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The European Diary of Fred and Lillian Lear

Patricia Newman

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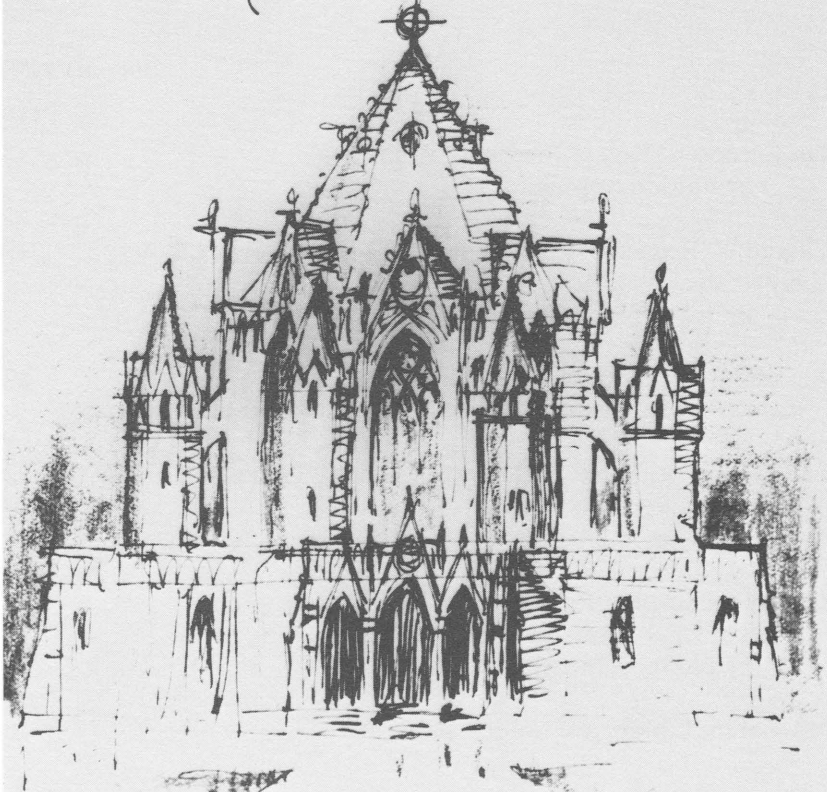
THE COURIER

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not come out.

William went to the sewing
circle at our Trinity Lodge last
afternoon - and she is learning
to knit. She goes around now
with the needles flying at the
talk, but she is still very
awkward at it yet.



This is my sketch for the book.

The European Diary of Fred and Lillian Lear

by Patricia Newman

Personal diaries are of special interest to scholars because their contents often reveal spontaneous, subjective, individual reactions to the significant events of the diarists' times. When the period of the diary is 1911-1914 and the place is Europe as seen by a young American couple, we are provided with another glimpse of a particularly complex period in social, political, and cultural history.

Frederick Roy Lear, late professor at the Syracuse University School of Architecture, and his wife, Lillian Congdon Lear, wrote their impressions in letters to relatives in the United States, letters which were kept for them until their return. The letters were written with the plan that they would comprise consecutive chapters of a diary of the Lears' lives, studies, and travels in Europe. Professor Lear was then a graduate post-baccalaureate architecture student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

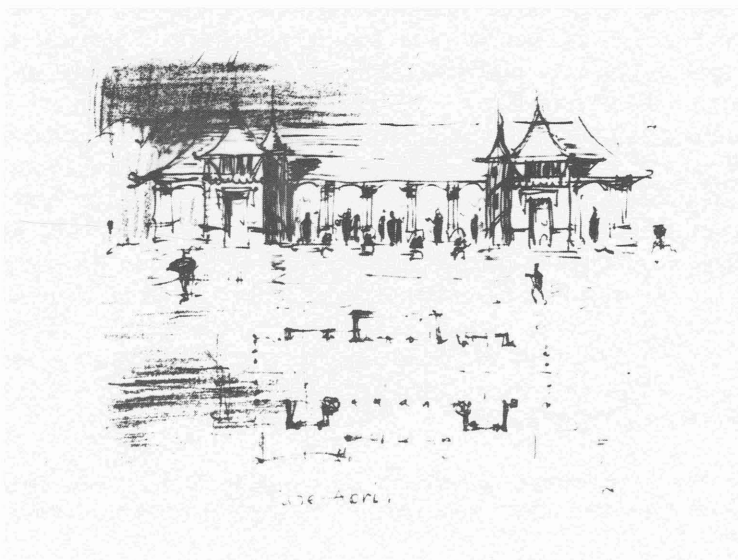
Numbers of small pen-and-ink sketches, many of them colored with tinted pencils, illustrate the diary pages. As Professor Lear recorded his experiences, he included drawings in the margins or between paragraphs of the diary illustrating his and his family's life in Paris and their adventures in other European cities and towns. His sketches range from illustrations of design projects for his classes to impressions of picturesque places, churches, and individuals who happened to catch his eye. When his workload was too pressing for him to write, the duties of diarist were assumed by Lillian Lear, who also included sketches on her diary pages.¹

