

**THE CROSSROADS OF BIOGRAPHY:  
IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE POPULAR AND POSTMODERN?**

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There are many crossroads we biographers face and today I'd like to share my thoughts on three: How can one be both academically rigorous, yet accessible? How much time should be devoted to de-constructing past biographers' inaccuracies in the quest for authenticity? Lastly, can a historian who embraces the ambiguities of postmodernism lure general historical readers into labyrinths of multiplicity? In other words, can one be postmodern yet popular? Postmodernism is a philosophy that opposes the "modern" positivist view that there is a fixed reality we can ascertain. Postmodernists think of human identity as "constructed" by race, class, gender. They try to break down dichotomies such as intellect versus sentiment; male versus female, choosing to look at the spaces in-between. They argue that there is no such thing as "truth," but rather that truths are relative and colored by our perspectives. My experiences in writing two autobiographies—one of an unknown "ordinary woman" and the other of well-known mythic figure Baby Doe Tabor—can provide a case-study of these challenges.

My first book, based on a 30-year-long nineteenth-century Iowa woman's diary, was titled **'A Secret to be Buried: The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie**. Although Gillespie was an unknown, I hoped people would be intrigued by a secret. (As Alice Roosevelt Longworth purportedly once quipped, "If you don't have anything nice to say about somebody, come sit by me.") We feminists provided reflexive introductions to our work, so I opened by sharing my own secret: I had grown to dislike my biographical subject. Urged by idealistic students in my American Studies seminar on "pioneer" women to do a book on the Martyr Mother we had unearthed in a manuscript diary held by the Iowa State Historical Society, I took microfilms of Gillespie's 2,500-page diary to Tucson with me, where after work each night I'd immerse myself in her

journal, which she called “my only confidant.” Each student had only read a two-year section of the journal and I soon discovered that a more intense relationship with Emily Gillespie did not endear her to me. She was critical, controlling and self-righteous. I truly don’t know if I would have finished the book, were it not for the advice of ultra-masculist writer Charles Bowden, who had himself studied nineteenth-century women long ago at the University of Wisconsin. “Get over it,” Bowden advised. “Any truly-alive Victorian woman would have been a shrew. Find out what made her so angry.” I stuck with the project and revised my original image of this woman as the suffering Martyr Mother persona she had incrementally constructed of herself. Luckily for me, this ordinary woman’s married life story turned out to be extraordinary and she revealed it with passion, once the dam of Victorian repression cracked. Gillespie wrote of her difficult marriage, “The heart sometimes is broken by trouble and its possor [sic] dies a martyr. I tried so hard to live through it without it being known by the outside world . . . yet I did not dare to displease him. I have written *many* things in my journal, but the worst is a secret to be burried when I shall cease to be.”

Two reviewers of my book did not like the fact that I didn’t reveal “the secret.” While I hypothesized about several possible secrets, I took the postmodern stance that I truly did not know the answer. I argued that Gillespie had created in her long diary what Robert Fothergill calls a “serial autobiography” and like many an autobiographer, from St. Augustine to Lillian Hellman, had artistic control over her persona and candor of her narrative. Gillespie, in my opinion, was such a skilled writer by the end of her life that she successfully “burried” her secret. Today, Emily Gillespie is cited on at least forty web sites, cited in scholarly work and even excerpted in two coffee table books. No longer is she an unknown “ordinary” woman.

At the opposite end of the biographical spectrum sits Baby Doe Tabor, a figure whose story (or whose storied figure) is extremely well-known in the West. Given my experience studying diaries, my heart leapt when I learned that the infamous Baby Doe

had written “diary notes” that had not been studied. I found the diary notes to be sparse and irregular, but behind them in deceptively neat archival folders were thousands of Tabor’s “Dreams and Visions” writings. [handout] In proposing a book that would bring these highly-unusual writings to light, I confronted many challenging crossroads.

