

ARTICLE

Elizabeth Robins Pennell (1855–1936): Pioneer Bicycle Tourist in Italy, Travel Writer, and Cycling Advocate for Women

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SUMMARY

In 1896 Susan B. Anthony wrote that bicycling had done more than anything else for women's emancipation. Elizabeth Robins Pennell exemplifies this assertion in both her personal life and professional accomplishments. Born and raised in Victorian Philadelphia, Robins Pennell "discovered" the world through her husband and collaborator, Joseph Pennell, an avid cyclist and brilliant illustrator, with whom she lived in London for over thirty years. Touring Italy by bicycle, Robins Pennell is probably the first woman who pedaled from Florence to Rome in 1884. She recounted this trip and several others taken with her husband on a tricycle and, eventually, on "safety bicycles" in France, England and Eastern Europe with vivid and detailed descriptions. She also became known as a keen art critic, a collector and writer of cookbooks, and a biographer of family members and friends. Her extensive autobiography left us with many details of her life and work. One of the accomplishments that made her most proud was to have been the first woman to cross over nine Alpine passes on a bicycle, with six being climbed in one week!

KEYWORDS: Elizabeth Robins Pennell – women's cycling – pioneer cyclist – cycling in Italy – touring cyclist – travelogue writer – bicycle advocate – women's sports – nineteenth-century women

Let me tell you what I think about bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel. It gives her a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. It makes her feel as if she were independent.

—Susan B. Anthony (cited in Bly 10)

The genre of travel writing offers no set format for writers to recount the details of their voyages. There are in fact "a thousand forms and formulas from which to choose when writing the account of a trip, whether [she] intends to publish [her] account or not" (Percy G. Adams, cited in Monga 50). It is understood, however, that a good travelogue places itself between a mere listing and description of places visited and a totally subjective personal narrative. There also seems to be a consensus that men and women travel writers generally "see" the travel experience differently and therefore describe aspects of it in distinct ways. In the nineteenth century Lady Eastlake suggested that travel accounts by men "are to do with What and Where, and women's with How and Why" (Jane Robinson, cited in Monga 32). Modern scholars have suggested that women's travel

narratives are less directed, less goal-oriented, less imperialistic, and more concerned with people than places. Siegel states that such assertions are hard to prove (4–5).

The word ‘travel’ supposedly originates from the Latin word “tripalium,” described as a torture instrument with three stakes (tres-pali) and used originally to tie up horses being shoed (Schriber xiii). From “to put to torture,” “to vex” or “weary oneself,” the word evolved in English into the meaning of “travel,” whereas in some Romance languages the word still implies stress or “labor,” as in childbirth (Monga 11–12). Probably because of the physical hardship associated with any sort of mobility from ancient times to the early twentieth century, women were not only “protected” from travel, but denied it altogether. They were left waiting, either for a stranger “to come to town” or for a lover’s or husband’s return. Morris notes that “the language of sexual initiation is oddly similar to the language of travel,” in the suggestion that both the feminine body and the globe are open to exploration by adventurers, who, historically, have been men (xv).

For centuries the social pressure on women to remain “at home” was exemplified by their coeval dress codes. The corsets that women wore throughout centuries had metal bindings that, as Morris remarks, were appropriately called “stays,” since women wearing them were unable to go very far (xvi). Men’s literature is replete with what Kristi Siegel calls “the rhetoric of peril,” which tells of girls and women whose attempts to escape the constraints of domestic life end tragically. From the misadventures of Little Red Riding Hood to the fateful consequences of Helen’s trip to Troy, to Medea fleeing with Jason, and Ariadne with Theseus, male narratives of women straying from home depict disasters and horrors (Siegel 55; Monga 30).

Despite such dire warnings and strong social pressure to remain bound to their homes, more and more British and American upper- and middle-class women undertook the perils of travel in the nineteenth century, with a remarkable increase in the third quarter of the century. In 1890 a Mrs. John Sherwood wrote that there were “more than eleven thousand [American] virgins who semi-yearly migrate to the shores of England and France” in order to shop, socialize with European nobility or bask in the sun or by watering holes (Schriber, xii). Notwithstanding the increase in women wanderers, long-standing misogynist prejudices were still common, as expressed in the following anonymous poem from the 1893 issue of *The Punch*:

A lady an explorer? A traveler in skirts?
The notion’s just a trifle too seraphic;
Let them stay and mind the babies, or hem our ragged shirts,
But they mustn’t, can’t, and shan’t be geographic. (Monga 32)

After 1850 women had started questioning the patriarchal ideology of gender that had permeated Western culture and had defined the roles and behavior of men and women from its onset. More women were demanding access to basic civil rights and male-dominated professions, or were forming associations on behalf of different causes, such as temperance and abolition of slavery in the United States. It is reported that toward the end of the century a woman who rejected conventional female roles, asserted her right to a career or to a public voice and power, and “laid claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men” was labelled a New Woman (Carroll Smith-Rosenberg cited in Schriber xvi).

