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book review of

*Renoir: An Intimate Biography* by Barbara Ehrlich White

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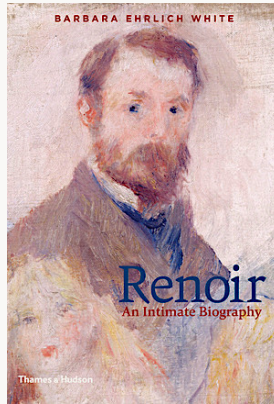
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Barbara Ehrlich White,  
*Renoir: An Intimate Biography*.  
New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2017.  
432 pp.; 58 color and 47 b&w illus.; notes; bibliography; index.  
\$39.95  
ISBN: 9780500239575

Barbara Ehrlich White's newest publication on Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) is the culmination of a career of scholarly work on the artist, and, most notably, an intense study of Renoir's letters and those of his friends, family, and associates. *Renoir: An Intimate Biography* is a companion to, and a revision of, White's *Renoir: His Life, Art, and Letters* (1984, reprinted 2010). The earlier volume reflected on 1,000 letters concerning the artist, and in the intervening years White has discovered and consulted an additional 2,000 relevant letters. The 1984 publication, illustrated on nearly every page, gives greater attention to Renoir's paintings and quotes more liberally from his letters. *Renoir: An Intimate Biography* has the feel of a historical novel—even in its physical appearance, which is handheld compared to the exhibition catalogue size of the 1984 volume. White uses the new letters as source material to reconsider Renoir's history, excerpting the correspondence throughout the book but not regularly reproducing it in full. The book is divided into seven chapters, each covering about five to eight years (except the first, which summarizes Renoir's first thirty-six years).

White makes no secret of her opinion of Renoir; the second page of the introduction asserts, "Pierre-Auguste Renoir is one of the greatest and most creative artists who ever lived" (10). She also describes him as heroic on more than one occasion. White's enthusiasm for Renoir is palpable, which is important to note in relation to one of the book's recurring themes. Renoir's contradictory nature—frequently changing his mind, sending mixed messages, and telling different stories to different people in his life—is brought to light through the conflicting opinions expressed in his letters. "Who can fathom that most inconsistent of men?" Camille Pissarro wrote of Renoir in 1887 (11). White explains away some of the uncomfortable and offensive aspects of the artist, described in more detail below, with this reasoning. She interprets the changeability evident in Renoir's personality as a deep-seated desire to be liked and accepted, stemming from his insecurities about his lower class upbringing, and to avoid conflict. Renoir wrote in an 1887 letter to his friend and patron Eugène Murer, regarding a critic preparing an article on Murer's collection: "He can say as much as he wants about my canvases, but I hate the idea of the public knowing how I eat my

cutlets and whether I was born of poor but honest parents. Painters are very boring with their pitiful stories, and people don't give a damn about them" (134). Further, in White's view Renoir told people what they wanted to hear because he desperately desired companionship. Renoir enjoyed working alongside other artists, though they did not always reciprocate those feelings. White mentions Monet sidestepping Renoir's requests to work together: "This morning I received news from Renoir, whom I have always feared would show up here. . . . I have too much of a need to be alone and in peace," Monet wrote to his partner Alice Hoschedé in 1888 (127).

Rather than recapping Renoir's full history, it might be more useful to explore several themes on which White frames her interpretation of the artist's life. First, what is most new about this book and what the author devotes the most time to unpacking, is the exploration of Renoir's lifelong relationship with his illegitimate daughter, Jeanne Tréhot (later Robinet). In addition to piecing together the facts of Tréhot's life and Renoir's involvement in it, White reconsiders Renoir's relationship with women—both real and painted—in this revised biographical context and seeks to temper the charge of sexism that Renoir and his work face in much of the existing literature on the artist. With that in mind, it is noteworthy that Renoir's wife, Aline Charigot, is given extensive attention in this biography, but that she does not fare well in White's assessment. A second yoke that White aims to lift from Renoir is that of anti-Semitism. The author reconsiders Renoir's correspondence with Jewish members of his circle and declares perceptions of the artist as an anti-Semite to be inaccurate. A final recurring narrative of the biography is Renoir's health. White devotes much of the text to a thoughtful examination of Renoir's identity and his challenges as a man disabled and disfigured by rheumatoid arthritis.

In 2002 researcher Jean-Claude Gélinau uncovered letters affirming that Renoir had two children with Lise Tréhot, the artist's primary model from 1866 to 1872. Renoir was still struggling for recognition and commissions at the time of both births, and both babies were given up to be raised by foster families. White notes that this choice was, in fact, atypical in Renoir's circle—Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley had sons with their models at this time and chose to raise their children as their own, later marrying their children's mothers. However, White argues that the difference lay in Monet and Sisley's class status, and in the case of Sisley, his wealth. Renoir potentially had more to lose by openly accepting his illegitimate family, which could possibly curtail the support of more conservative friends and patrons. Renoir kept his relationship with Lise (which ended in 1872) and their children a secret from all but a few close friends for his entire life.