Because “Baby Doe” has been such a popular figure for 150 years and I am committed to public education, I wanted to write an accessible book, placing it with an agent who would find a respected “cross-over” publisher. As it turns out, crossing over from the caricature “Baby Doe” to the earnest and eccentric life-writer I call “Lizzie” was not considered potentially popular. In 1994, at the urging of Barbara Kingsolver, I sent a book proposal to her agent, Francis Goldin. Goldin’s office replied, “To us, such a book seems most appropriate for an academic house . . . None of us here can see a commercial editor taking it on.” I soldiered on. In 1999, another colleague recommended an agent whom I later found out has represented Tom Clancy. By now, I had published a scholarly essay on Baby Doe Tabor’s fragmentary writings that I included in my proposal. The agent (another Easterner) found my samplings of Tabor’s more lucid “Dreams and Visions” crazily inscrutable. She suggested that I should recreate in fiction “the wild world of the West,” making Baby Doe one of the characters, as Wallace Stegner had done in *Angle of Repose*. To my credit, I responded with moderation: “Since I don’t have the talent of a Wallace Stegner (nor his ‘flexible’ attitude toward the historical documents he used in creating his splendid *Angle of Repose*) I plan to stick with my original concept for the book.” My files contain four other kind rejection letters from agents, (including a Westerner) all of whom found the topic of Tabor’s baffling life-writings more suited for an academic press. However, among many academics, “Baby Doe” Tabor has been perceived as a “buffoon,” as one of Patricia Limerick’s students observed to me recently. Thus Tabor remains a liminal and suspect figure, known throughout the West, yet not fitting into either the popular or academic.

Baby Doe’s notoriety, the very notoriety that I hoped would intrigue readers

enough to endure her eccentric life writings that had won my empathy, remains a major challenge. In my biography, I spend a great deal of ink on undermining some of the bedrock notions of the Baby Doe legend. I anticipate that for the most part this bedrock is immovable, given my experiences as an Arizona Humanities Council lecturer who at first tried to tell the story of *Elizabeth* Tabor. My audiences would look puzzled, even after I would clarify that she was Horace Tabor's much-younger second wife. Inevitably someone would call out, "She means 'Baby Doe'" and everyone would settle in.

Ironically, in my work that seeks to rewrite the biography of Lizzie Tabor in her own words, I find it necessary to repeat the very legend I then de-construct. While people who have grown up on the legend almost lip-sync my recounting of the Tabor Stations of the Cross that include adultery, divorce, scandalous death and isolation, neophytes in the audience unfortunately become inoculated with the satisfying tale of a sexual wanton's deserved suffering and the legend lives on.

The body of Baby Doe—"forever young," as she sings in the famous opera—is an obvious site for exposing this preference for the mythological mannequin instead of biographical accuracy. I've met unanimous (male) resistance in my efforts to foreground my work with a picture of aged Mrs. Tabor which is contemporaneous with the writings I've studied. Even though the subtitle of my book is "the madwoman in the cabin," its cover depicts a luscious younger Baby Doe. Rather than be confronted by the haunting last photograph taken of Mrs. Tabor, in which her sunken eyes pierce the viewer, we seem to prefer her gaze to fall demurely elsewhere so that we can feast our eyes on her voluptuous youth. As wise Tom Noel observed to me as we looked up at the enormous millennium mural depiction of Baby Doe (and her cleavage) at the entryway of the Colorado State Museum, "When the mural was being planned, someone complained that the true pioneer in the Tabor story was Augusta and they should use her picture. But it's the snowy bosom of Baby Doe that will bring people into this museum." In sad irony, the original painting of this fantasy Baby Doe by Waldo Love was completed in 1935,

when lonely Mrs. Tabor died, gaunt with starvation rather than lush with youth.

Even the voice of Baby Doe is fertile ground for fantasy. Recently at a Westerners Corral lecture in Tucson, I began my talk by asking the audience to think about how Baby Doe's voice might have sounded. The "Dreams and Visions" I used in my lecture were written when Lizzie was about sixty years old; they were earnest and pleading. However, the man who answered my question at lecture's end said, "I think she must have sounded like Marilyn Monroe when she sang 'Happy Birthday' to President Kennedy" and everyone laughed. Thus Baby Doe remains ever-young in the American imagination, as do Monroe and Kennedy. This insistence on erotic fantasy rather than chronological accuracy galls me perhaps because it mirrors my early hypothesis about what I would find in Tabor's "Dreams and Visions." I expected to find endless replays of her past in which her beauty charmed everyone from a drygoods merchant to President Chester A. Arthur. In reality, there were very few of these dreams and if they were erotically suggestive, Lizzie added a note to her transcription expressing her disgust. In the vast majority of "Dreams and Visions" Lizzie saw herself as ineffectively powerless over devilish men and demons. Her dreams were rarely about her wanton past. Instead, they were obsessive about the present endangerment of her two daughters, particularly Silver Dollar, in which Lizzie took on the mantle of a fearsome Warrior Mother rather than a floozy.

