurs: Kate Field (1838-96) and Charlotte Smith (1840-1917)

Autumn Stanley
Institute for Historical Study
Berkeley, California

Two women outwardly more different than Mary Katherine Keemle Field and Charlotte Odlum Smith can hardly be imagined. Kate was strikingly attractive--often called "bonny Kate Field." Charlotte, though not unattractive, was simply never spoken of in such terms.[1]

Kate Field was by some lights a child of privilege. Though her family was not wealthy, as the only child she was much indulged, given the best St. Louis schooling. A wealthy aunt and uncle gave her further schooling in Boston and took her to Europe for two years.

The Odlums, by contrast, had seven children, three of whom died in infancy [25, A]. Charlotte's own poor health reportedly interrupted her schooling [15, p. 756]. Whatever Charlotte's father, Richard Odlum, did for a living, it evidently did not suffice, for Catherine Odlum was obliged to keep boarders [24a, b; 1; 2]. At Richard's death, Charlotte became the "man of the family" at age 16.

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[1]Kate was petite, "very slender and graceful, with a wealth of chestnut hair falling in clustering curls,...fair complexion and luminous blue eyes" [29, 37]. Many men, including some famous literary names, fell in love with her or found themselves charmed. Biographical information on Field, where not specifically referenced, comes from References 29, 8, and (various issues of) 6.

Charlotte was tall and, though attractive as a young girl [25, Kirby and Lee depositions], became focused on her reforms to the exclusion of worries about attractiveness to men. As a Pittsburgh *Leader* reporter put it in 1893 [12],

> Miss Smith is the picture of earnestness and strength. Her every thought and purpose has evidently been given to her noble life work,...elevating the condition of the wage-earners of her sex and compelling from employers [equal pay for equal work]. But in becoming a fanatic..., she has, like all fanatics, let slip all the merely pretty feminine ways and graces.... She is large and rather stout. Her dress was of the plainest, a black wool gown escaping the ground in extremely sensible fashion--that is by half a foot or more--a plain black bonnet pulled slightly awry in the excitement of the moment, a flushed, determined face.

Information on Smith's childhood comes largely from References 15 and 25, Depositions A and B (Jul. 26 and 27, 1887).

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Aside from the class difference, Charlotte's childhood was grimmer than Kate's in other ways. Joseph and Eliza Field maintained a tender and loving relationship until Joseph's early death; and though work often separated them for months at a time, he kept in close touch by letter with his beloved wife and daughter. Richard Odlum may have abandoned his family. Certainly he was not enumerated with them in the 1850 census, when Charlotte was ten [24b; 17]. At the very least, his work--perhaps with New York's many canal and railroad projects of the day--took him away for long periods. When he died of cholera in Canada, Catherine learned the news from a neighbor's newspaper.

Yet there are intriguing coincidences[2] and important similarities in the backgrounds, childhoods, and careers of these two women. Born just two years apart, into families of Irish Catholic heritage,[3] both girls lost their fathers as teenagers, and thenceforward felt a need to support themselves and take care of their mothers. Kate was, as noted, the only child; Charlotte was the oldest, the most practical, and probably the most intelligent of the four surviving Odlum children. Both these women, in fact, were obviously quite intelligent; and if Kate had more formal education, Charlotte did an impressive job of educating herself, as her writings reveal. Both believed strongly in marriage as an institution, but Kate never married, and Charlotte married only briefly, leaving her husband when their second child was only a few weeks old [25, B]. Both were hot-tempered,[4] and had great drive and ambition. At seventeen Kate was already aware of her ambition and of how her sex might frustrate it.[5] Both had other careers in mind at first. Kate wanted most to be a great singer, and she tried acting, lecturing, and play-

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[2]In 1852-3 the Fields lived in St. Louis near 6th Avenue and Market Street, just blocks from where the Odlums lived (also on Market) when they returned to St. Louis in 1859-60. Joseph Field established a periodical on the same street (Olive) where Charlotte's *Inland Monthly* was located in the 1870s. Richard Odlum and Joseph Field may have died the same year (1856). Both families thereupon went traveling, possibly visiting some of the same Eastern cities at the same time. Field's funeral was held on the same street in Mobile, AL, where Charlotte's mother and brothers lived ten years later. Both Kate and Charlotte were keenly interested in science and invention [29, 60, 64; 24c; 25, A; 16; 9; 20].

[3]Kate's mother was of Quaker stock, and Kate, following her father's example, "easily sloughed off a baptismal Catholicism" to become "basically secular in belief" [13]. Even so, the background has its influence. Charlotte remained an active Catholic all her life.