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¹The Lears' interest in visual documentation of their European stay is reflected also in literally thousands of picture postcards which they purchased during their travels and which are now a part of the extensive collection of Lear memorabilia recently acquired by the George Arents Research Library (GARL).

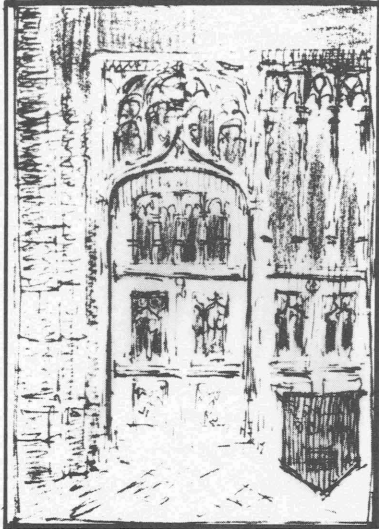
The comments and illustrations which concern Lear's architectural education in Paris confirm that in the first decades of the twentieth century the Ecole des Beaux Arts was a stronghold of academic tradition in the arts. Architectural schools throughout the United States encouraged their best students and faculty members to study in Paris, and these Americans were often the ablest recipients of what was the most soundly conservative architectural training available. Judging from his diary entries, Lear seemed to have been content with the demands of the Ecole's traditional academic curriculum, although he mentioned in one letter that a particular solution which he had submitted in one of his design classes would probably not win a prize — apparently because he had not chosen to take his design cues from the acceptable neoclassical or neo-Gothic styles.

I was “in loge” again all day, this time it was an “esquisse esquisse” [sic] of a shelter in a park. It goes without saying that I was home very late. My esquisse went off well and I rendered it in color and it was successful but doubt if good enough to get me a mention as I did it in English Tudor style and they do not like that.²



²GARL, *Lear European Diary*, October 11, 1912.

The title of Lear's final thesis at the Ecole was "The Protestant Rural Church,"³ and he seems to have excelled particularly in design problems which involved the use of the ecclesiastical neo-Gothic style. One such problem, an intricate Gothic choir screen, earned him a "mention" from the Ecole, and he included a colored sketch of it in his diary-letter.⁴



In view of Professor Lear understandably traditional orientation concerning architectural design, his comments after visiting exhibits of avant-garde art in Paris in 1911 are not surprising:

We...went into the painting exhibition. This was a queer combination of some fine pictures and some of the very worst order of the Modern Art school...Just before we left we went into a room devoted to the painters who are followers of the cubes spheres and cones. Saw some hideous portraits and nudes. To give an idea how bad the Modern art movement can go will try to make a sketch...And my drawing here is even too good to give any conception as there is something like a human being to the proportions I have shown and there is nothing so in the painting.

³GARL, Lear *Résumé*. The Lears left Europe in 1914 with the outbreak of war. Fred returned in 1918 with the U.S. Army Educational Corps, wrote his thesis, received high honors for it, and was awarded his diploma from the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

⁴Several years later Lear was to design a number of Gothic Style churches in Upstate New York, among them the University Methodist Church in Syracuse.