Elizabeth Robins Pennell was an unlikely candidate to become a New Woman, but circumstances in her life and a deep-seated sense of adventure made her the partner in a couple that

toured all over Europe on a tricycle or a bicycle between 1884 and 1900. This study will focus on Elizabeth Robins Pennell as a writer of articles, promoting cycling as a healthy and easy sport, and of travelogues, with particular attention given to her account of the 1884 trip which was titled in her book *Two Pilgrims' Progress, from Fair Florence to the Eternal City of Rome*. Elizabeth also wrote about art, cookbooks, recipes, and famous people, and she left an extensive autobiography. In order to better understand Robins Pennell's writings, I will present the main events of her life as they influenced her work.

Born in 1855 in predominantly Quaker and Protestant Philadelphia, Elizabeth Robins spent eleven years in a Catholic convent where her widowed father left her and her sister in the nuns' care until they were seventeen. As she wrote in her autobiography, Elizabeth was trained, like all the other girls in the convent, in faith and good manners, rather than being academically educated, since at that time "it was unfeminine, if not unladylike, to be too learned," and girls were taught to find a husband as soon as possible to help them cope with the evil world outside the convent (*Our Philadelphia* 94–104). In her account of the time she spent in the convent with Robins, Agnes Reppelier describes, forty years later, young Elizabeth with light blue eyes, dark skin and hair, as the undisputed leader of their group of six young girls, due in part to her "biting dryness" and her propensity to consider the pragmatic aspect of every situation (88, 38, 6). In the plays often performed in the convent by the young students, Elizabeth's performance was always technically excellent, although, according to Reppelier, the "unemotional rendering of the most heroic sentiments chilled the hearers' hearts" (40).

Only as an adult, Elizabeth Robins was able, as she writes, to shake off her respect for Philadelphia conventions as to "relieve the dullness of my life by straying from the Philadelphia beaten track" (126). Such a beaten track, for a Philadelphian girl, meant going through the long ritual of "coming out" in society by taking "humiliating" private dancing lessons, as Robins defined them, attending parties with the same "boring" people and following shallow social practices. As she recounts the events of her youth, the older Elizabeth Robins denigrates these and other "foolish" Philadelphian customs, such as limiting the access to the Philadelphian Assembly to the male members of long-standing city families. She comments, with wry humor, how she felt excluded from the center of political life in her city: "It was an injustice that oppressed me with a sense of my wrongs as a woman and might have sent me window-smoking had window-smoking as a protest been invented" (165).

The 1876 Centennial Exhibition, held in Philadelphia, was for Robins like "a violent upheaval shaking the universe to the foundations" by putting her in contact with people who led different lives and uncovering undreamed options (205, 209). After her dismissal from the convent, circumstances and customs, together with what she calls a natural indolence, kept her at home with her father, who was firmly anchored in Victorian practices in the matter of gender roles.

Robins' uncle, Leland, changed her life. In 1880 he came back to the US, having lived in England for ten years. Realizing both Elizabeth's restlessness and potential, Leland encouraged her to find a creative outlet. He first suggested that she try her hand at drawing, and when that effort

proved unsuccessful, that she write under his tutelage. Writing seemed to suit Elizabeth's talents and her father's concern that she not work away from home. In order to put Elizabeth Robins Pennell's contribution within the literary scene of her society it is helpful to know that by 1872, or about eight years before Robins started writing and publishing articles for literary and art magazines, three quarters of all novels published in the United States were written by women (Coultrap-McQuin 2). *Atlantic Monthly*, the magazine that published Robins' first article and had celebrated its twentieth anniversary a few years before, counted several women among its contributors. Women writers and journalists were, however, almost invisible to the general public, although their texts enjoyed a larger and larger readership. Such an ambiguous state of semi-private, semi-public roles for women writers found the approval of society, but it left them in an awkward position. Although research shows that the most successful women writers received equal or similar compensation as their male peers, the opinion that women writers were just "scribbling away" persisted for a long time.

The first essay that Robins submitted for publication, in 1881, "Mischief in the Middle Ages," dealt with a subject inspired by her eclectic uncle, who encouraged her to always do extensive research before writing. The essay was first rejected by *Lippincott Magazine*, but accepted by *The Atlantic Monthly*, whose editor asked Robins for further submissions. She felt great pride for this success, which, looking back, may have been exaggerated, as she describes in her autobiography: "I saw the world at my feet, where, to my sorrow, I have never seen it since that first fine moment of elation" (*Our Philadelphia* 244).