[4]Charlotte was so angry when the police failed to keep their promise to prevent her brother Robert from diving off the Brooklyn Bridge in May of 1885, that she physically attacked the hapless officer bringing her the news [14]. In letters and journal entries Kate berates herself about her temper [29, 70].

[5]She says, "Oh, if I were a man!... There is not an ambition, a desire, a feeling, a thought, an impulse, an instinct that I am not obliged to crush. And why? Because I am a woman, and a woman must content herself with indoor life, with sewing and babies" [29, 69].

writing as well. Charlotte's early entrepreneurial ventures--aside from a spot of blockade-running early in the Civil War [25, A, B]--were all in retail. Clearly, however, she was an entrepreneur at heart, opening a millinery and dressmaking shop and pattern emporium in St. Louis at age 19 [16; 24c].

But perhaps the most important similarity between them, or at least the most pertinent here, is that they were both political animals. After a certain point in each of their lives, they took social, political, and economic criticism at the national level as their role and province.[6] In short, they were both reformers. Their *styles* of criticism were at first glance as different as their mode of dress. Kate, always the darling of her family and of society, often used a rather light and bantering wit to make her points. Charlotte also used wit, but of a more mordant and heavy-handed type. Indeed, if Kate Field was Washington's court jester, Charlotte Smith was a revivalist preacher come to court--or an ancient Hebrew prophet returned to haunt the halls of Congress.

And yet, there was an underlying common ground of attitude and approach between them. Interestingly enough, for example, both became lobbyists. And Kate, says Frank Mott, could be a bit of a shrew at times [11, p. 40]. Also, these two journalist/reformers favored some of the same causes. Both opposed immigration. Both were anti-Cleveland and anti-Mormon. Both became interested in the role of women at the Columbian Exposition--though Kate won medals and praise for her interest, whereas Charlotte became *persona non grata* at the Woman's Building. Both were feminists and wanted to do something practical for women,[7] and both saw the basic need as jobs and money. Both also wanted to help labor, though Charlotte's was a sustained effort over nearly forty years, whereas Kate's may have been a one-time thing.

These similarities should not be overstated. Kate Field joined the suffragists late in life, whereas Charlotte remained a strict economic feminist

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[6]Indeed, Kate was fascinated with politics as early as age 18 [29, 12, 29], and was an avid reader of newspapers even as a young girl. Her politics--or rather, her outspokenness about her views--cost her a great inheritance, which would have made her financially independent for life; for her uncle had resolved to leave her his fortune until she took the Union side in the Civil War.

[7]Indeed, both did render direct aid to women. As early as 1874, while running her first periodical, the *Inland Monthly*, in St. Louis, Charlotte Smith founded a Woman's Printing Company to give employment to women--including the printing of the *Inland* [30]. She also hired women as canvassers for the *Inland*. In the 1890s her crusade for women inventors encompassed such practical proposals as aid with model-making, patent drawings, and the expenses of getting a patent, all outlined in the only known journal devoted exclusively to women inventors [22]. And in Boston, after the turn of the century, Smith's Woman's Rescue League provided shelter, employment counseling, medical care, and other direct aid to impoverished working girls and to sick or disaffected prostitutes [26, 446].

In 1882, Kate Field started a Cooperative Dress Association, which not only hired women, but offered cheaper and more healthful clothing for women. A small but telling feature of the enterprise was that it provided seats for all the women employees--"a patent self-acting seat" where they could rest between customers [29, 391-3, 409]. Unfortunately, the venture lasted only two years.

to the end. Kate's interests were broader (more "cultural") than Charlotte's. One of her proudest achievements was getting the import tax on art repealed; another was saving John Brown's farm and gravesite for the nation. Charlotte might well have seen these as frivolous concerns, so long as thousands of working women were trying to subsist on $3-5 a week.

Before further comparing the careers and journalistic enterprises of these two very different women--who yet were so much alike--let us examine the field they eventually entered, broadly called journalism.

As Susan Lewis's paper from this conference [7] makes clear, we must stop categorizing 19th-century women as either domestic drudges or exploited workers, while a wealthy few of their sisters either ignored their plight in a social whirl or tried, as reformers or clubwomen, to better their sisters' condition. Certainly, these two basic groups did exist, and the former was much too large. But the picture is far more complex than such a dichotomous division would suggest. By the late 19th century women were entering more highly paid work, including government clerkships at various levels. Substantial numbers of women made good livings for themselves and their children by running small businesses ranging from confectionery shops and groceries to fancy goods and millinery shops, photography studios, book and stationery stores. A few women ran large businesses as well.