...two modern sculptures in marble. This sketch looks very much like the one of a woman loving her dog. Can you imagine anything more hideous cut from marble? This is no joke but the serious attempt of some "Sculptor" who undoubtedly thinks he has wrought a wonderful piece of work that is to be handed down to posterity. Cannot see how sane men can do such work and most of all how a committee of men would allow such an atrocity to be exhibited in an Autumn Salon. But they were there. Of course they made some poorer painting of the real kind seem much better.⁵

Fred frequently wrote about art and architecture, subjects which concerned him professionally. Lillian's contributions to the diary were often more personal than those of her husband, having to do with the particular concerns of a young-middle-class American woman looking after the needs of her student-husband and small child in one of Europe's most cosmopolitan cities. Her observations frequently were about such family matters as their living arrangements, their child's schooling, and what they ate and wore. In the summer of 1912 she became ill and was hospitalized for a while in Paris. She continued the diary correspondence nevertheless, since by then Fred's studies had begun to occupy most of his time and energies. Lillian made a trip home early in 1913 to await the birth of their second child. She returned to Paris with her children and her mother, who stayed with them briefly, in late September of that year.

Lillian's closet acquaintances were other American women in Paris who shared her conservative values as a young, traditionally educated woman from Upstate New York. One of her diary entries tells of what seemed to her to be inappropriate behavior on the part of an American woman:

...met a Mrs. Evans whose portrait Mrs. Maybee is painting. After tea she said do you mind if I smoke?...Ruth asked her why she did that...till I was some embarrassed. Mrs. Maybee was furious to think she would do such a thing in

⁵GARL, *Lear European Diary*, October 28, 1911. This refers probably to the Salon d'Automn of 1911 when, for the first time, space for cubist paintings was allowed at this official annual exhibition.

~~...~~
 I just showed with the wings of the
 mountain and she began jumping up and
 down. And said something like this.
 "I saw it" - on the street standing there -
 yesterday morning, and they hold it just
 like this. - "and the water
 come out, - a little hole like
 this"

It was a
 surprise.
 It was a
 jump.



...the water
 ...the water
 ...the water

...parents on a treat but got tired
 this time as they were raw and I
 did not know that. It must be
 a terrible of events in the room and
 some hours with a night of show in
 baked with in them here we
 ...

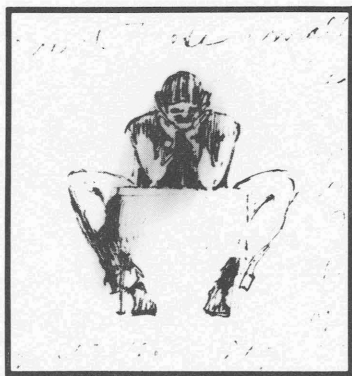
...we have nearly
 from your people. Letter. Can not
 come too fast but as now.

RUTH LEAR
 From a drawing in her father's diary.
 She is now Mrs. Leonard Mowry.

front of a child. That is sort of thing many Americans do when they come to Paris. Do you wonder French or English do not like Americans? We have helped a little bit to change their opinion here in “pension” about those *dreadful Americans*.⁶

Lillian found an activity for herself which was very appropriate to her Parisian surroundings: she began to take lessons in hat-making. Her diary contributions are illustrated from time to time by both her husband and herself with sketches of her creations. Their daughter Ruth, who was often a subject for her father’s diary sketches, attended a French school and became able to converse with her French school-mates in their own language. Lillian and Fred also studied French, and Fred wrote of some of the difficulties met in their efforts at learning the language:

...the lessons were given in a lower grade room of a public school. This was a hard place for “yours truly” trying to get in one of those small seats. The teacher dictated a chapter from a novel and expected us to write it down. Could not get anything I felt certain of so I decided to not try it...We will not go again as the class is too far advanced for us. Mme. Gregoire [their French landlady] volunteered to give us a half-hour lesson in French after “denier” [sic] each evening. This will be fine...⁷



⁶GARL, *Lear European Diary*, January 4, 1912.

⁷GARL, *Lear European Diary*, October 14, 1911.

side. When was under cover to
apple.



...tumbled over like
this under cover.
~~with~~
outer cover

She has had her
white feathers cleaned and
is making some roses of gold by
winding a narrow strip of gold around
a small ball of cotton covered with
blue cloth.



Now completed.

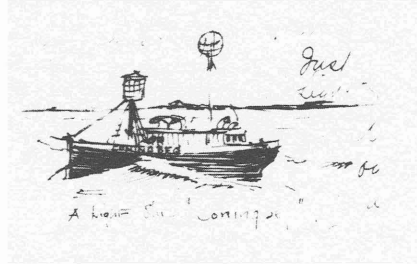
She made
two of gold

and then one of blue-
done. I have done it all
put together they make a combina-
tion which looks something like
this, which is
rather stunning.

