

REVIEW ARTICLE

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Joseph Stanley Pennell *Rome Hanks, and Kindred Matters*

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The recent republication, by Second Chance Press, of Joseph Stanley Pennell's novel, *The History of Rome Hanks, and Kindred Matters*, offers an occasion for reviewing once more this interesting book and studying the dynamics of literary reputation and its precarious position in our world. In 1944, the publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons first published Pennell's novel. The book received, on the whole, some excellent reviews. Shortly after publication, it was banned in Boston bookstores. It became a best seller — Scribner's claimed a sale of 100,000 copies — and was issued in a reprint edition by the Sun Dial Press. At length, having had its day, it dropped from sight like many another novel that has done fairly well.¹

The author followed up his success with another novel, *The History of Nora Beckham* (1948), a kind of sequel to *Rome Hanks*. Though received respectfully enough by the reviewers, this novel appears not to have caught on with the public and did not sell very well. Pennell wrote no more novels. Because so many copies of *Rome Hanks* were available, one could usually find them in second-hand bookstores or on the shelves of the Salvation Army outlet stores, now, apparently, unread.

Seeing the novel now, in its carefully managed reprint dress, the reader must feel inclined to ask some questions about it: Why should this book be rescued from the trash heap of novels that have excited

interest and reasonably good sales and then died away into the rapidly receding past? Why should it be given, so to speak, a second life, however limited and abbreviated? What caused Second Chance Press to put its resources into reviving this book rather than some other, possibly equally interesting, novel that has dropped from sight? Is *Rome Hanks* worth the trouble of reviving? Is it worth reading, or rereading? Is Pennell an unfairly neglected American writer, and do we owe it to him, or to the muses, to take another look?

The best general answer that I can give must be a personal one. When the book appeared in 1944, I read it, and, as a young reader, cared very much for it. Subsequently, over the years, I have reread it several times, always with renewed interest. All readers cherish books that they are sure no one else knows about; they delight in being proprietary, keeping their secret, or, just occasionally, recommending *their* book to someone. I had begun to think that I might be sole owner of *Rome Hanks*, with all its pleasures and its vicissitudes. Its revival by a publishing company piqued my curiosity. I inquired and learned its history; and I want to retell the story, give some account of Pennell, and assess, one more time, the novel that he wrote.

Paul Rossman is a professor of history at Quinsigamond Community College, in Worcester, Massachusetts. An admirer of *Rome Hanks*, determined to make it available for students in his courses, he set out on what can only be called a long and heroic quest to find a publisher who would reprint the book. He was frequently rebuffed in his efforts till Second Chance Press, an enterprising outfit based in Sag Harbor, took up his challenge and reissued Pennell's novel.² The public response seems to be encouraging. A favorable notice appeared in *Choice* (January 1983), a journal that guides librarians in their book selections. *The New York Times Book Review* noticed the reprint, and an announcement has appeared that the paperback edition of the reprint, also from Second Chance, will be used in a history course at Harvard.

And what of the author of *Rome Hanks*? Joseph Stanley Pennell was born in Kansas on July 4, 1908. He studied at the University of Kansas and then at Pembroke College, Oxford. All of his career was spent as a newspaperman, in Denver, Los Angeles, Kansas City, and St. Louis. Over the years, he seems to have done a small amount of magazine publishing. A few poems appeared in *Poetry* in 1931 and

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1932; there was an article called "Our Own Oxonians" in the *North American Review* in 1930.

When his first novel was accepted by Scribner's, it was handled, apparently, by the firm's famous editor, Maxwell Perkins. The Scribner archives, now at the Princeton University Library, contain extensive correspondence about the production of the book. With such an initial success, one could well imagine that the author might have become a prolific novelist; but he did not. The second novel, *Nora Beckham*, continued the saga begun in *Rome Hanks*, and it is possible that its relatively poor reception discouraged further attempts at fiction. Or, it may be that Pennell felt he had exhausted that particular vein of material and had no further interest in writing novels. At any rate, he published no more fiction and died on September 26, 1963. By that time, his best book was long since a dead issue.