It was through a commission by *The Century Magazine* to write the narrative for drawings on different aspects of old Philadelphia that Elizabeth Robins met the illustrator Joseph Pennell. This collaboration was the beginning of a symbiotic partnership that lasted over forty years and that included illustrated texts on travel, art, biography, and autobiography. The first article to come out of their collaboration was published in March 1882 as "A Ramble in Old Philadelphia." This first experience prepared Elizabeth and Joseph for their travels to several regions in Europe in the following two decades in the new and novel mode of traveling by bicycle and tricycle. Robins provides few details on the evolution of their romance, a consequence perhaps of her Philadelphian upbringing, as she writes in her memoir: "Always I have been shy in expressing emotion of any kind" (293). She depicts their decision to marry, hastened by the offer they received from *The Century Magazine* to work in Europe, in the following terms: "When our walks together had become too strong a habit to be broken . . . we decided to make the habit one for life, . . . we planned work for the long years we hoped were ahead of us" (300-01). Before they were able to go to Europe, they had to resolve the logistical problems around their union, which included Joseph being "expelled from the (Quaker) Meeting house" because of his marriage to a Catholic and a priest refusing to marry them because of Robins' "revolt against church discipline." They finally resorted to a desperate appeal to the mayor to marry them before their departure, "a horrid breach of decorum in the Philly of those remote days" (*The Life and Letters*, 13-14).

Elizabeth and Joseph greatly enjoyed traveling, writing and drawing. The many commissions they received jointly and separately from several British and American magazines during forty years of work allowed them to travel extensively and earn a decent living. Robins soon overcame the Victorian concern and taboo of women working outside the home and repeatedly expressed admiration for women journalists and writers, while becoming a prolific writer and journalist herself. One of her first long commissions was to write the biography of Mary

Wollstonecraft (1759–97), a strong advocate of women’s rights and well-recognized author, which confirmed Robins Pennell’s conviction that women had the right to follow their desires, and reinforced her strong interest in recounting people’s lives and accomplishments. Later Robins Pennell would write biographies of her husband, her uncle Leland, and, in collaboration with Joseph, a biography of their friend, the painter James Whistler. Through the guidance of her uncle and her husband, through endless conversations with artists, and innumerable visits to European art galleries and shows, Robins Pennell became a keen critic of art. Critics now agree that she “advanced the most progressive ideas with regard to contemporary art in England, and as such she deserves more attention and appreciation” (Morse Jones 138).

A less known aspect of Robins Pennell’s life and work regards her interest in collecting first (or older) editions of cookbooks. She became interested in them in part because, as she admitted, she had always been blessed with a “healthy appetite, a decent sense of discrimination in satisfying it, and also a deep interest in the Philosophy of Food” (*Our Philadelphia* 414). By the end of her life, Robins Pennell had a collection of 433 cookery books, which she left to the Library of Congress. She also believed and wrote that “what a man is depends a good deal on what he eats” and cites approvingly the story of how Benjamin Franklin admitted that he would rather discover a recipe for making Parmesan cheese in an Italian town than ancient inscriptions (417–18). For five years in the 1890s Robins wrote a column on food, cooking and recipes in the British *Pall Mall Gazette*. In 1896 some of these articles were collected in a book under the title *The Feasts of Autolycus*, which was reprinted in 1901 and again in 2000 under the title *The Delights of Delicate Eating*.

Robins Pennell’s strong personality shows the prejudices of her time, her culture and her social upbringing. In her writings she expresses disdain or spite against “the aliens,” defined largely as anyone not born in Philadelphia (or, more often, anyone not American-born), and the Jews who, according to her, were degrading the quality of living in Philadelphia. She was critical of any change in the architecture, the gardens and the social construct of Philadelphia which was altering forever what she described later as her “beautiful, peaceful town where roses bloomed in the sunny backyards and people lived in dignity behind the plain red brick fronts of the long narrow streets” (*Our Philadelphia* 541). By the same token, during forty years of travel, she recounted being upset at the changes occurring in Italy and France due to the increasing number of tourists, now in their cars, who visited those countries.

Robins Pennell embodies an ambiguous dichotomy in the history of women’s emancipation: although following Victorian practices such as wearing long skirts, long-sleeved blouses and hat, as she appears in her husband’s illustrations, she assumes unconventional roles, such as becoming a prolific and innovative art critic, a profession still dominated by men, and embracing the sport of cycling, still in its infancy and practiced by a relatively small number of women. As one of the first women to tour by tricycle or bicycle all over Europe and over the highest peaks of the Alps, she elicited surprise and admiration in fellow travelers and residents. One of the reasons for this general wonderment was, as Joseph recalls, her peculiar way of stopping her bicycle, “by letting it run down in smaller and smaller circles, then sitting down herself in the center, with the front wheel sticking up in front of her.” He recounts how she performed this act before Mark Twain, “who could only remark, by way of greeting, ‘Lord Almighty’” (Clark 121–22).

Tinker, the author of a short biography of both Pennells, thus summarizes their contribution to the diffusion of culture and knowledge: “She with her books and he with his drawings have done

more than any other two people I know to spread in America a popular knowledge of the art of the old world, of the everyday life of its people, of the beauty of its countryside and of the architectural loveliness of its cities” (28). The Pennells returned to the United States at the start of World War I and settled in New York, where Joseph died in 1926 and Elizabeth in 1936.