White speculates that Renoir and Tréhot's first child, a son named Pierre Tréhot born in 1868, died in his early years, as no information has been discovered beyond his birth certificate. Their daughter, Jeanne, was born in 1870, in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War. Jeanne was sent to live with a professional foster mother, Augustine Blanchet, in Normandy; White suggests that Renoir may have personally selected Blanchet through acquaintances in Paris (44–45). Interestingly, while Jeanne's birth certificate lists her last name as Tréhot, Renoir's daughter began to use his last name as a child—a fact of which Renoir was aware and apparently permitted (46, 164–65). The earliest extant letters from Renoir to his daughter date from 1892. He sent her money with each letter, including a dowry for her 1893 wedding to Louis Robinet. Renoir also arranged a legal workaround to provide the young couple with

funds for a home that remained in Renoir's own name; Jeanne and her husband essentially leased the home from Renoir, which allowed Jeanne to remain in the home after Robinet's death (rather than the property reverting to his male relatives per French law) (214–15).

Indeed, Renoir provided for Jeanne throughout her life and displayed a fatherly concern and kindness toward her in his letters. However, these acts were all done in secret. He enlisted a complicated web of a few trusted friends through which to route his communication with his daughter and his payments to her. For example the above-mentioned house payment was made in three parts: one third from his own bank account, one third from his dealer Ambroise Vollard, and one third from a friend, with correspondence sent to the home of one of Renoir's maids (215–16). Renoir's will stipulated a modest annuity for his daughter—which, after the artist's death, was the first time his family and most of his friends learned of Jeanne's existence.

White reconsiders Renoir's life through the lens of the recently discovered details of his relationship with Jeanne. Renoir, White argues, was also supportive of other women in his life—he was a close friend of Berthe Morisot and was compassionate to her daughter, Julie Manet, especially after Morisot's death. However, at the same time that Renoir was maintaining ties with his daughter and having a collegial relationship with Morisot, he expressed opinions such as “the woman artist is completely ridiculous. . . . In ancient times, women sang and danced for free, for the pleasure of being charming and gracious. Today, it's all for money which takes away the charm” (1888 letter to critic Philippe Burty, quoted 19, 152–53). White explains this by reminding the reader of the prevailing sexism of Renoir's era and his need to be accepted: “it must be viewed in the contexts of the time and Renoir's desire to be uncontroversial”; further, she argues, “Renoir's actions of kindness, generosity, open-mindedness, love and respect for the women in his life speak louder than the words he sent his friend Burty” (153).

However, there is an awkwardness in praising Renoir for the instances in which he exceeded societal expectations while forgiving the times in which he merely met the status quo, particularly when considering that his “greatest” act of kindness was undertaken in secret. Further, could it be proposed that Renoir was—at least in part—sending money to Jeanne to keep her from causing problems in his burgeoning career? The tone of Renoir's letters certainly express a love that exceeds that practical need, but that motivation could have played a role in his consistent support.

Another woman who figures prominently in this biography of Renoir is his wife, Aline. As the recent Phillips Collection exhibition catalogue notes, Aline is a figure who, relative to the partners of Renoir's contemporaries, has been only lightly covered in the existing literature. [1] Aline came from a working class family in rural France and worked in a Paris creamery across from Renoir's studio when they met in 1878. She modeled for several of Renoir's best known paintings, including *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881), *Dance at Bougival* (1883) and *Country Dance* (1883). They married in 1890 and remained together until her death in 1915—though Renoir concealed their relationship, including their first son (Pierre, born 1885), from most people until the 1890s. Morisot was shocked to learn, in 1891, that Renoir had a wife and son (151). White attributes this, again, to Renoir's fear of ruffling feathers: Aline “was an unsophisticated woman from the country,” and “it is likely that Renoir was ashamed of his

lower-class mistress and son” in front of upper class friends like Morisot (105, 151). This analysis is too simplistic, as Morisot, and Renoir’s many other wealthy friends, were aware of Renoir’s own background, which did not present a barrier to their relationships.

White’s assessment of Aline is not favorable. Aline is described as domineering, a woman who—once Renoir had achieved success—tried to convince him to live a more luxurious lifestyle than that with which he was comfortable. Eventually, the couple lived largely apart. Throughout the biography much attention is devoted to Aline’s weight. She was “plump” (80), had an “increasing girth” (161), and was “unusually obese” (208); while detailing Renoir’s illness, White notes, “it is ironic that Renoir should have struggled to gain weight when his wife struggled to lose it” (235). It should be noted that the correspondence does not reveal Aline’s own concern for her health. Renoir sometimes reported to his friends that she “continues to do the opposite of what she should do” (1908 letter to Georges Rivière, 225). Nonetheless, Renoir paid homage to her in his paintings—not just in the recognizable images of Aline, but in the “ample” and “voluptuous nudes” that abound in his work (151). This biography contributes much to our understanding of the facts of Aline’s life, but there remains room in Renoir scholarship for a more empathetic and deliberate approach to her.

