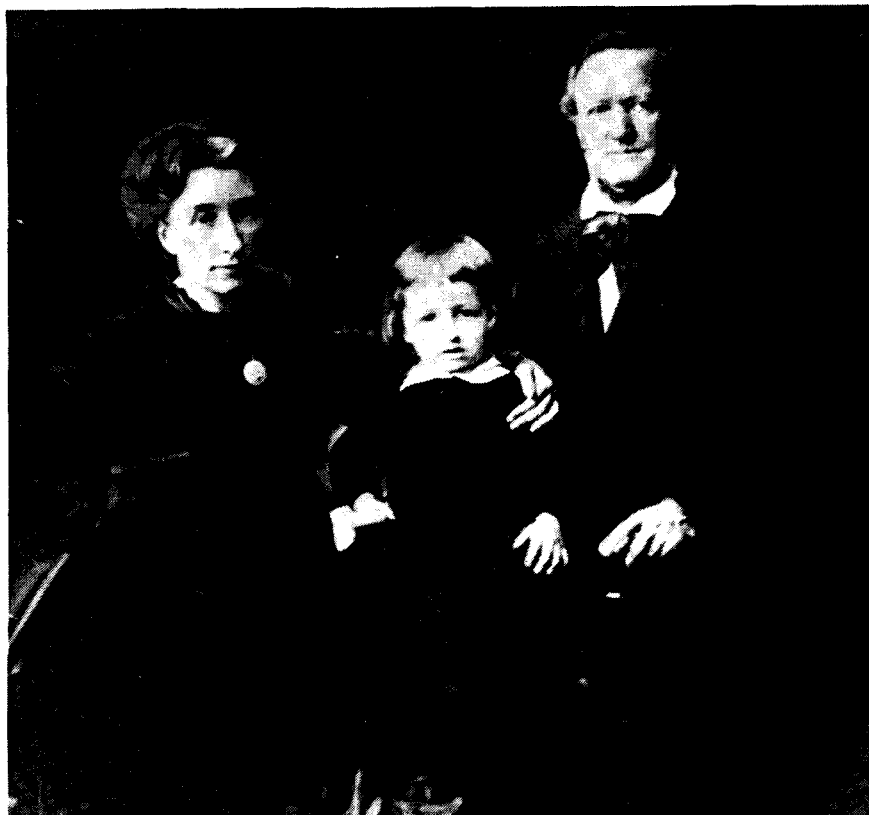


## Days in the Life of Cosima Wagner



Cosima and Richard Wagner with their only son, Siegfried, 1873

### **Cosima Wagner's Diaries: Volume I, 1869–1877**

Translated by Geoffrey Skelton  
Edited and annotated by Martin Gregor-  
Dellin and Dietrich Mack  
Helen and Kurt Wolff/Harcourt  
Brace Jovanovich, 1248 pp., \$24.95

Reviewed by  
Eleanor Perényi

**T**HE PUBLICATION of Cosima Wagner's diaries almost a century after she made the final entry on February 12, 1883, the day before Richard Wagner's death, is an event for Wagnerians, students of 19th-century cultural history, and anyone interested in the morbid psychology of women. Up to now,

only two scholars are known to have examined the journals: Wagner's biographer Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, and du Moulin Eckart, author of Cosima's official biography. For obscure reasons, both inaccurately reproduced much of what they chose to quote. Cosima, who didn't die until 1930 (at the age of 92), could, of course, have corrected the errors and for that matter published the diaries herself. That she didn't was owing to a series of family wrangles and lawsuits that weren't cleared up until 1974—when the transcription of her nearly one million words began. Now we have the English translation by Geoffrey Skelton, and so far as one can judge it is admirably done.

Cosima was the second of Liszt's three bastard children by the Countess

Marie d'Agoult. Virtually abandoned by their parents, they were brought up in Paris by their paternal grandmother. Two of them died young, losses that haunted Cosima for the rest of her life and were in no way compensated by her marriage to Hans von Bülow, a stiff-necked young musician who was devoted to her but had no gift for love. Wagner, 24 years older than she and her father's friend, was a powerful influence on her long before they became lovers. Liszt had been the great promoter of Wagner and "the music of the future" during his tenure as musical director at Weimar; Bülow had early hitched his wagon to Wagner's star. Unhappily married and feeling herself very much the foreigner in Germany, Cosima naturally fell into Wagner's clutches.