Both Elizabeth Robins and Joseph Pennell, avid cyclists themselves, wrote articles in numerous magazines and publications, especially in the 1890s, to promote cycling as a wholesome activity. In July 1894 Robins Pennell wrote the article “Cycling” for *St. Nicholas*, a magazine for young people, aged five to eighteen, in which nonfiction articles were written in an adult style and were meant to provide a window to the world for young readers. In her article, Robins Pennell shares her opinions on, and her experiences with, cycling, which, she notes, has grown “in a little more than ten years into one of the most popular pastimes of the day,” with hundreds of cycling clubs and thousands of cyclists in America and in England (733). She then describes the advantages of cycling over other sports: it allows one to go almost everywhere there are roads at the desired speed, to breathe the “pure, sweet air” in the countryside, and to see a country in a thorough way, as she did when touring in Italy, England and France (733). She continues by describing the various types of bicycles available, such as the ordinary tall bicycle, which, she writes with bravado, “if I were a boy I would ride nothing else,” even with all the risks of falling that bike presents (735). Answering the hypothetical question of a girl on how one should mount a bicycle, she recognizes the difficulty of riding a “safety” bicycle with skirts, but suggests the use of the new “safety attachment” that keeps the bicycle still for mounting (736). In the last part of the article she gives practical and detailed advice on how to mount the above-mentioned cycles, as well as stressing the importance of learning the nuts and bolts of these “machines.”

Robins Pennell suggests that her readers take regular care of their bicycle and reminds them that the aim of cycling is not racing, but “to ride *well*, to see, know and love the country through which you wheel” (739). After affirming the benefits and pleasures of cycling, she recommends that her readers learn “the history and the romance of other days” during such journeys, since “the world is one great book of beauty and romance; and on your cycle you can gradually master it, chapter by chapter, volume by volume” (739).

Above all, in her advocacy for cycling, Robins Pennell targeted women. She wrote a chapter to that effect in the book *Ladies in the Field*, edited by Lady Greville in 1894, with other contributions by women writers. In this book, which includes chapters such as “(Horse) Riding in Ireland and India,” “Hunting in the Shires,” “A Kangaroo Hunt,” and “Tiger Shooting,” the item on “Cycling” clearly stands out for the novelty of the sport described and Robins Pennell’s strong encouragement for women to become regular cyclists. In her preface, Lady Greville lauds every type of sports, which women now share with men, and which make women healthier without decreasing their femininity. Bound to the Victorian culture of domesticity, Lady Greville sees women’s objective in sports as refining men’s “coarser ways” and language, and becoming “bright and cheerful companions” to men (iv).

Robins Pennell takes a much broader view than Lady Greville on the role of sports in women’s lives, as she writes at the onset of her article that women should, just like men, take their amusements very seriously. After affirming that, for her, cycling is the most satisfactory of all sports, she gives a short history of tricycles and bicycles and comments on women being interested in those “machines” since their first appearance. She describes her own experiences with cycling, first in England, and then in Italy in 1884, and praises the safety bicycle with a dropped frame as the

“greatest invention of all” and perfectly suited for women (247–250). While she encourages women to take lessons at one of the many bicycle schools, she also provides detailed information on how to mount and steer one of those “machines.” As for the appropriate dress for a woman cyclist, she advises “a grey tweed” as gown with “a linen or thin flannel blouse and jacket” in the summer and, in all seasons, a felt hat. For underwear she recommends “wool next to the skin,” and the choice between knickerbockers or a short petticoat, as also suggested in various documents issued by the Cyclist Touring Club for its women members (259).

The issue of the proper attire for women who wished better mobility than the one allowed by the conventional Victorian clothing had haunted women for at least the last fifty years, since the day Mrs. Bloomer had offered her eponymous wide pants as contribution to the Dress Reform movement. Surprised by the scandal among the wider public at the appearance of women in bloomers, even the most liberal women had repudiated the pants as a plausible option. In 1896, two years after the publication of Robins Pennell’s essay on bicycling for women, Susan B. Anthony, in the same interview in which she praised bicycling, expounded on the need for change in women’s clothes in the following terms:

I think the newer and better woman, the self-helpful and self-reliant woman, needs clothing that is more suited to her getting about than are the fashions today. I don’t endorse hideous clothes merely because they are less cumbersome, but I think woman must evolve something that will give her freedom in clothes and yet not make her an object of ridicule. (cited in Bly10)

Robins Pennell did not adopt bloomers or knickerbockers, but adapted her Victorian skirt to fit her cycling needs. In her essay on “Cycling” she shares with her readers the device she uses to prevent long skirts from getting caught in the spokes: a row of safety hooks around the waistband of her skirt, and a row of eyes on the skirt itself about a foot below. As she explains, she hooks her skirt up before mounting her bicycle and starts pedaling “with an easy mind, knowing there is absolutely nothing to catch anywhere” (260–61). Her lyrical description of a woman enjoying a ride in the countryside is a real ode to cycling:

What stronger inducement could [the touring wheel-woman] have? Hers is all the joy of motion, not to be under-estimated, and of long days in the open air; all the joys and adventure and change. Hers is the delightful sense of independence and power, the charm of seeing the country in the only way in which it can be seen. (264)