Journalism was opening to women in the last quarter of the century. According to Frank Luther Mott's history of American journalism [10], for example, women flocked into newspaper work in the 1880s. The major trade periodical, *The Journalist*, estimated in 1886 that 500 women were working regularly on the editorial side of American newspapers. By 1888, 200 women were working on New York papers alone, and local women's press clubs were springing up. As early as 1885 the Women's International Press Association was founded, with Mrs. S.I. Nicholson of the *Picayune* as President.[8]

Information from the 1880 and 1890 census compendia confirms this increased participation. Indeed, the numbers are probably low, in that married women were often listed as "keeping house" when in fact they had another occupation. In 1880, 12,308 people listed their occupation as journalist, 288 of them female. By 1890, 21,849 journalists were enumerated, including more than three times as many females, 888. Though women's percentage of all journalists is still small (just over 4%), the women's numbers are obviously increasing faster than the men's, and far faster than the U.S. population as a whole.

Interestingly enough, in the Washington, DC, directory for 1890, among the 102 journalists and news organizations listed in the business directory is only one woman, Alice Neale, though many more women obviously pursued

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[8]The flood continued through the decade of the 1890s. By 1898 *The Journalist* estimated that 4000 women were engaged in various capacities in New York journalism alone [vol. 23, p. 9, Apr. 23, 1898].

this occupation.[9] In fact, as early as 1880, Washington already had 19 female journalists (of 168).

By 1890, Charlotte Smith and Kate Field might both have been included in this DC directory listing, but were not. The 1890 census compendium gives no figures for individual cities, but the 1891 DC directory shows 3 women--including Kate Field but *not* Charlotte Smith--out of 138 journalists listed. Several names appear by first initial only, some of whom may have been women. Charlotte evidently preferred to call herself a publisher [27].

Boston and San Francisco's 1890 directories fail to list journalists at the back, but a survey of the first 100 pages of the Boston directory showed two women journalists (Miss M.A. Aldrich of the *Boston Home Journal* and Mrs. Fred A. Bishop, Editorial Department, publication not specified) and Allie A. Adams (presumably female), Publisher, of J.Q. Adams & Co. To put these numbers in perspective, the same 100 pages show: 126 teachers (and 2 principals), 99 dressmakers, 41 bookkeepers, 28 nurses, 20 stenographers, 15 milliners, 14 clerks, 12 physicians, and 11 artists, and 9 proprietors of variety shops, to list the ten top occupations for women. Rarest of all in journalism would be female owners of periodicals, particularly those starting them as businesses. Such women might appear among publishers in the census, rather than among journalists. In any case, they cannot be isolated in the federal statistics, and much more research must be done to determine their frequency. However, because of the inherently public nature of the enterprise, we do often know these women's names, notably--aside from Smith and Field--Anne Royall, Lucy Stone, Ellen Demorest, Jane Swisshelm, Abigail Duniway, Jeannette Gilder, Mary Nolan, and Margaret Fuller.

It is in this context that both Smith and Field chose to found periodicals in Washington, DC at about the same time--Charlotte starting her second periodical, *The Working Woman*, there in 1886 and Kate her *Kate Field's Washington* in 1890. The two publications, whose contrasting characters are epitomized in their names, were not only business ventures but organs for causes dear to the editors' hearts.

The finances of these two women are cause for debate. Aside from the usual 19th-century reticence about such matters, the basic source on business finances for that century, R.G. Dun [5], often omits women simply because women borrow less money than men. Whether this was because of a socialized reluctance to take risks or because they felt that credit would be

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[9]City directories are a rich source for students of U.S. business and occupational history. The business directories at the back (where various types of business, such as grocers or milliners, and the practitioners of certain occupations, such as engineers or journalists, are listed together alphabetically) are a great convenience, but cannot be relied on exclusively, as some names are always omitted. In this DC/1890 directory, for example, Lucy B. Stelle is in the residential listings as a journalist, but does not appear among the journalists listed in the back. Moreover, if in order to be listed, a proprietor had to request and/or pay for the listing--or if a business had to be large or prominent enough so that the directory compilers would list it unasked--women's businesses might be more likely than men's to be omitted. And if a woman was married, she might not appear at all, either in the residential or in the business listings.

denied them, the result is the same--lack of a paper trail. The only known R.G. Dun record on Charlotte Smith [5] pertains to her 1870s *Inland Monthly* venture. The investigator pronounced her hard-working and honest, but considered her worth only $800 credit, and said she was barely making a living on the magazine. The Dun records stop before 1890 in any case.