As mentioned briefly above, another revised line of reasoning in this publication is White’s approach to Renoir’s anti-Semitism. Renoir’s derogatory remarks about Jewish patrons and his fellow Impressionist Camille Pissarro, who was Jewish, and Renoir’s opinion of the Dreyfus Affair are documented—and indeed a good reference for these letters is White’s 1984 publication on Renoir.<sup>[2]</sup> However, in this volume, White supports the claim that she no longer considers Renoir anti-Semitic by detailing the quantity and quality of Renoir’s relationships with Jewish patrons, friends, and his sister-in-law. Renoir went to Pissarro’s funeral, White notes, unlike Degas; Renoir maintained a relationship with his dealers, the Bernheims, who were Jewish; Renoir remained close to his brother, Pierre-Henri, after he married a woman who was Jewish. Renoir’s painfully offensive statements, White explains, displayed sentiments that were “commonplace” at the time, but he superseded these with his actions (201, discussed in full 191, 201–05). The argument parallels that described above regarding Renoir’s sexism—but the logic is flawed. In the context of the Dreyfus Affair, while some of Renoir’s friends including Edgar Degas and Julie Manet shared his anti-Dreyfus and anti-Semitic opinion, many of those in Renoir’s circle asserted Dreyfus’s innocence—Mary Cassatt, Monet, Pissarro, and Paul Signac among them (192). Renoir made an explicit choice to adopt an anti-Semitic viewpoint that should not be readily dismissed. It is useful to continue to fill in Renoir’s personal and professional web of contacts, but it is difficult to understand what is gained from weighting one type of interaction over another. Again, another interpretation might be that Renoir kept people close who could help him in his career. A recurring theme of Renoir’s correspondence, as emphasized by White, is his desire for friendship, companionship, and for official recognition.

Lastly, this biography deserves special mention for its careful and considered approach to Renoir’s health. Renoir’s physical challenges from rheumatoid arthritis, beginning in 1888, were severe. He was described as “emaciated . . . with pointed cheekbones, sunken cheeks” by an interviewer in 1891—and he would continue to work for another twenty-eight years (154–55). White details the various treatments Renoir tried, the increasing pain he suffered (as relayed in his letters) and the changes to his style necessitated by the decline of his motor

skills. Because Renoir persevered despite worsening health, White interprets the artist's twentieth-century paintings, particularly the nudes he completed in the last two decades of his life, as positive, joyful and a "heroic" accomplishment (237). It is undoubtedly difficult for some viewers to experience Renoir's late nudes in this way, but White makes an impassioned case both for these works' art historical precedents and their importance as a symbol of Renoir's resolve over his circumstances.

The audience for this book is unclear at times—it alternately reads like a novel, an art history reference work, or a biography appropriate for someone with a familiarity of the time period. But this has the effect of opening the publication to a wide range of readers and allowing each to make his or her own judgment based on the new facts at our disposal. Some of the premises put forth in this book are too apologetic for Renoir's behavior and too one-dimensional; early in the biography, White asserts that Renoir's "paintings never reflect his problems or those of the world" (49). That Renoir never let his circumstances seep into his work is difficult to believe—and what is gained from simplifying him in this way? Nonetheless, the task White has undertaken in assembling this compendium of letters is a valuable resource for future research. As some of this correspondence is now printed or excerpted for the first time, it will take time for art historians to consider if or how these materials affect interpretation of Renoir—though printing more letters in full would have been useful for reference. If recent exhibition history is any indication, there is no shortage of public interest in Renoir's work and no shortage of angles from which to approach the over 4,000 paintings in his oeuvre.[3]

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## Notes

[1] Sylvie Patry, "Aline Charigot: Model, Wife, and Muse," *Renoir and Friends: Luncheon of the Boating Party*, Eliza E. Rathbone, ed. (Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection, 2017), 50–65.

[2] Recent articles discussing Renoir's anti-Semitism include Elizabeth Melanson, "[The Influence of Jewish Patrons on Renoir's Stylistic Transformation in the Mid-1880s](#)," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2013); and Sarah Tas, "The Elusive Charles Ephrussi: Collector, Critic, and Patron of the Arts," *Renoir and Friends*, 86.

[3] Recent exhibitions in the United States have included (in addition to The Phillips Collection exhibition already mentioned): *Renoir Landscapes* (organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007–08), *Renoir in the 20th Century* (organized by LACMA, 2010); and *Renoir, Impressionism, and Full-Length Painting* (organized by The Frick Collection, 2012).