Analyzing Robins Pennell’s life and work, one may legitimately ask whether she could be called a New Woman. A close study of her life and accomplishments suggests that she walked a fine line between adhering to the strict Victorian proscriptions of female behavior and asserting herself as an independent writer and “explorer.” In fact, while she took up the pen, wrote and published innumerable texts, many of these were produced as team projects with her husband. Furthermore, she rode her bicycle, one of the markers of New Womanhood for some critics, but she was always accompanied by her cyclist husband, even though she rode farther and more regularly than most women did before and after her. She may well exemplify women living in the transition period between the restrictive nineteenth-century ideology of gender and the more liberal and open thought and behavior of the twentieth. While some of her statements point to an open and progressive perspective on women’s role, others alert the reader that she may not have been quite

sure what this new role for women was. Perhaps, and more accurately, she believed that the fight for women's advancement was being won and did not need any further battles. She was, in fact, the living proof of a woman who had achieved personal and public recognition, as well as a gainful livelihood.

That Robins Pennell rode the tandem tricycle and, later, her own bicycle in the conventional Victorian feminine attire (always accompanied by her husband) gave a stamp of respectability to her unconventional mode of travel. Still, at a time when it was common and fashionable for women to look and act frail, and when physicians and behavior books reinforced the notion that women's physiology would not withstand extraordinary exertion without major physical and psychological damage, Robins Pennell's cycling exploits run counter to her society's beliefs and practices. This behavior, described in her numerous accounts of their travels, makes her a convincing spokesperson for the new lifestyle promoted by the New Woman. In one of her later memoirs, Robins Pennell suggested that her cycling attire, as well as her behavior, were anything but conventional. She described herself "in [her] short skirts, at a time when short skirts were not the mode, covered with mud," entering the largest hotels in Europe "without a tremor, conscious that the cycle at the door was [her] triumphant apology" (*Nights* 32).

An additional element confirming decorum in Robins Pennell's travels and texts are the literary references found in all of her writings, starting with the account of one of the first bicycle trips that she and her husband took in England, entitled *A Canterbury Pilgrimage* (1885), followed by *Two Pilgrims' Progress* (1889) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1909). These writings point to texts by Chaucer, Bunyan and Sterne respectively. Thanks to these strategies, Robins Pennell was able to neutralize the "position of gender ambiguity" that Shirley Foster ascribes to women explorers who transgress the boundaries of domesticity and femininity prescribed by their society (11). I suggest that the Pennells' use of the term "pilgrimage" for the title of two of their travelogues has little, if any, religious meaning. They may have used it to distinguish their travels from mere tourist trips, distancing themselves from the tourists that they believed were spoiling the places they loved. Labeling their journeys as pilgrimages was also a way to pay homage to the authors who used that term in their texts and who were dear to Elizabeth and Joseph. The account of their first "pilgrimage" is dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson "[i]n gratitude for the happy hours we have spent traveling with him and his donkey" (Preface to *A Canterbury Pilgrimage*).

While Joseph began bicycling in the late 1870s, Elizabeth Robins began riding a tricycle, probably with Joseph, just before their wedding in the summer of 1884. Their first bicycle trip, however, was in England, shortly after their arrival in July of 1884, when they rode a tandem tricycle to Canterbury. In the description of their trip (*A Canterbury Pilgrimage*), the Pennells treat the traditional concept of the pilgrimage in a slightly ironic manner, since they soon discover that the road they took to reach the holy shrine of St. Thomas, and which they had described as "sacred," because it was trodden by the ancient pilgrims, was not the one used by those pilgrims. As they proceed on their ride, their quest to connect with the ancient pilgrims becomes more and more elusive, until it proves impossible. Robins Pennell writes: "the further we went, the more it seemed as if we were in pursuit of a shadow" (34). They finally realize that nothing is left of the original shrine, since it was burnt by Henry VIII together with St. Thomas' bones in 1538. The Pennells emphasize their chosen mode of travel when they preface their travelogue as "Ridden, written and illustrated by Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell." She recounts that they both found one of the

main pleasures of this trip in the simple act of traveling, which for them and at this time in their life, consisted in riding a tandem tricycle. The lovely Kent countryside in August gives them immense joy, so much so that Elizabeth Robins writes: “An eternity of wheeling through such perfect country and in such soft sunshine, would, we thought, be the true earthly paradise” (46).

Just as Joseph’s illustrations immortalize moments of the life of the countryside they traverse or the people they meet, Elizabeth’s literary descriptions depict the momentary gesture, action or facial expression of the people around them, the waning sunlight on the trees on the hillside or the perfume of old cherries in a nearby orchard. The Pennells used the skills of their respective trade to describe and illustrate the numerous other travelogues and works on which they collaborated. In October 1884 Elizabeth and Joseph journeyed from Florence to Rome on the trip that, forty years later, Elizabeth would describe as “the most beautiful, the most successful of the many beautiful, successful journeys we were to take together” (*The Life and Letters* 128, 130). As they traveled on a tandem tricycle, they were most likely the first touring cyclists that the residents of central rural Italy had ever seen, much to their wonder, bewilderment and, at times, terror. The account of the trip, accompanied by Joseph’s illustrations, appeared in two issues of *The Century Magazine* in 1886, with the title “Italy from a Tricycle,” and was published soon after as a book in several editions in England and the US, with the same title *Two Pilgrims’ Progress, from Fair Florence to the Eternal City of Rome*.