Women, she had been brought up to believe, had no higher function than to serve as priestesses at the altar of art, and neglect had given her a low opinion of her own worth. As a girl she was considered plain, though in fact she was an elegant creature, and a gifted person in her own right. All this Wagner saw. He loved her for herself, but still more as the daughter of Liszt—toward whom his feelings were compounded of admiration and jealousy. He wanted her, and what Wagner wanted he was accustomed to feel he must have, no matter what the human cost. Cosima, who had never before been made to feel indispensable, gave herself without hesitation.

The diaries begin on January 1, 1869, a few weeks after Cosima joined Wagner for good at Tribschen, a villa on the Vierwaldstätter Lake, just outside Lucerne. She brought with her two daughters, Isolde and Eva, whom Bülow pretended to believe were his and who bore his name, and she was pregnant with Siegfried, her third child by Wagner, and only son. (Two older daughters who were legitimately Bülow's were soon to arrive.) Already the lovers were a public scandal. Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner's patron, was so

From Cosima Wagner's Diaries

embarrassed by the whole affair he hardly knew how to proceed with the productions of Wagner's operas in Munich. Liszt was furious at "the moral murder of Hans" and steered clear of them for several years. Aware of all this, Cosima set to work if not to expunge the record—which was hardly possible—at least to justify it, first to her children, then by extension to the world at large.

So, we have, on the one hand, her daily hand-wringing at the grief she has caused Bülow, and on the other her eulogies of the demigod for whose sake no sacrifice could be too great. (It must be said that Bülow shared this view—he was the gentleman-martyr *par excellence*.) The result is as morally suspect as such *mea culpas* generally are. "Passion dies," wrote Liszt in response to one of her complaints, "but the pangs of conscience remain." The diary records her outrage: "What a superficial judgment! As if my coming to R. had been an act of passion, and as if I could ever feel pangs of conscience on that account! How little my father knows me, after all!—How willingly would I give up any sort of joy if I knew but one being to whom I could entrust R.'s isolated life!" One is reminded of those politicians who run for office only to save the country. In Cosima's letters to Bülow she made clear what a wretched husband he was and how right she was to leave him. They make pleasanter reading than the flights of hypocrisis in the diary. She abased herself before Wagner, but those who knew her well recognized her ruthlessness. To Liszt, she was always *ma terrible fille*, and with reason.

The problem with Cosima's journals is in fact her strong will. Sooner or later, most diarists give the show away whether they mean to or not, and that is their charm. But Cosima was no Boswell. Her object was to create a legend, not to elucidate one. That was Wagner's object too, and it can be fascinating to watch them in collaboration. Wagner as she enters his study with the baby in her arms: "To create beauty from beauty!" Cosima when he plays her a fragment from *Tristan*: "[It] so pierced my heart that I was quite unable to write a short note...." (His music invariably made her swoon.) Wagner was of course such an outsized personage that it is almost impossible to write dully about him—even his dreams, which he told her every morning at breakfast, are more amusing than most people's. The details of their household, too, are interesting. Will the dog Kos be returned safely from the veterinarian? We read on to find

out, only to realize that such minutiae are really all that Cosima has to add to our store of knowledge concerning Wagner. Something is missing, and it is a huge something.

The reader who begins here would never guess that Wagner was one of the monsters in the world of music. His vicious anti-Semitism does, to be sure, appear. Cosima records their pleasure when the audience at a Wagner concert utters the dread "Hepp, hepp!" (the cry of the pogrom) at some Jews who are protesting his pamphlet *Jewry in Music*; and we are treated to a number of lectures on this repulsive subject. We get, too, glimpses of his sudden, shameless courting of Prussia when he perceived, almost too late, that German imperialism was the wave of the future. His financial dealings, bordering on the criminal; his treachery and ingratitude toward everyone who tried to help him; his emotional chicanery—all these are glossed over or ignored. Cosima took Wagner's word for it that he was a persecuted man and never asked herself whether there might be a reason. Proper wifely behavior perhaps (they were married shortly after Siegfried's birth) but a loss to those who want something more than confirmation that 19th-century women had quite a hard time of it.

Scholars, for example, are going to be disappointed at the scamping of the Wagner-Nietzsche relationship, which was central to the development of Nietzsche's thought. What, they have wondered, was the real story behind the philosopher's flight from Bayreuth in the summer of 1875? Cosima scarcely touches on the episode—nor on the last meeting of the two men at Sorrento, when Nietzsche's disillusionment was complete. No longer useful as a propagandist for Bayreuth, he simply fell by the wayside. In the end, Cosima's egotism and inhumanity came to resemble those of Wagner himself. Left alone to manage Bayreuth, she became a tyrant, and it is no great wonder that her descendants were delighted to receive the Fuehrer.

