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Elizabeth Emery, *Photojournalism and the Origins of the French Writer House Museum (1881-1914): Privacy, Publicity, and Personality*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2012. xii + 231 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$104.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-0877-2.

Review by Masha Belenky, The George Washington University.

La Maison de Balzac, la Maison de Proust, la Maison de Victor Hugo: writer house museums have long been a ubiquitous feature of the French cultural landscape. Elizabeth Emery's new book tells the fascinating story of the origins of this institution at the end of the nineteenth century. As she seeks answers to the question of why writer house museums came to occupy such an essential place in the French *patrimoine*, Emery also traces the shifting relationship between a writer's home, a writer's identity and work. Although several histories of individual writer house museums exist, Emery's study is the first to consider them as what she calls "a modern social construct" (p. 4). Her book brings to light the dawn of celebrity culture, made possible not only because of the public obsession with private lives of literary celebrities, but also thanks to developments in photojournalism and photography, the rise of the popular press, and the advent of the modern sciences of anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis.

Emery meticulously reconstructs the social context which allowed private spaces to develop into "public institutions" (p. 5) and to become what historian Pierre Nora famously called *lieux de mémoire*. The book is impressive in its interdisciplinary reach, drawing on a broad range of materials: published volumes; articles in the contemporary press; numerous photographs; nineteenth-century scientific studies. Emery masterfully weaves together different stories which emerge from these documents, showing how the writer house museum became a nexus of different forces of modernity: "The consecration of house museums in France was thus a product of the intersection of new mass media; a growing culture of celebrity, scientific innovation, improvements in travel networks, the development of museums, and an evolving sense of the importance of patrimony" (p. 3).

Each chapter is organized around a particular text or series of articles but is enriched by a wide array of other documents that Emery unearthed to tell the story of the writer house museum. Chapter one, "*La Maison d'un artiste: The Writer's Home as Self-Portrait*" focuses on Edmond de Goncourt's 1881 guidebook to his house and his extensive art collection. This book, Emery argues, paved the way for the French fascination with writers' houses. In *La Maison d'un artiste*, Goncourt suggests a symbiotic relationship between his home and his writing, representing his home as an extension of his writing, and his writing as an extension of his home. Yet Goncourt's text also reads like a museum guidebook and a decorating manual. While building on work by Dominique Pety and Janell Watson who established parallels between Goncourt's collecting and his literary activity, Emery suggests that, in fact, we can also read *La Maison d'un artiste* in the context of collection and exhibition appraisals in *La Gasette des Beaux-Arts*, an influential art publication.[1] Unlike museum guidebooks, however, Goncourt casts his collection and his interior decorating as "an extension of his artistic identity" (p. 38).

Chapter two, "Writers at Home and in the Popular Press: Truth and Fiction," examines the practice of "at home" reporting and photography that emerged in the 1880s. The journalistic interview, an

American import that came to France in the 1870s, revolutionized French attitudes toward celebrities because they now became available to the masses through the popular press (p. 53). The interview became the key to the study of the writer house because, since writers worked at home, the interview inevitably described their surroundings. This chapter centers primarily on the journalist Jules Hoche's 1883 *Les Parisiens chez eux*, a series of profiles of great men that documented his visits in their homes. This work, Emery convincingly argues, marks a turning point in the public's attitude toward celebrities. Unlike the preceding tradition of the "great writer visit" (p. 55) which promoted the image of the writer's greatness, the reportage aimed to demystify the figure of great writer: "The new system of reportage was predicated on exposing the "truth"—what Hoche termed "uncovering" intimate things that lay behind the public "silhouette," the grandiose public image of the celebrity" (p. 55).

What resulted, Emery points out, were highly subjective and often misleading narratives of the writers and their homes upon which interpretations of their works were then based. By contrast, photography was considered a "scientific" and realistic medium of representation that conveyed the "truth" about its subject. Emery documents the so-called "at home" photography popularized in the late 1880s, and in particular the series of photographs titled "Nos contemporains chez eux" by Dornac (pseudonym of Paul Cardon). Dornac produced over 200 photographs of famous public figures (such as Alexandre Dumas, Emile Zola, Gustave Eiffel, Huysmans, Colette, Louis Pasteur, among others) in their private homes. Dornac's photographs were widely circulated in different forms—sold as individual photos, published as albums, or circulated in the illustrated periodicals accompanied by text. These photographs add a new dimension to the ways in which writers and writers' homes were represented, as well as ways in which they were received by the public.