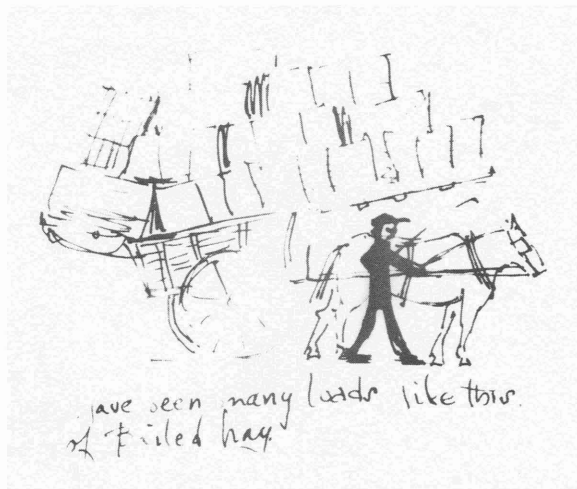
It is not supposed
to be visible under
the hat. Don't you
think she does well?



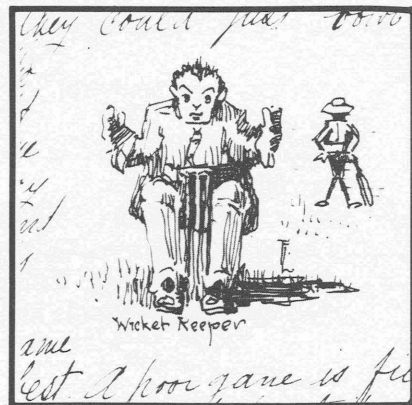
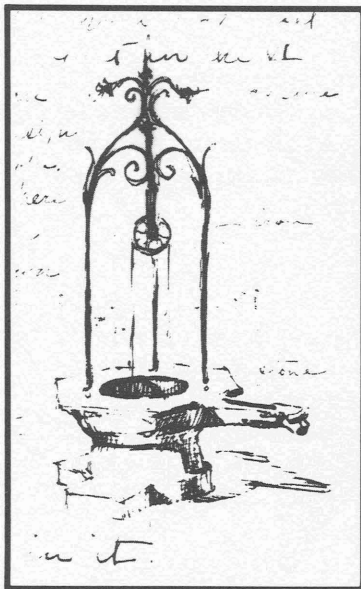
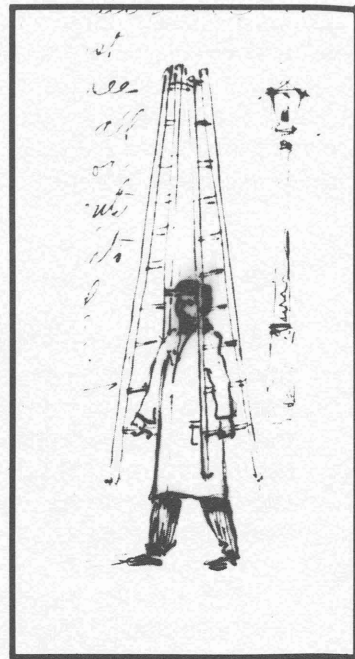
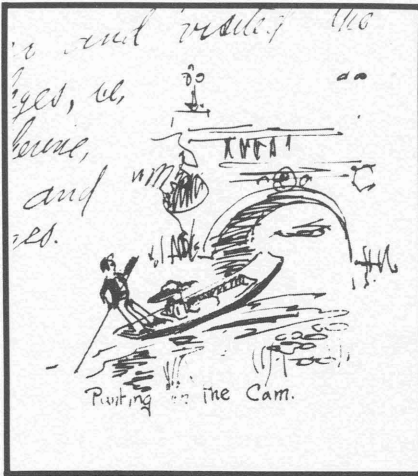
Some of Fred's most entertaining diary contributions are his illustrated descriptions of everyday scenes and activities. His first diary pages, written during the ocean voyage from Boston to Liverpool, are enlivened by drawings — one illustrates the intricacies of a shipboard game, others show views from the deck which appealed to him, such as a lightship off the coast of Ireland.



