

Garval on Emery (2015)

Emery, Elizabeth. *En toute intimité... Quand la presse people de la Belle Époque s'invitait chez les célébrités*. Éditions Parigramme, 2015, pp. 240, ISBN 978-2-84096-958-7

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Elizabeth Emery's anthology serves up fifteen interviews with late nineteenth-century luminaries: Paul Bourget, Aristide Bruant, François Coppée, Alphonse Daudet, Alexandre Dumas fils, Jules Ferry, Camille Flammarion, Ludovic Halévy, Pierre Loti, Jules Massenet, Robert de Montesquiou, Gabrielle Réjane, Victorien Sardou, Jules Verne, and Émile Zola. Published in *La Revue illustrée* between 1892 and 1898, the articles and accompanying photographs present their subjects at home, promising a glimpse into celebrities' private, inner lives.

With titles like "Une heure chez Aristide Bruant," "Une conversation avec Pierre Loti," or "Alexandre Dumas intime," these pieces pioneered the genre of the illustrated celebrity interview, later a mainstay of magazines like *Life* and *People* in the U.S., or *Paris-Match* in France. In this sense they represent an important step along the path toward the excesses of contemporary celebrity culture, from stalkers to paparazzi—what Emery calls "l'évolution inévitable vers l'invasion de la vie privée que représente cette presse *people*" (11).

From our modern vantage point, these interviews can seem refreshingly discreet, genteel, and urbane. Interviewers and interviewees alike belong to a small, cordial circle of largely Parisian intelligentsia, and the stars welcome the journalists into their homes with open arms. The conversations dwell not on the sordid matters—romantic entanglements or substance abuse issues—that fill tabloid pages today, delving instead into the famous subject's views on literature and the arts, the challenges and triumphs of their storied careers and, given the domestic setting, the particularities of their home décor. Along the way, intriguing confessions abound: Verne lacks ambition; Sardou's father did not want him to be a playwright; and, if he were not a novelist, Zola would have become an interior decorator.

In her astute introduction, Emery cautions against falling for the apparent naturalness and supposed veracity of the texts and images that portray these celebrities. We should recognize instead the artifice and even disingenuousness at work in the interviews. For example one journalist, unable to visit Dumas in person, creates the impression of a real exchange by stitching together quotations from other interviews and writings by the author. Likewise, the photographs of seemingly spontaneous interior scenes are carefully staged, and the spaces they represent, while ostensibly mirroring the subject's inner life, may well have been decorated or arranged by others.

Emery's introduction also situates the emergent genre of the celebrity interview in relation to burgeoning celebrity culture, and evolving media technologies. She then introduces the individual articles with essential information and perspectives about the interviews, personalities involved, and settings. Some might wish however to see these early celebrity interviews traced back further, for example to the mid-century genre of biographical fiction—like Delphine de Girardin's *La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac* (1836), Adolphe Pictet's *Une course à Chamounix* (1838), or Léon Gozlan's *Balzac en pantoufles* (1856)—with a kindred penchant for projecting, however fancifully, into celebrities' private realms. Others might quibble with the use of *Belle Époque*, rather than *Fin-de-siècle*, to designate the 1890s. Yet others might wonder why Réjane is the only woman featured here. Why not the still more illustrious actress Sarah Bernhardt? Why not popular women writers of the day, like Gyp, Rachilde, or Séverine?

Emery addresses such scholarly concerns elsewhere, notably in her 2012 *Photojournalism and the Origins of the French Writer House*. But this is a different sort of book, from a different type of press. Parigramme, a small trade publisher, offers a remarkable range of intelligent, attractively produced books about Paris, aimed at a more general audience. So, rather than extensive analysis, this volume offers abundant—and delightful—raw material to explore and contemplate, from diverse perspectives. We might note, for instance, that despite strong democratizing currents in Third Republic France, hastened by the new media technologies making these illustrated interviews possible, there persists a retrograde fantasy of the great man as a "seigneur moyenâgeux" (222), the courtly master of his home domain, referred to repeatedly as "maître" or, more quaintly still, "le maître de céans" (196). We might note as well that, as statuemanía raged in France, crowding public space with what June Hargrove calls an "open-air pantheon" of cultural heroes, these celebrities echoed the phenomenon inside their homes, crammed with portrait busts of themselves and their notable contemporaries.

These are just some avenues for reflection. Entertaining and informative, *En toute intimité* has far more to offer both a general

and scholarly readership. It will be a special treat for all interested in the emergence of modern celebrity culture, and in France's rich cultural life at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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