Chapter three, "From Home to Habitat: *Bricabracomania* and *La Nouvelle Psychologie*," builds on the preceding discussion of the "at home" photography to argue that such photographs were revolutionary in the 1880s; they showcased new technologies such as flash photography and portable equipment. Above all, they allowed the public to peek into the private sanctum of a writer in ways previously unknown. By making writers' homes available to the broad public, they invited reporters, scientists, and literary critics to interpret the writers' personality and their work by "reading" the objects surrounding them. The widespread tendency to draw conclusions about writers by observing them in their "natural habitat," Emery suggests, was akin to ethnographic practices of "human zoo" displays that were common in late nineteenth-century France. As in the case of the human zoo, the idea was that a viewer could learn about the habits and identity of the subject—in this case, a writer—by studying the habitat. In both cases, Emery suggests, a dwelling was read as an indicator of character (p. 86), and photographs of writers' studies were seen "as metonyms for the work accomplished in private spaces" (p. 95). Moreover, the emerging field of psychology shored up the idea that one can interpret a writer's work based on his private life and space. Whether the "at home" photographs merely reinforced the public's preconceived ideas about individual writers, or (occasionally) even contradicted these notions (this was the case for Zola: his home—filled with religious objects—appeared to be inconsistent with his naturalist aesthetic), the photographs contributed to the developing idea that writer houses were spaces worthy of analysis and, eventually, of preservation (p. 119).

If the previous two chapters considered how writers and their homes were represented—and often misrepresented—by the reporters and photojournalists, chapter four, "Home Life as Fiction: Photo-Interviews as Narrative Acts," looks at the writers' attempts to recover narrative authority over their self-image. The writers used the genre of the photo-interview to reclaim their public images. Specifically, Emery studies a series of photo-interviews "Une heure chez..." published by *La Revue Illustrée* from 1892 to 1904. During these interviews, the writers gave guided tours of their homes and thus had tremendous opportunities for publicity and self-promotion. Emery argues for the importance of the photo-interviews for the subsequent creation of the writer house museum: "This crucial step in self-representation became the lynchpin of the modern importance accorded to the writers' house. If writers themselves considered their homes so important for their work, they must be worth preserving" (p. 142).

Chapter five, “Literary Pilgrimage and the Cult of the Writer House Museum” shows how sustained attention for the writers by the press which fostered public curiosity about them eventually led to the creation of the writer house museums. The writer house museum brings together the different narrative strands Emery develops in previous chapters. It became a crucial repository of the materials by and about the writers and an important part of the commemoration of their life and work. Emery tells a captivating story of the creation of the Maison de Victor Hugo in 1903, the first national writer house museum in France, as a paradigm for the discussion of other such museums (those of Mallarmé, Sand, Balzac, Zola, and others). She places the creation of the writer house museum in the context of late-nineteenth-century fascination with preservation and commemoration. Emery concludes by suggesting that writer house museums represented a paradox: on the one hand, “the writer house museum is, in fact, most writers’ worst nightmare” (p. 230) as their private lives get rearranged and rewritten by the museum curators, and the narrative of their life and work is told by someone else. At the same time, these museums are sites of commemoration, celebration and promotion of their works.

A work of literary, cultural and social history, *Photojournalism and the Origins of the French Writer House Museum* sheds new light on the inception of the modern phenomenon of celebrity culture by placing it in the context of new developments in journalism, photography and sciences in the late nineteenth-century. It is a treasure trove of previously unexamined resources and a huge array of unique photographs. The book will no doubt appeal to scholars in a number of fields, such as French studies, nineteenth-century literature and visual culture, cultural history, and museum studies. The book should also inspire readers to visit some of the writer house museums and to pay homage to France’s literary greats.

NOTE

[1] See the following studies: Janell Watson, *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Dominique Pety, *Les Goncourt et la collection* (Genève: Droz, 2003).

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