While hard experience as a revisionist biographer has convinced me that I cannot budge the youthful Baby Doe off of history's stage, there are other areas in which I've found information to add to the record. It is in Lizzie's dreams about her "troubles with Silver," re-integrated with other papers in the Tabor collection, that I uncovered enough documentary evidence to make a crucial biographical pronouncement—yet I decenter it with postmodern speculation. I have concluded the Lizzie's daughter Silver Dollar had multiple pregnancies—most of which ended in what she called "miscarriages." It is beyond the scope of this presentation to lay out the convoluted trail of evidence from my

book, but I'll focus here on the first—or perhaps second—time Silver became pregnant while still in Colorado. In mid-1914, Silver had fallen in love with a man named Ed Brown up in Leadville and became increasingly defiant when her mother opposed their marriage. Even beloved priest Father Guida interceded in the quarrel after he received a letter from desperate Silver. He wrote to Mrs. Tabor to reconsider, “it being a matter of very great importance in the life of young persons especially in the circumstances in which the writer of that letter finds herself . . .” [italics mine]. By late 1914, Mrs. Tabor was suspicious of two other players in this drama. One was a “McLennan,” which Lizzie spelled in a frustrating variety of ways, who visited a Dr. Frantz with Silver. Dr. Theresa Frantz was a physician and house doctor for the Florence Crittenton home for unwed mothers and orphans. Lizzie wrote in her October 11, 1914 diary, “I commenced a Novena to the Mother of God and St. Rita in the name of O Blessed Mothers lonesomeness for Jesus for Honeymaid’s return. . . .” However, this Warrior Mother did not leave all agency up to the Virgin Mary and Saint Rita. She corresponded with her brother Peter, whom she disliked and distrusted, but who was the financially stable leader of the McCourt family. Lizzie resented the fact that Pete was giving money to Silver, yet she asked him for financial aid so that Silver would come home to her or move to the Midwest to live a quiet life with their sister Claudia McCourt. In October, Lizzie also wrote desperately to A.M. Stevenson, a former Tabor family friend and attorney down in Denver, asking for the enormous sum of \$2000 on account of Silver’s “health.” She urged that in order to protect Silver, they must “act quickly” and seems to gotten approximately \$1,000 from Stevenson, which she ordered sent to Dr. Theresa Fantz. Does this mean that Dr. Fantz required the money for secretive housing for a young woman “in trouble,” housing that only a physician could discretely arrange? Then a mysterious baby/child image appears in Lizzie’s diary, following a hasty account of Silver “acting the cheapest” by doing the “tango & dancing & dressing so terrible & acting the cheapest & lowest until it hurt my credit.” The entry closes with Silver saying,

“Mama I want to tell you something & knocks on door & Mother & child in black.” The lynchpin evidence is a page from a February 1915 calendar with code by Lizzie that I read in multiple ways in my book. I suggest that a baby was born—or aborted—on a date Lizzie circled. Or was this just another vivid *dream* of a baby? Lizzie’s “Dreams and Visions,” which oscillate between the earthly and divine, between diary and dream, all on one page of writing, are evidence of her “hybridity,” to use a postmodern marker.

When I first discovered this evidence, I thought of trying to locate evidence of an actual baby born to Silver Dollar Tabor in February 1915 and given up for adoption. I assumed that Lizzie, as a devout Catholic, would have had the baby baptized, so I searched the Denver diocese records to no avail, even looking under the myriad pseudonyms Silver deployed to cover up her misdeeds. Access to sealed state adoption records proved too expensive and I was uncomfortable, as an adoptee myself, at the prospect of uncovering information that could disrupt an adoptive family’s privacy. In my book, my postmodernist strategy is to argue that whether or not a biological child was born to Silver Dollar Tabor is ultimately irrelevant because to the dreaming Lizzie, this child *lived*. In fact, one can trace in what I call Lizzie’s Dream World how the baby develops from an infant into a toddler and ultimately into the little Matchless Mine girl who became a great solace to the aging, dreaming widow in her cabin. Will my readers entertain these uncertainties, or accuse me of a teasing narrative interruptus?