A way of approaching Pennell as a writer could be through his previous publication, but I am not sure that it would be an encouraging way. Since poems do play a role, fairly important, in *Rome Hanks*, we might examine a sonnet entitled "Transciency," that was published in *Poetry*:

Now you may go, and never see me more,
 For I am set upon by little things;
 And you are that I knew you were before
 You smiled — another wall for beating wings
 To beat against, and never span the space
 Between the false and true. Now you shall go!
 My time, dimension and your lovely face
 Remain irrelevant as fire to snow.
 As blood forgets its contents in the dust,
 As atoms dissipate, as chance sorts life
 To waste and seed, and moves it all with lust,
 I shall forget our little while in strife.
 For you I cannot lift a broken voice,
 Because there is no love nor any choice.³

It is a fairly conventional poem, and pleasant enough. One takes note of it and waits for more. But Pennell thought well enough of the sonnet to make it an epigraph for *Rome Hanks*, where it takes on an added significance and contributes to the development he planned in the novel.

The novel which Pennell composed and published as *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters* is complex and multi-leveled.

There seems little doubt that it contains a considerable amount of autobiography, especially in the author's portrayal of Lee Harrington. Lee is a central figure, a character-narrator who is meant to hold together the many different strands of the narrative, who is called upon by the author to comment upon them and upon the characters being described, who offers, in his own person, a coherent theme for the book. In addition, it was noticed by the reviewers of 1944 that Pennell's book bore some close resemblance to the recent novels of Thomas Wolfe. This, I believe, is a fair judgment. To a beginning author in the late 1930's, the novels of Wolfe must have seemed a heady brew, and they must have seemed worthy of imitation. Like Wolfe, Pennell does mingle past and present in his story. His book does offer experiments with a variety of literary techniques. It does possess stylistic exuberance, sometimes effective, sometimes defective. At times, it reads like the sort of novel Wolfe might have written if he had set out to write a novel mainly about the Civil War. But saying these things is not being derogatory about Pennell's book.

By making its title a history of a personage, Pennell links his novel with the great tradition of fictions that presume to tell the "true history" of a character; the assumption is, that if a true history is not told, false histories will be, and Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, Foundling* is a great precursor. All of this is significant, for the book fights a running battle with history, or what we think of as history, or what gets published and publicized about the events that make up history, warping the facts to render an untrue picture. An example given by Pennell is that of Clint Belton. To published history, he is an outstanding Union Army commander. The books tell of his "eye of Mars," and they repeat endlessly the stories of his heroism. But those who actually fought with him know that he was a coward at Shiloh, that he killed men in his own regiment who had witnessed his cowardice, that he caught the eyes of his superiors and earned promotions by his generous use of liquor, cigars, and careful toadying. Rome Hanks knows these things and carefully suppresses his knowledge, preferring not to believe the truth that he knows. Thomas Wagnal knows the facts and is circumspect and mostly silent about his knowledge. But known or not, the facts are there and they contradict the histories,

even if they remain only as part of the slowly fading memories of war veterans who are aging and dying and will not talk.

Because the novel is a difficult one to unravel, a structural outline is necessary to disengage some of its many close-woven strands:

1. It is the story of Rome Hanks — Romulus Lycurgus Hanks, whose ancient name may be Hengist — who has fought Indians, has served with Grant in the Mexican War, and serves under Belton in an Iowa regiment through much of the Civil War. He is portrayed as the ideal man and soldier, often seen from the outside and described in admiring terms. He is captured at Atlanta, sent to Andersonville prison, and does not return till after the war. In the post-war years, he cares for his family, moves them from Iowa to Kansas, and dies in the 1880's.

2. Clint Belton is a Harvard-trained lawyer, an officer in the Civil War. He is meant to be a complex figure, who can combine elements of bravery and cowardice within himself, though Pennell portrays him predominantly as an unsympathetic character. In Mississippi, during the war, he meets a Southern woman, Una Theron, and marries her after the war. Practicing law, he is appointed by Grant to be Secretary of War, but his promising political career is cut short when it is discovered that Una has had shady financial dealings that could be attributed to him. He is nearly impeached, is forced to resign, and his wife suddenly dies; he blames all of this and much else on Rome Hanks, and he travels to Kansas in order to murder the man who, he believes, has caused his troubles.

