

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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*Elizabeth Robins Pennell: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dave Buchanan and Kimberley Morse Jones. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 284 pgs.

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<1>Elizabeth Robins Pennell was a prolific writer in multiple fields, and so her work is a rich subject for scholarship. The essays within *Elizabeth Robins Pennell: Critical Essays* explore her diverse outputs. Edited by Dave Buchanan and Kimberley Morse Jones, the collection is the first grouping of essays dedicated to Pennell, seeking to showcase her as “interdisciplinary long before the word existed” (6). The essays are grouped depending on Pennell’s subject, and each tackles a different sub-theme or critical approach within that theme, with an impressive depth of range and consistently rigorous analysis.

<2>The first two chapters, from Dave Buchanan and James Diedrick, consider Pennell’s life writing. Buchanan’s chapter moves throughout Pennell’s career, exploring Pennell’s complicated relationship with writerly authority. At times she used pseudonyms, or gave her husband Joseph credit for her work, “playing the role” of “junior female assistant” (20), while she later “play[ed] the role of bold authorial presence in the spotlight” (28). Buchanan provocatively argues that Pennell “played the role” of expert in certain fields (travel and food writing, biography) but shied away from it in her art criticism and cycling columns: areas in which she was less comfortable. This suggests another layer to Pennell’s skills: not only was she a gifted writer, but she adopted performances to craft her reputation. Inevitably, this meant Pennell did not always receive adequate credit, and Buchanan ends by declaring that Pennell’s reluctance leaves it “up to others, beginning with the voices in this collection, to do it for her,” setting the scene for the essays that follow (28). Diedrick turns to Pennell’s *The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1884), which was altered without Pennell’s consent by John H. Ingram. Diedrick demonstrates that Pennell overcame the subsequent negative reception of her book and situates Pennell’s shifting relationship with Wollstonecraft in the context of “the contentious gender politics of late-Victorian England” (36). He notes that, unlike many of her female contemporaries, Pennell did not share Wollstonecraft’s radicalism and gradually

viewed her more conservatively. Pennell recast Wollstonecraft's views to suggest she did not argue for the emancipated woman, and Diedrick contrasts this with the rethinking of gender undertaken by women like Olive Schreiner. Ultimately, Diedrick mobilises the disparate responses to Wollstonecraft through the lens of Pennell's shifting attitudes to "productively complicate our understanding of late-century feminism" (52).

<3>The next essays turn to Pennell's cycle writing. Una Brogan considers the intertextual relationship between Pennell's *Our Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1888) and Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1767) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). While Brogan admits that Pennell's sarcasm and practicality rendered her unable to recreate a truly sentimental journey, she argues that Pennell's desire to "carve out a place for cyclists as respectable members of society" (78) and the "moments of sheer joy" expressed about journeying connect the two authors (74). Both Sterne and Pennell depict travel using a portfolio of intertextuality, but it is this emotional aspect that forges their strongest link (75). Brogan's piece uses Sterne to illuminate how Pennell mobilised her literary knowledge to establish a new mode of tourism. Pennell's sarcasm is the focus of Buchanan's second chapter: he explores her role as contrarian in *Over the Alps on a Bicycle* (1898). Bad-temperedness rather than euphoria sets the tone, and Buchanan suggests that Pennell adopts the radical literary decision to write against the pro-Swiss exaltations of Rousseau and Ruskin, instead aligning herself with the less-enamoured Shelley, Twain and Byron. Perhaps the most interesting part of Buchanan's chapter is where he highlights Pennell's contradiction of her earlier attitude towards cycling: she turns from beauty towards glory, from aesthetics to athletics. This change of heart "is the most outrageous component of Pennell's contrarian performance: playing against type – against herself, in fact" (102). As in his initial chapter, Buchanan's idea of Pennell as literary performer unlocks her nuanced adaptation of both literary tradition and her own position as a writer.

<4>Holly A. Laird and Christine Bachman-Sanders discuss Pennell's *To Gipsyland* (1892). Laird sets Pennell's quest to become a scholar-gypsy within the nineteenth-century fascination with Romani origins, represented by the writings of George Borrow and Matthew Arnold. Paying attention to the language Pennell uses to describe the Roma and herself, Laird concludes that Pennell's romanticised desire to find herself and "the real gypsy" is undercut by modernity. Capitalism and tourism erode the Roma lifestyle Pennell seeks, but she "still seems oblivious to the role played by her own tourism in the Roma's loss of freedom" (125). Pennell's problematic misunderstanding and Orientalist approach to Roma culture is the subject of Bachman-Sanders's chapter: she convincingly argues that *To*

*Gipsyland* reinforced narratives of white supremacy. Bachman-Sanders unravels the “unexpected ways that domination can be expressed,” highlighting that Pennell’s desire for intimacy with the Roma carried an “imperialist nostalgia” that racially fetishized them (146, 147). By reading *To Gipsyland* through a theoretic lens that draws upon Edward Said, among others, Bachman-Sanders emphasises the harm perpetuated by writers who “harmlessly” explore different cultures without recognising their own complicity within forms of domination.

<5>The next three chapters proffer the most delicious section of the collection, as Alex Wong, Bonnie Shishko and Alice L. McLean focus on Pennell’s food writing. Wong considers the playful, ironic style of Pennell’s *Feasts of Autolycus* (1896), analysing it as “an exercise of the gastronomic imagination” that is influenced by Pennell’s gastronomic forbears – Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de le Reynière – and by more unexpected figures including Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater (157). Wong discusses how Pennell’s “recipes” explored the “tension between gross appetite and elegant gastronomic connoisseurship” and parodied (and therefore established a relationship with) the popular aesthetic and decadent writings of the time (167). This intertextual play allows Pennell to skirt “potential embarrassments” while indulging her love of food and writing about it (169). Shishko considers the same essays, published in America as *The Delights of Delicate Eating* (1901), but foregrounds Pennell’s approach to “food as works of visual art” (173). Analysing Pennell’s evocative, visual descriptions of different dishes, Shishko coins the term “culinary ekphrasis” to explain how Pennell’s culinary writing “constructed in the reader’s imagination images of dishes to be made and consumed in the future” (181). This artistic rhetoric, Shishko argues, transposed Pennell’s “formalist critical gaze” onto ingredients, framing them as “formal elements of an imagined painting” (182). Shishko draws our attention to these intertwined strands of Pennell’s career – art criticism and food writing – making a case for Pennell’s interdisciplinarity even “in the structure of the domestic recipe” (185). McLean then extends Shishko’s argument, discussing the influence of gastronomic literature and the performing arts on Pennell by highlighting the allusions to gastronomic writers, painters, poets, and playwrights that peppered Pennell’s culinary writings. Taking inspiration from these sources and using “luxurious, lyrical language” to situate herself in gastronomic tradition, McLean argues that Pennell subverted the typical expectations of domestic women’s recipes, creating a space where women could take pleasure in eating (200). This reimagining of the recipe was not straightforward, however, and Pennell struggled to “jettison the messy ends of eating from her prose” (208). McLean concludes, however, that instances where “the cooking woman” appears in Pennell’s essays “signified a cultural shift” where women were liberated from the confines of the domestic cookbook, and the domestic cookbook took its place in gastronomic

discourse (209). The essays on Pennell's evocative recipes thus emphasise the culture of art and gastronomy she situated herself within, and the way that she challenged the typical expectations of nineteenth-century women's food writing.