Before going on to Paris, Fred traveled throughout the southern part of England, all the while including sketches in his diary pages which range from a quick impression of a double-decker London bus to a drawing of a cartload of baled hay. He described a cricket match and a boating trip in one letter, and to that particular page he added sketches of a wicket keeper and of Lillian and himself punting on the River Cam.⁸



⁸The Lears enjoyed boating, and early in their marriage took an extended canoe trip on Upstate New York waterways which Fred described in detail in a little handprinted diary, also a part of the Lear memorabilia in the Arents Library. See *The Courier*, XII, 3, Summer 1975, p. 23, "From Syracuse to Keuka, Mostly by Canoe, in 1907." Edited by David F. Tatham.



Similar drawings, a picturesque shop or a street-lamp trimmer with his ladder, enliven his Paris diary pages. On trips to Italy he included sketches of people in peasant costume. His intricate diary descriptions and sketches suggest that he was fascinated with the way things were put together and with how they worked, from the details of one of Lillian's new hat creations to the operation of a funicular railroad.

Although Fred Lear's sketches are among the most intriguing aspects of the diary, one of his liveliest entries is without illustration. In August, 1914, the Lears left Europe during the first few days of World War I. Fred's vivid description of their adventures escaping via Antwerp, at the last moment, provides a dramatic finish to the diary of their experiences in Europe:

August 1, 1914 [Paris]

Was up at an early hour today...learned that the Belgian trains were leaving on schedule time, but they could not guarantee that they would arrive, but when I learned that there would be absolutely no trains tomorrow, I did not hesitate to go. Then I went to the Red Star Line Office and they told me that "so far as they knew" the Marquette would sail on Aug. 6...

...I started for our tickets. I was never before in such a malicious crowd. They kicked and punched their way toward the windows, hundreds of people trying to secure tickets in time sufficient to serve a third their number. I was nearly crushed, but finally got our tickets.

August 2, 1914 [Antwerp]

...at last we arrived in Antwerp and found our trunks were left at Brussels; but we had a name of a pension and took a carriage there. They first said they could not take us in because of the troubled times; but when I said I had some French gold...she finally decided to take us in for two days, and longer if I could find more ready money...

August 3, 1914

Out in the city early and found the city under martial law...

Went to the Counsel's office to register and take out a citizen paper...if there was any trouble. Hundreds of Americans around his office, most of them without steamboat passage on either the Marquette or [the] Finland and many of them with only the money orders etc., which cannot be cashed. A few actually hungry and in want with checks for hundreds of dollars in their pockets.

August 4, 1914

Down by the docks and found the boat Marquette dismantled, even the dining tables and chairs all removed as she is ordered to England to act as a transport in case England is drawn into the struggle...

Again they have decided to let the Marquette sail, and I went up to the dock and saw them loading up, so they may put off after all.

Cannot change any more French money and still have 150 francs (\$30). There are no trains out of the country. And no more channel boats to England. If the Marquette does not sail we are stuck here...

There were riots on the streets tonight and the troops had a hard time to keep them down. All Germans and Frenchmen were compelled to leave the country before 6 o'clock. Did not stay out tonight because the crowds are too dangerous.

August 5, 1914

Can be glad to have our steamer trunks. Most passengers will arrive on board with only the clothes on their backs. Walked through the older parts of the town near the Cathedral and docks. Saw the restaurants, cafes, and hotels, belonging to the Germans that had been raided by the mobs last night. Nothing but the walls and broken bits of furniture remained...

August 6, 1914

...I went direct to the Red Star Line Office and found they expected the boat to sail. So I got my family down to the dock at noon and we went on board. The boat was to leave at 4 o'clock, but we were delayed a half-hour, while the Belgian water-scout removed four Germans...

At last the Land Captain gave the signal, the bridge was raised and we were in motion. We cheered and all felt happy and relieved...⁹

⁹GARL, *Lear European Diary*, August 1-6, 1914.

Despite harbor mine and U-boat scares, the Marquette made its way safely away from Antwerp, past the south of England, and out into the Atlantic. The Lears arrived in Boston on August 18, 1914.

Modern scholarly interest in pre-World War I Paris usually focuses on the artistic avant-garde. Yet the Lears were a couple whose moderate stance was perhaps a more typical American attitude of the times. Their diary serves as a useful reminder that a conservative reaction to new developments in art and architecture was an important dimension in the total picture of Americans in Paris.