Robins Pennell’s descriptions and Joseph’s illustrations focus on the people they encounter, and their depictions aim at capturing the moment when their tricycle passes them. The Pennells introduce their audience to “shirtless bakers, their hands white with flour,” “barbers holding their razors” and women “washing in the stream below” (*Two Pilgrims’ Progress* 16, 20). In describing the landscape around them, they also highlight the colors and the shape of the natural scene they see, such as, “the hedges were covered with clusters of red rose-berries and the orange berries of the pyracanthus” (37). Robins Pennell often describes the landscape and scenes of human activity in a wide panorama of “literary” brush strokes, but she pauses to comment on the grape harvest, the offer of grapes from two farmers, and the desolate landscape of the Sieneese hills, where in a poor village, a woman offers them freshly picked lemons to quench their thirst (66). Besides appealing to the readers’ visual awareness, Robins Pennell’s descriptions appeal also to their auditory faculties, so that we hear “children saying their lesson in school” through the building’s low windows, the “wandering cries of (the) women,” “the soft bells of a monastery” and “the cracking whip of a peasant . . . driving an unwilling donkey” (26).

Just as *A Canterbury Pilgrimage* was written as a literary homage to Chaucer, the account of the journey from Florence to Rome bears the literary legacy of John Bunyan and his *A Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). It also retraces the itineraries followed by Nathaniel Hawthorne and J.A. Symonds, whose travelogues appeared in the 1870s and 1880s, respectively. In the preface to the 1899 edition, the second American printing of the travelogue, Charles Leland, Robins Pennell’s uncle, wrote a poem praising the two modern pilgrims who, one with the pen and the other with a pencil, had shown the world that one could travel as fast by bicycle as by horse. He also defended the Pennells’ work against accusations of being a parody of Bunyan’s Christian epic, which, in this edition, is recalled through short citations at the beginning of each chapter. The label of “pilgrimage” may have been used here by the Pennells also because the city of Rome was both their destination and that of traditional religious pilgrimages since medieval times. No other reference in the text suggests or evokes religious messages. To the contrary, the appearance of the two cyclists

riding a tandem tricycle on the country roads of Italy inspired both wonder and terror in the local population who had never seen such a “machine,” as shown in their encounter with two nuns on a carriage. On seeing the tricycle, one of the nuns crossed herself and hid her face with her hands, as if she had seen the devil, and the other asked for alms before giving them her blessing (*Two Pilgrims’ Progress* 21).

This trip took the form of a real adventure for the young couple, especially since friends had repeatedly and insistently warned them against going to Italy, where not only cholera and malaria persisted in some regions, but where bandits surely hid everywhere, and where good food was not to be found anywhere. Elizabeth and Joseph faced these terrible threats with their youthful enthusiasm and healthy skepticism that carried them unharmed to Rome and beyond. As riding a tricycle or bicycle in Italy was still a novelty, especially in the rural areas that they traversed, they were therefore aware of how their vehicle was perceived by the natives, “this new folly of the foreigner” (*Two Pilgrims’ Progress* 16). They describe many scenes in which their tricycle elicited curiosity, wonder and fear in the various people they met. Children were attracted to it and wanted to touch its various parts; carriage drivers were puzzled and at times tried to outrun it with their horse power, and shepherds crossing the road with their flocks in front of them caused the Pennells alarm or falls. Besides the tricycle, their clothes also attracted people’s attention. Women admired Elizabeth’s skirt and wanted to feel its material; Joseph’s knee breeches and long black stockings “made them wonder what manner of priest he might be” (29).

As travelers, the Pennells had frequent interactions with innkeepers, and owners and waiters of small restaurants. Most of these people were friendly and usually talkative and the two appreciated their attention and care. When they lodged in a *pensione* in Siena, which was also hosting several British travelers, Robins Pennell remarked how the two of them had found “more pleasure in the half-understood talk of the Italian *padroni* and waiters” than in the “elegant and learned conversation” of their English-speaking fellow guests (46). An “innkeeper” who holds a special place in Robins Pennell’s narrative is the Abbot Di Negro at the Monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. The effort to reach the monastery located in the south-eastern clay-covered hills of Tuscany, amidst patches of chestnut trees and cypresses and interspersed with ravines and canyons, had been a tiring adventure for the two cyclists, who were happy to find shelter, food and friendship in the semi-deserted monastery. They spent, as she writes, “golden days” at the monastery, enjoying free access to the complex of convent buildings, the garden and the hills around it. Most of all, they enjoyed the friendship of the abbot who spent hours visiting with them. Robins Pennell remarks that leaving was difficult, as “every day we fell under the dreamy influence of the place and became less willing for action” (*Two Pilgrims’ Progress* 94).