The major surviving source on Smith's finances is Catherine Odlum's claim for a pension based on her son David's Civil War service [25]. The examiners sought to establish 1) Catherine's need for the money, 2) David's contribution to her support, and 3) the family's loyalty to the Union. Charlotte's and Catherine's testimony seems calculated to give as little information as possible on money matters.[10]

The evidence is conflicting, from the pension claim and elsewhere. Charlotte's childhood in Upstate New York was likely, as Logan Reavis observed, one of "straitened circumstances" [15, 756]. When Richard Odlum died, his estate was apparently less than $500 [25, A]. After Richard's death, however, Charlotte received a cash inheritance from a paternal relative [25, B]. She declined to name either that relative or the amount of the inheritance, but soon the family was in St. Louis, Charlotte was in business, and David was enrolled in the Christian Brothers School, with two years' tuition ($600) paid in advance [25, A, B; 16 (ad)]. On the other hand, Catherine still kept boarders [24c].

Then, in 1861, David ran away from school to join the Union Army, and Charlotte set out, with mother and two youngest brothers in tow, to find him. Partly as a cover for her search, Charlotte became a blockade-runner on the Ohio River. The venture must have proved spectacularly successful, for when she opened a drygoods store in Mobile after the War, she put $20,000--possibly as much as $40,000--worth of stock into it. (Her testimony conflicts with her mother's here: Catherine says Charlotte built a building and put $40,000 worth of stock into it [25, A]. Both conflict with their unanimous testimony in the pension claim and other writings that they lost everything when their Memphis house was demolished to clear a firing path for Union guns from the fort. They must have salvaged at least their hard currency.) At the same time, in Mobile, Catherine Odlum was running two boarding houses [25, A].

The fate of her Mobile venture is unclear, but Charlotte, now married to a grocer named Edward Smith and the mother of a young son, soon moved to Philadelphia, where Edward opened another grocery store, and Charlotte a separate store of her own. The two apparently kept their money separate; and indeed Charlotte left Edward soon after their second child was born. She

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[10]This pension claim has many fascinating aspects that cannot be discussed here, not the least of which was the philosophical question whether a daughter rather than a son could be held liable for supporting her mother, especially when she had married and had children of her own to support. David Odlum, enlisted under the false name of Charles Rogers, had disappeared in late 1862. The Army claimed he deserted; the family was equally certain he was dead, since he had not contacted them for twenty years. Aside from the priceless glimpse into family dynamics, the claim and its outcome would be a fascinating case study of the effects of President Cleveland's pension reforms.

went to Newport, RI, where she opened a book and stationery store for summer visitors. Then she headed for Chicago, where she opened a bookstore just three days before the Great Fire of October 1871. Once again she claimed, in the quickie book she wrote on the fire [19], to have lost everything;[11] clearly at least she lost the entire stock of that bookstore.

So perhaps it was really true, as she claimed in an early *Inland* issue (Aug. 1872, p. 344), that she was working 20 hours out of 24 to support her two fine boys. When the magazine closed in 1878, it was being published simultaneously in St. Louis and Chicago, and claimed branch offices in several other cities. I am not certain whether it closed because it was failing, because Charlotte tired of it, or because, as she said, she wanted to move closer to the center of national power in order to influence legislation on behalf of self-supporting women. Perhaps the *Inland* had been enough of a success to underwrite her move to Washington, DC. In 1877 [20 (Sept. 1877, p. 182)] she called it "a pecuniary success" and claimed she'd never borrowed a dollar for it, or received any donations.[12]

Interestingly enough, it was about this time (1878) that Charlotte started calling herself a widow in the Chicago directory. If Edward Smith did indeed survive till 1878, he may have left her something, though one of her obituaries says he died in the late 1860s (i.e., soon after she left him), disclosing "an insolvent estate" [4b].

About 1890, Smith speaks in the *Working Woman* about "great expectations" from a will then in probate. If these expectations bore fruit, perhaps this inheritance helped support her activities from then on. An exasperated official in the Woman's Building at the Chicago Fair (1892-3) called her a "bloated bondholder" [28, p. 510], which lends credence to this idea.