There is another quasi-postmodern move in my biography regarding the sudden sparseness in Lizzie’s writings from 1925 until her death in 1935. One explanation that I posit is mystical, the other rather mundane. The mystical: Lizzie’s prolific “Dreams and Visions” were one form of communication with Silver she cherished to bridge their physical separation. Many times Lizzie would note at the end of a horrific dream that the actual Silver was clearly in danger. On the other hand, a beautiful dream made her feel as if she in Leadville and Silver in Chicago were spiritually linked. Mother and daughter occasionally wrote to each other describing their powerful dreams and considered

themselves co-dreamers. I also suggest that Lizzie was assiduously writing and storing away her “Dreams and Visions” for her Silver in hopes that she would return and become Lizzie’s beloved biographer-daughter. Lizzie, who had long ago sponsored the publication of Silver’s short novel and a song, was clearly invested in her daughter’s potential as a writer. However, Silver’s death in 1925 would dash all Lizzie’s hopes and extinguish her grand writing project with Silver. However, Baby Doe denied that the woman found dead in Chicago was her daughter Silver and if she truly believed this, she would keep on writing to/for her daughter. This leads to a more mundane possible cause for the missing papers. We know that Lizzie Tabor stored some of her “Dreams and Visions” in trunks down in Denver and in a Leadville hospital run by nuns. However, I’ve also found in her writings notations to “file” a certain dream with a much earlier one, as well as notations saying “copied and filed.” This indicates to me that Lizzie probably had many of her “Dreams and Visions” in her cabin when she died. The final decade of her writing likely fell prey to the well-documented pilfering that occurred night after night despite attempts to secure the famous Baby Doe’s cabin after her death. Ever the optimistic postmodernist, I believe the passion with which Lizzie Tabor wrote the few “Dreams and Visions” from the 1930s indicates this graphomaniac would not let her daughter’s earthly death keep her from recording her “Dreams and Visions.”

Biographers’ multiple versions of Baby Doe’s death show how ambiguity, the surreal and unknowable that characterize postmodernism have been part of the saga all along. For every biographer has written his or her moral of the Tabor tale onto Baby Doe’s corpse. Caroline Bancroft’s depiction of the “arms extended in the shape of a cross” frozen body is without equal. But two other versions narrated to me show that ambiguity and gender bias (in this case unacknowledged) color the Tabor tale. One version, told to me in a Denver bar by Dennis Gallagher, is this: When they carried the stiff-as-a-board frozen body of Baby Doe out of her cabin, the wind blew off her omnipresent cap to reveal a cascade of gorgeous blondish-red hair (on an eighty-year-old



woman!). But a woman up in Prescott, Arizona, told me a different tale when I lectured there. She claimed her father had been the doctor brought to the cabin to examine Baby Doe's body. What he found was a mutilated corpse with its nose chewed off by rats. To me, these divergent tales are emblematic of the gender gap in the Baby Doe tale that I noticed in the oral histories Caroline Bancroft collected and now housed at the Denver Public Library. In the Bancroft narratives, every man praised Baby Doe, while every woman condemned her as a "red-light woman," as one informant wrote. Was the deceased Baby Doe forever young--or forever disfigured?

Given such strongly-held pre-existing visions of Baby Doe, what is a postmodernist biographer to do? How much un-writing will those who love the Tabor legend tolerate as I bring Lizzie Tabor's unruly, accusatory words to a historical melodrama in which she traditionally is silent? How much ambiguity can a biographer risk? Only time--and reviewers--will tell.

In closing, I confess I am not thoroughly postmodern, for I harbor hope that "truth" does exist. I hope that someone reading my book will be so curious about their grandmother (the one who was adopted in 1917) and her striking resemblance to Baby Doe that they will help me uncover a great historical "secret to be buried" about the fate of Silver Dollar's baby. I also hope, as did Tabor biographer Evelyn Furman, that the man "from the Western slope" who called her annually offering to sell her his trunk full of Baby Doe's writings, has family survivors who will bequeath them to the Colorado Historical Society archives. And if, as *I* dream, the writings document the last decade of Mrs. Tabor's life, I will dive in seeking answers.