I mention these points because it isn't the translator's job to second-guess his subject, and Geoffrey Skelton hasn't done so, either in his notes or his introduction. A crib is therefore needed if the otherwise uninformed reader is to make sense of Cosima's story. I recommend Robert Gutman's *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind and His Music* by way of setting the record straight. ●

Eleanor Perényi's latest book is *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1974).

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## Against the Law

### The Million Dollar Lawyers

by Joseph C. Goulden  
Putnam's, 346 pp., \$10.95

Reviewed by Alan Barth

JOSEPH GOULDEN closed his earlier book, *The Superlawyers* (1972), by quoting Shakespeare's Dick the Butcher: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers." He closes his new book, *The Million Dollar Lawyers*, by quoting himself as saying to a friend: "As you know, I'm not anti-lawyer—I just think they foul up a lot of things for the rest of us." To which his friend replies, "Well, why not just say they'd better get off our toes and stop making society so damnably complex? The way I read what you've written, they're more interested in their damned fees and their little courtroom games than they are in justice. For one, I'm tired of it. Damned tired of it, and I think lots of other people are also."

"I thought about that statement for a while," Goulden concludes. "'You're right,' I said. 'So I think I'll leave out the ersatz political philosophy and say just that.'"

Well, Goulden went ahead and said just that. But it isn't enough, really. *The*

*Million Dollar Lawyers* leaves out of account the numberless lawyers who honorably counsel widows and settle estates and guide businessmen through the intricacies of anti-trust laws and compassionately arrange divorces and write viable contracts and render a score of other services to a society grown inescapably complex without the contrivance of lawyers.

There is much truth in what Goulden says, of course, and it is truth worth telling. But it can hardly be considered a revelation that to most lawyers their work is a way of making a living—and they get the most they can out of it.

Goulden accomplishes the limited task he sets for himself by recounting a long succession of lawsuits and court trials that have taken place in the past decade or so. These tales are for the most part interesting and significant, disclosing a great deal about the myriad ways in which time and energy and money are wasted—often deliberately—by resorting to the rituals and amenities and subterfuges of the law. These tales, told with verve and sophistication, are carefully researched by a writer who knows where to look and what to look for.

*The Million Dollar Lawyers*, Goulden tells us at the outset, "is composed of disparate but interlocking sections. The first treats two sorts of cases in which the ordinary citizen is apt to find him-

self involved at one point or another during his lifetime: divorce or personal injury. The next discusses what could be called the 'stock market lawyers,' and how their mumbo jumbo, recited in total unison with their cousins, the brokers, affects the truth of what we are told about the bonds and securities in which some 26 million of us have invested our funds. Then we explore the special problems involved when large corporations—in this instance, IBM and Telex—heave and snort at one another in multimillion-dollar litigation. Finally, there is a look at a new specter known as legal malpractice."

The book begins with a string of exceedingly seamy and sordid divorce cases in which the legal gladiators seem to be much more like shysters than million-dollar lawyers. Divorce actions are often complicated by terrible personal bitterness that leads to the cruelest and most shameful sorts of accusation by persons once presumably in love and linked by vows of fidelity. "Divorce," an unidentified Dallas lawyer says to Goulden, "is inherently acrimonious, and people who have fought and hated one another for years see the proceeding as their 'last chance to take a shot at the SOB.'"

In the next section Goulden tells us a great deal about personal-injury suits—how they are prepared, how settlements are negotiated. Personal injury suits are hardly a pleasanter form of lawyering than divorce cases, but they can be immensely profitable.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Goulden's book is his detailed account of the infinitely intricate and protracted lawsuit brought by the Telex Corporation against the International Business Machines Corporation. His reduction of this complicated contest to a degree of comprehensibility is an achievement of no mean proportion, and demonstrates how skilled a reporter he can be. It also demonstrates Goulden's point—how lawyers batten on the rivalries of giant corporations.

"In 1955," Goulden tells us, "IBM retained only nine in-house lawyers in its domestic and corporate headquarters. In March 1975, according to vice-president and general counsel Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, the domestic staff was up to 105 full-time attorneys.... There are another 96 attorneys on IBM's foreign staff.... This doesn't begin the count, however. The New York firm of Cravath, Swaine & Moore, which is IBM's chief outside counsel in the anti-trust cases, has upwards of 50 lawyers working full-time on IBM on any given day." Even the greenest of these lawyers is paid over \$20,000 a year.