The Pennells’ description of the coeval Italy and Italians they met is generally favorable and realistic. They refused to see the places they visited as vestiges of a glorious past, although at times they refer to the past as compared to a perceived degraded present. Robins Pennell mildly criticizes Goethe, who, for instance, while in Assisi, avoided looking at anything else besides the Roman temple of Minerva because of his deep love for classic ruins and his disdain for more “recent” artifacts. On the contrary, in Assisi, the Pennells enjoyed the cathedral with Giotto’s medieval frescoes as well as interacting with a restaurant waiter who insisted on showing them the “finest road to Rome” on a map displayed on their dinner table (*Two Pilgrims’ Progress* 138).

There is no doubt, however, that throughout their travels in Italy the Pennells maintained a position of benevolent superiority, and therefore of distance, from which they observed and

described the places they visited and the local population with whom they interacted. Robins Pennell describes some of the villages as “degenerate,” or “wretched” and some of the inhabitants as “peasants . . . eating their midday meal,” or “old hags of women with thin white hair and bent almost double under heavy bundles of wood” (42, 88). Although they also show their appreciation for the lighter side of Italian people, as when they acknowledge that “some men went along the street below our window singing,” they comment, with a slight tone of superiority, on the “song-loving Sieneese who in their own simple fashion go through life” (35, 51).

Further south of Assisi, however, their benevolent attitude changed into scorn, likely due to the local people’s lack of understanding of Joseph’s Italian, which until then had facilitated their interactions. Their failure to communicate at the basic language level made them both angry and spiteful of the people they met. Robins Pennell first depicts a change in the way the local women dress, and she describes them wearing “bodices and long earrings and . . . their handkerchiefs up on their heads,” followed by the comment on how “they, and the men as well, were less polite and more stupid than the Tuscans or Umbrians about Perugia” (144). She gives some examples of such “stupidity” of women as when they failed to understand their greetings or warnings about their incoming tricycle. With some frustration, she also comments that “even the beasts we met were stupid as the people,” and as a final judgment she writes: “Indeed, the people thereabout all spoke in dialects worse, I am sure, than any Dante heard at the mouth of Hell” (145, 147). The linguistic divide within Italy had kept the dream of a unified country at bay for centuries. Dante’s efforts to create a national language out of his Tuscan “dialect” in the fourteenth century were successful at the level of the educated elite. In the centuries that followed writers in the numerous Italian courts and main urban centers produced a rich body of literary works written in “Italian.” The people living in the countryside of every region and the poor inhabiting the cities, however, kept speaking their own dialect, which differed greatly from the one in the nearby region or in the next valley. It is not surprising that Joseph Pennell, who had worked for months in Tuscany and in Venice, was unable to understand the language spoken in the rural areas south of Florence.

As in other publications, Robins Pennell comments here on the pleasure of exercising outdoors, especially through bicycling. She describes their efforts in one of their numerous climbs of the trip as follows: “we were working just hard enough to feel that joy . . . which comes with healthy out-of-doors exercise and, I think, with nothing else” (18). About the joy of cycling downhill she writes: “None but cyclers know the delight of a five-minute coast after hours of up-hill toiling” (40–41). As in every adventure, however, some events in this trip were not so pleasant. For instance, as they were enjoying the downhill just mentioned and the tricycle was going at about twenty miles per hour, a shepherd “drove a flock of sheep out from the woods a few feet in front of us,” causing them to fall in the gutter as they could not brake fast enough (41). Toward the end of the trip the brake of the tricycle loosened and snapped so that they could not enjoy the “seven miles’ coast” to Terni, to which they had looked forward for days. They had then to resort to walking and reaching the town at night when the town gates were shut (151, 154). They continued their ride into the *campagna romana*, the Roman countryside, along the old Flaminia road, and into Rome. Riding into one of the main squares, Piazza del Popolo, they ignored the order to stop from a *carabiniere*. A few weeks later, while they lived and worked in Rome, they were forced to pay a fine of “ten francs” for “furious cycling” on the Via del Corso, a main pedestrian street, and for refusing to dismount when ordered (173). With this comment, Robins Pennell concludes the account of their first bicycle trip in Italy.

This bicycle ride was followed by one to France and then by several others through various regions and countries in Europe. In *Our Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* the Pennells described and illustrated a bicycle journey they took in 1887 from Calais to Rives in Southern France. This was supposed to be a segment of an ambitious tricycle ride from London to Rome in order to show the world the pleasures of traveling by bicycle or tricycle, and to convince cyclists of the advantages of touring rather than “hanging” around race tracks (Preface). Both Pennells were critical of “scorchers,” as record-setting cyclists were called. Even during their trip through France they were annoyed with fellow cyclists or curious bystanders who wanted to know how fast they had ridden the previous day or during their fastest rides. To the Pennells it was the journey that mattered, not the speed.