Certainly, except for a possible few months with a Chicago business while stocking her bookstore, and two brief stints as a federal clerk in Washington, DC, in 1882 and again in the late 1890s, Charlotte Smith never took paid employment in her adult life. Yet, in addition to underwriting her Woman's National Industrial League and, later, the Woman's Board of Trade (Boston), she spent untold thousands of her own money over four decades on projects to benefit working women in general, as well as to help individual homeless and desperate women. On the other hand, at her death, she left no known will or property, and had to be buried by the Catholic diocese of Boston, where she died.

In short, we know where a lot of her money went, but not where it came from or why there was nothing left at the end. Though external evidence is conflicting, internal evidence from both the *Inland* and the *Working Woman* indicates a strong financial motive in their founding. The Editorial Department of the first issue of the *Inland Monthly* (Mar. 1872) says,

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[11]In the preface she calls herself one of the "destitute unfortunates" given refuge by St. Louis.

[12]But cf. an early *Inland* issue [1 (6 August 1872) p. 344], where she notes that the magazine is now out of debt.

> ...as no magazine has ever yet been published in the United States from any other motive than a purely philanthropic regard for the interest of the public welfare, we have the candor to acknowledge that an improvement of our financial condition has been one of the motives which induced us to undertake this enterprise, and we therefore beg leave to state that any subscriptions in money, handed in by gentlemen or ladies, will be thankfully received.

These two main periodicals,[13] each lasting six or seven years, probably contributed substantially to her philanthropic lifestyle--which, as she was fond of reminding people, was very expensive. One example she gave is worth repeating here for what it reveals about her personality: she claimed to have broken fully 5000 stout black umbrellas over the heads of mashers she saw annoying young women in the street [4a]. These high-quality umbrellas cost about $1 each.

More significantly, Smith declared in an 1897 interview that in the past five years she had spent $50,000 on Boston charities. Elsewhere she said she had spent $20,000 in her seventeen-year campaign for a national pure food law, specifically noting that she financed the campaign from her writings [4a, 4b]. Since her only known book is her small work on the Chicago Fire, her "writings" must refer mainly if not entirely to her periodicals.

In the absence of independently determined circulation figures for these magazines, we must use Smith's own statements, which claim a circulation for the *Working Woman* of 50,000 in 1887 [21 (Oct. 15, 1887: 2: 3)] and over 100,000 in 1888 [18]. Publishers routinely exaggerated these figures, and obviously not all copies were subscribed for or sold (many were sent out for political and advertising purposes [18]). But at $1 a year, or 5 cents a weekly copy, even if the *Working Woman* had only 20,000 paid subscribers, Charlotte Smith would have had a great deal of money for those days, even after paying her publication costs.

Kate Field's case is simpler. At least, her life is far better documented. She was a successful lyceum lecturer, a popular journalist with various large newspapers, and a successful writer of travel books. For her work as a publicist for the telephone, she received valuable telephone stock. This might have kept her comfortable for life, but for her involvement in various causes. She was, for example, as already mentioned, one of the founders and head of the Cooperative Dress Association in the early 1880s. Its failure after barely two years may have left her short of money, if her involvement was financial as well as ideological and temporal, for her *New York Times* obituary [8] says it went under with some $130,000 worth of debts and only about twice as much in "nominal" assets.

In any case, *Kate Field's Washington*, a weekly of 16 pages, sold for $2 a year, postpaid [6]. Individual copies were also available at newsstands--as

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[13]She started a third periodical, also in Washington, DC, in 1891--*The Woman Inventor* [22]. However, since this lasted only two issues, it seems likely that it was not a success.

for instance in all the finest Washington hotels--originally for 5 cents a copy; later for 10 cents. The prospectus was "richly freighted with advertising," and "subscriptions set in almost on the first intimation of the idea" [29, p. 467]. Whiting notes that the journal started on "a fairly good financial basis, a part of the stock being taken by eminent financiers." Field hired Ella Leonard as her business manager, plus two Vassar graduates for the staff, and took an office in the Corcoran Building [29, p. 470].

Internal evidence--numerous ads, clever appeals for advertising and for subscribers, ads for Field's books, etc.--suggests a definite money-making motive for the weekly. Circulation figures are scarce, but in 1890 the *American Newspaper Directory* reported a "guaranteed" circulation of 5,000 each week, and by 1894 the circulation reported by Field herself exceeded 7,500, which was high for a weekly. Thus, it appears that the periodical was a success, ceasing in 1895 because of Kate Field's health--in other words, for lack of a leader rather than for lack of a following.

Two case studies do not an analysis make, and much more research remains to be done. However, the entrepreneurial achievement of these two intriguing figures can suggest a path for future workers to follow.

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