

# “How Dreary to Be Somebody”

*The life of Alice James.*

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We take it for granted that biographies are composed because of a certain fame someone has achieved. Alice James, however, is the worthwhile exception. The sister of psychologist William James and novelist Henry James, Alice is notable precisely for who she did not become.

It takes an exceptional biographer to tell such a person's story. In Alice's case, she is fortunate to have been found by the shrewd, sensitive Jean Strouse. In *Alice James: A Biography*, first published in 1980 (it won the Bancroft Prize) and now reissued by New York Review Books, Strouse uncovers a woman of immense fascination, untapped genius, and heart-breaking fragility. By deciphering the traces of Alice's life in the writings of her brothers, Strouse not only opens up a fresh perspective on this famous family but also delves deep into the psyche of a challenging woman. As Colm Toibin's new introduction observes, “Strouse is not a biographer who begins with a theory and sets about proving it; her version of this complex life is judicious and detailed.” But perhaps even more significantly, Strouse has shown that one's legacy can't be measured only by what one “accomplishes.”

Alice James was born in 1848, the youngest child and only girl of the five James children: William, Henry, Garth Wilkinson (“Wilkie”), Alexander Robertson (“Bob”), and then Alice. Being born into “a perfectly self-sufficient erotic-intellectual commune,” as Jacques Barzun has described the James family, was as much a burden as it was a blessing. Alice was a woman in a family of men during an era of Victorian repression; on top of that, she was smart. While defending herself from her brothers' taunts and even William's “overtly sexual” flirtations, Alice had to endure her father's confusing partiality. Though he loved his daughter dearly, Henry James, Sr., remained convinced that women should be excluded from intellectual spheres. Thus, he focused solely on educating his sons, leaving Alice to gather the scraps of her brothers' studies. “To be a James and a girl then was a contradiction in terms,” Strouse observes, and “it is Alice's struggle to resolve that essential contradiction, her attempt to find something whole and authentic in her own experience, that gives her life its real stature and interest.”

Alice's struggle proved to be severe. By conventional measures, she was a failure. She “did not produce any significant body of work. She never married.

She did not have children. She was not socially useful, particularly virtuous, or even happy,” Strouse writes, with the blunt realism that anchors the biography. Alice suffered from constant invalidism, caused in part by an unknown nervous disorder. Confounding every physician who saw her, she had to accept the ubiquitous diagnosis of “hysteria,” receiving a grotesque range of primitive treatments throughout her life.

Her constant health battles were something she both writhed against and revealed in. Her breakdowns “gave her a mode of self-assertion” as Paul Fischer puts it in *House of Wits: An Intimate Portrait of the James Family*. Not only did Alice enjoy the attention her examinations promised, but her illness “provided her with an escape route—a way out of having

to choose between a safe boring life of devotion to others and a dangerous assertion of intellectual competence.” In other words, “it justified her failure to achieve while allowing her to preserve a sense of potent capacity.”

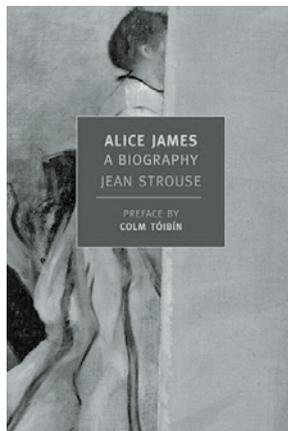
Alice was all too aware of her shortcomings and limitations. She felt she had no stake in the James' genius, even signing one of her letters to William as “Your loving idiotoid sister,” but at the same time knew her intellectual capacity was unusual. As she got older and marriage receded as a possibility, she tried to cope with her lot by variously joining a sewing bee, teaching correspondence history classes to women through The Society to Encourage Studies at Home, and, when she moved to London, hosting well-attended salons in her home. But she abandoned each new endeavor, thus shutting the doors that could have let her out of her sick room. Instead, she chose to make her illness her career. “It grew out of her particular, troubled existence, just as Henry's novels and Williams' psychology grew out of their moral concerns and personal conflicts,” Strouse writes. “An expert at suffering, she could *convert* the waste of her life into something more lasting than private unhappiness.”

Alice's fortitude in the face of suffering was admirable, but Strouse is careful to point out that “To make her into a heroine (or victim-as-heroine) now would be seriously to misconstrue her sufferings and aims.” Even to equate her resilience with religious patience is inaccurate, since Alice “clung too fiercely to

the unique quality of her own experience, and had too much contempt for organized religion, to find solace in conventional faith.” Nonetheless, Strouse suggests, she accomplished what many women of her

time were unable to do: cobble together some sort of individual identity.