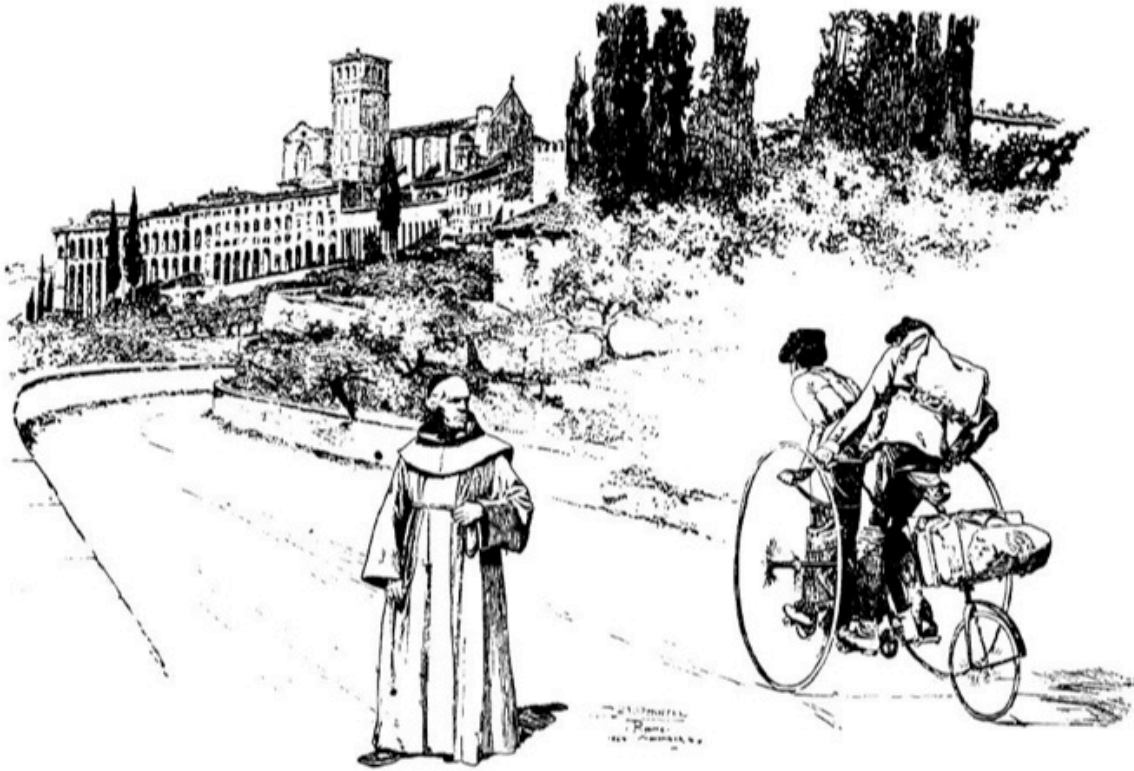
The other bicycle trips undertaken by the Pennells had specific objectives, and their bicycling became merely the means by which they arrived at a specific destination where these objectives could be attained, rather than the main activity to be described. For instance, subsequent trips to France aimed at describing churches and cathedrals or at elucidating the way people from Provence amuse and entertain themselves, while a journey to Hungary became the elusive search for the “real” Gipsy, whose mythical life and music had fascinated the Pennells since their time in Philadelphia (*To Gipsyland* 10).

In 1898, toward the end of her cycling adventures, Robins Pennell published the description of a trip taken the year before, *Over the Alps on a Bicycle*. This is the report of their adventures over nine passes in the French, Swiss and Italian Alps, the highest of which was about 8,000 feet (2,438 meters). They conquered the passes under the hot August sun, over stony roads, often drenched by sudden and violent rainstorms, pushing their bicycles up steep zigzagging roads, and then descending at vertiginous speed and with great peril on the other side of the mountain pass, obstructed at times by carts, buggies and inattentive tourists. As she reaffirms that the objective of the ride was to see whether she would be able to accomplish all those strenuous climbs, Robins Pennell also expresses the conviction that “any woman who rides” well on a good bike “may learn what pleasure there is in the exploit” (105).

One of the remarkable features of this latter account is the proud tone with which Robins Pennell, by now an experienced cyclist riding solo on a “safety” bike, describes her accomplishment. In her last comment she writes: “I am told I have made a record, I think I have, and one to be proud of. I went over nine passes, six in one week”(105). In the preface she had announced: “And if the name of the first man to climb the Alps with his bicycle is disputed, I propose to immortalize the name and adventures of the first woman.” That woman of course is Elizabeth Robins Pennell! By accomplishing such an extraordinary feat and recounting it in writing, Robins Pennell makes sure that readers in the twenty-first century and beyond will remember forever her extraordinary accomplishments!



Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell: *Two Pilgrims' Progress: From Fair Florence to the Eternal City of Rome*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1899. 134.



Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell: *Two Pilgrims' Progress: From Fair Florence to the Eternal City of Rome*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1899. 136.



Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell: *Two Pilgrims' Progress: From Fair Florence to the Eternal City of Rome*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1899. 172.

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