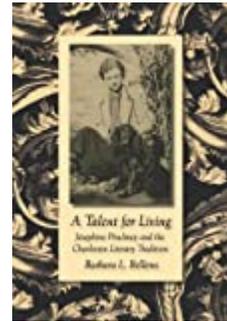




Barbara L. Bellows. *A Talent for Living: Josephine Pinckney and the Charleston Literary Tradition.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. 301 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3163-3.



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A Woman of Letters, A Woman of the South: The Life of Josephine Pinckney

Thirty years after the end of the Civil War and five years before the dawn of the twentieth century, poet, essayist, and novelist Josephine Lyons Scott Pinckney (1895-1957) was born in South Carolina. Throughout her entire life and career, Pinckney felt torn between the ties of tradition and the pull of the modern. Deeply rooted in the city of Charleston and intensely proud of her distinguished family's history, Pinckney nonetheless chafed at the expectations placed on her by the rigid code of white southern gentility and rebelled against the constraints of proper white southern femininity. Not content to conform to her mother's expectations that she make a brilliant marriage and devote herself to a life of respectable domesticity, Pinckney instead worked tirelessly to forge a career as a poet, novelist, and public woman of letters.

In this new biography (the first full-length biography ever to be written about Pinckney), Barbara L. Bellows details Pinckney's fascinating life and remarkable literary career. Pinckney, Bellows demonstrates, was a woman of enormous contradictions. Gifted with a remarkable talent for forming friendships (and possessed of a strong personal magnetism that earned her many

admirers), Pinckney was nonetheless haunted throughout her life by a terrible sense of emotional isolation and alienation from those around her. A cosmopolitan woman who traveled extensively throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, Pinckney remained deeply attached to her hometown of Charleston and drew much of her sense of self from her identity as a southerner. Profoundly invested in modernism (and an important architect of modern southern literary culture), Pinckney was nonetheless fascinated by the southern past, particularly by the legacies that slavery, racial oppression, and the Civil War had left on southern society.

Born into one of the oldest families in South Carolina (the descendant of, among other notable white southerners, the esteemed plantation manager and republican mother Eliza Louis Pinckney), Pinckney remained fascinated, throughout her career, in exploring the culture and decline of the planter aristocracy. Although Pinckney's strong-willed mother, Camilla Pinckney, did her best to induce her daughter to conform to the ideal of genteel southern womanhood, from the time she was a girl, Pinckney was determined to become a part of the

emerging modern world that existed beyond the often repressive social sphere into which she was born. Seeking to divert the young Pinckney's attention from her growing literary ambitions, Camilla Pinckney dragged her young daughter along on several (desperately boring, in Josephine's opinion) tours of Europe. These efforts were distinctly unsuccessful. Throughout these tours, Pinckney wrote letters to her friends at home, not to regale them with accounts of Europe's beauty, but rather to demand information about the new writers, books, and ideas that were then transforming American literary culture.

Bellows demonstrates that although Pinckney's work is not currently part of the canon of either southern or modernist literature, she played an important role in the emergence of a new southern literature during the 1920s and 1930s. The southern literary movement (dubbed the "Charleston Renaissance") that emerged in the wake of World War I, Bellows argues persuasively, has for too long been depicted by scholars as a predominantly male-initiated and male-run movement. Yet, such women as Pinckney were vital contributors to the new literary culture of the New South. Pinckney was one of the co-founders of the Poetry Society of America (formed in 1920), an organization that did a great deal to encourage the development of a new southern literature. Like fellow members of the Charleston Renaissance, Pinckney in her own literary work sought to prove that southern writers "could write about the land they loved without falling into the artistic trap of sentimentality or provinciality" (p. 42). Disgusted by the 'moonlight and magnolias' school of literature about the South, Pinckney and her colleagues sought to create a new southern literature, which, although deeply rooted in southern culture and traditions, was nonetheless free from any tendency to sentimentalize or romanticize the southern past.

Bellows had a long and accomplished career as a writer, publishing poetry, fiction, and essays that enjoyed both popular and critical success during her lifetime. In her first published volume, the poetry collection *Sea-Drinking Cities* (1927), Pinckney sought to put into practice her belief that literature could be profoundly and authentically southern, without being sentimental or sensational. Pinckney regarded her volume as a contribution to ongoing discussions about the nature of "southernness" and as a way to bring previously unexamined areas of southern life and experience before the national American public. Many poems in the collection, for example, relied on the rhythms of Gullah, a language developed by South Carolina's African American population,

and on stories rooted in uniquely South Carolinian myths and history. Although the work received a great deal of positive critical attention, the volume failed to sell, which was a grave disappointment to the ambitious Pinckney.

Pinckney enjoyed significantly more popular success as a novelist than she did as a poet. Although Pinckney's first work of fiction, a historical novel over which she labored for years, *The Hilton Head* (1941), failed to achieve wide popularity, her second novel, *Three O'Clock Dinner* (1945), was an immediate and dramatic popular and critical success. A selection of the influential Literary Guild, *Three O'Clock Dinner* is a searing comedy of manners that examines how traditions of the southern gentry (and of genteel Charleston society, specifically) were challenged and destabilized in the years prior to World War II. Bellows (the editor of a 2001 reprint of the novel) provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the content, cultural significance, and contemporary reception of *Three O'Clock Dinner*.

Pinckney's third novel, *Great Mischief* (1948), was, like its predecessor, a popular and critical success, earning the distinction of being a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection. Unlike some of her contemporaries, Pinckney was not terribly ambivalent or conflicted about her popular success, or the role that such institutions as the Book-of-the-Month-Club played in ensuring that success. "I won't waste any tears at this time on the standardization of the American mind etc.," Pinckney wrote cheerfully to her publisher, Marshall A. Best, in 1945, after learning that *Three O'Clock Dinner* had been selected by the Literary Guild. "The future looks rosy to me" (p. 186). Pinckney's final two novels, *My Son and Foe* (1952) and *Splendid in the Ashes* (published posthumously in 1958), enjoyed some critical success but failed to capture the public imagination in the same way that *Three O'Clock Dinner* and *Great Mischief* had. And, to Pinckney's frustration, the numerous plans to bring her novels to the big screen during the 1940s and 1950s also ended unsuccessfully, with disputes about casting, funding, and plot changes consistently derailing all film projects.

Devoted to detailing the peculiarities of her beloved Charleston in her literary work, Pinckney was equally committed to preserving Charleston's unique heritage in terms of both architecture and culture. An ardent supporter of city-wide efforts at historic preservation, Pinckney was also a prominent member of the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals (formed in 1922). This organization (run primarily by whites) worked to transcribe and preserve traditional African American spirituals and

songs. Although consistently plagued by both racism and paternalism, the organization nonetheless played an important role in preserving African American musical culture for future generations. Increasingly concerned with issues of racial justice in the years after World War II, Pinckney in the last decades of her life donated both time and money to efforts to improve health care and educational services within Charleston's African American communities.[1]

By bringing this complex, significant author's life and work back to scholars' attention, Bellows has enriched

our collective understanding of the emergence of literary modernism in the South, the roles of such institutions as the Book-of-the-Month-Club in shaping literary culture, and the struggles that white southern women faced during the mid-twentieth century in seeking to forge careers for themselves as public women of letters. Note [1]. For a recent, excellent full-length study of Charleston culture between 1920 and 1940, see Stephanie Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

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