As much damage as Henry Sr. might have done through his eccentric Swedenborgian preoccupations and well-meaning sexism, he did impart one strange measure of success to his children. In his opinion, “an interesting failure seemed more worthy of appreciation than any ‘too obvious success,’” Strouse writes. “To ‘succeed’ as a person, then, in the broadest Jamesian interpretation, meant to achieve a complex identity forged out of all these ideas about morality, consciousness,



**Alice James**  
A Biography

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perception, and communication—and a sense of self that had to do with a quality of being and the ability to see life steadily (as Matthew Arnold put it) and see it whole.” Measured by conventional standards, Alice’s life was an abject failure, but near the very end, she found a bit of Jamesian success.

At the age of 41, she began to keep a diary. She hadn’t dared take on such a project any sooner, Strouse explains, because “to a woman whose father had placed negative value on female intelligence and whose family suspected

one person’s success was purchased by another’s failure, addressing posterity even in this covert way seemed a dangerous undertaking.” But the journal provided the outlet she had needed: “Finding a way to think and speak for herself was, for Alice, her life’s highest aim. In beginning to keep a private journal, she had begun finally to distinguish herself, in both senses of the word—from her famous brothers, and as a person on her own.”

This aspiration to be a person in her own might sound like a cliché to modern ears, but for a woman whose own

intelligence had been suppressed not only by social restrictions but also by her own father, locating a sense of self was no small matter. Perhaps what is most remarkable is how simple her desire was. Alice didn’t need to be somebody, she just needed to be herself.

“How dreary to be somebody / How public, like a frog / To tell your name the livelong day / To an admiring bog!” Emily Dickinson wrote in her poem “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” Alice copied these lines into her notebook, and no doubt clung to them. Alice had no interest

in fame or credit. She even refused to write for publication. Perhaps doing so would have cured her of some of her feelings of futility—after all, many women in her time *did* find careers as writers—but Alice was too overwhelmed with one goal: “to keep in mind as much as possible the invaluable thought that one has only to live one day at a time and that all the vague terrors of the future vanish as the future at every moment becomes the present.”

When Alice was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 42, she was thrilled not only to finally have a “palpable disease” but also to be allowed to die. She had been preoccupied with death since she was a young woman, at one point asking her father if suicide was a sin, which he answered negatively, so long as she “did it in a perfectly gentle way in order to not distress her friends.” So when her doctor finally told her death was imminent, Alice rejoiced. “Death was the consummation of struggle and pain, the apotheosis and the cessation of suffering,” Strouse writes. “Alice went out to meet it like a lover keeping a long-awaited assignation, yearning to surrender to its large, dark, overwhelming force.”

As she lay dying, she told William: “When I’m gone, pray don’t think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else, had neurotic science been born.” Alice knew better than anyone the ways in which she had been thwarted and yet refused to blame anyone or anything. “Surely there is nothing so true as that we are simply at the mercy of what we bring to life & not what life brings to us,” she had written to William a few years before.

Alice’s diary was a secret to everyone but Katharine Loring, her closest friend and caretaker, who transcribed Alice’s entries when she eventually became too weak to write. William and Henry were both stunned and conflicted when Loring shared it with them after Alice’s death. (Henry viewed “personal publicity as a catastrophe.”) A selection from her diary was published in 1934. When Leon Edel, Henry James’ most assiduous biographer, republished the diary in a fuller edition in 1964, *The Saturday Review* hailed it as “one of the neglected masterpieces of American literature.”

But Alice didn’t write for posthumous recognition. As she told Bob’s wife after he broke down and was sent to an asylum: “The weary journey does not last forever and we do not take our success with us only the manner in which we have met our failures, that never crumbles in the dust.” And indeed, in the end she was recognized for precisely that.

For many readers, Alice’s published diary confirmed what her doctor said about her: “If she had had any health, what a brilliant woman she would have been.” But it was her brothers who understood her best. After her death, Bob wrote to Alice’s friend Fanny: “Dear Alice’s life didn’t seem beautiful, but I doubt not it was interiorly beautiful. There is nothing beautiful in a life that has nothing to overcome. And she overcame more than any of us can ever know.”

Perhaps not in spite of but because of her failed life, Alice deserves the honor of a closer look and an amplified voice, which is precisely what Jean Strouse has given her.

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