3. Thomas Wagnal, an Edinburgh-trained surgeon of the Iowa regiment, is a friend and admirer of Rome Hanks and a detached observer of the war and of Belton. He marries Una Theron's sister, Katherine, and, after her death, becomes an Episcopal minister. He is witness to the main events of the novel and is frequently the ironic narrator of the true story.

4. Thomas Beckham, son of an English immigrant, enters the Union Army as a boy; and his experiences reflect that point of view. He is wounded at Gaines's Mill, captured by the Confederate forces, and held until sent back in a prisoner trade. After the war he comes to work for Rome Hanks and marries Rome's daughter, Myra.

5. Pinckney Harrington, from North Carolina, fights on the Confederate side at Gettysburg and gives a true picture that conflicts with published accounts. His brother, Jud, is the father of Robert Lee Harrington, who moves to Kansas and marries Rome Hanks's granddaughter, Nora Beckham.

6. Lee Harrington, son of Robert and Nora, is the brooding center of the novel; all of its events are filtered through his consciousness. Obsessed, like Dante, with a Beatrice — in this case, Christa Schell, a spoiled, beautiful girl whom he tries to impress with stories of his heroic Civil War ancestors — he finds that his researches into memory and history take him deeper than he could imagine into the bloody past and into a darker world than he could conceive.

Nothing in the novel is laid out as directly or as flatly as I have made it sound. Instead, the stories emerge as the reader works his way through the dense, complex chronicle of events and personages.

Because so much happens, over a long period of time, to so many persons in the book, many of its reviewers (and it has had only reviewers, never any critical analysis) concluded that the novel suffered from not possessing sufficient structure. It was called a "strange, inchoate book,"⁴ an "incoherent patchwork of incidents,"⁵ and "chaotic, undisciplined, and formless."⁶ Orville Prescott lectured the author: "he scorns the self-discipline of the artist who should know that a novel must have some design, some order, some comprehensible narrative with a flow and pace to it that can hold a reader's interest."⁷

One must make the point that the novel does have a narrative structure, but that the careful structuring of its elements is not readily perceptible to the reader who must read it once, perhaps too quickly, and, as a book reviewer, must render a report on the impressions it has left. Reviewing often works best for an uncomplicated narrative. So the reviewers were at a disadvantage with this novel. They were to be congratulated for finding, in spite of their emphatic qualifications and reservations, some of the real qualities that made *Rome Hanks* seem extraordinary to them; for, after stating their reservations, they all praised the book.

As an instance of the care with which Pennell put together the elements of his novel, let us take the matter of Wagnal, who is a crucial narrator. He appears early in the book, in the second chapter

(p. 6) and is prominent as character and narrator to the end of chapter 37 (p. 296). About sixteen chapters are given, wholly or in part, to his detailed telling of events that occurred during the war and for at least a dozen years after the end of the war. This part of the book is rich, for Wagnal is a superb story-teller. Lee Harrington, his youthful auditor, thinks that he rambles and is sometimes incoherent. That is true; but, mostly, Wagnal has a firm grip on the facts, a sharp eye for the telling detail of place or character, and a sharply ironic view of the events he is narrating. He is a great scene-stealer, often more interesting than the people he is talking about.

Wagnal is used by the author to exemplify two major themes of the novel: memory, its treacheries and delectations, and the contradictions between what "history" tells and what memory confirms or denies. In Edinburgh, not long after the infamous body snatchers, he is able to remember, early in the novel, a snatch of song about the resurrectionists:

Up the close and down the stair,
But and ben with Burke and Hare (p. 8)

and, though this verse keeps recurring in his narrative and worries him, he fails to remember more of it. Likewise, the name of the Crimean sergeant who served under Clint Belton during the war, who always seems to be sneering at him, and who persists as his batman in the years after the war, keeps intruding upon Wagnal's memory. He can't quite call the name up to the surface of his mind; it may be Mibble or Gribble, but it continues to escape him. These lapses seem strange, for Wagnal, of all people, appears to have total recall. He can remember exactly the sound of a bonesaw in the field hospital or the rain dripping from General Grant's hat at Shiloh; he recalls clearly the Confederate soldier, hardly more than a boy, who attempts to stab him with a homemade bayonet, a butcher knife tied to a broom-handle. But as he tells Lee the whole hard story of the tragic war and its aftermath, the floodgates of his memory do open, and the reasons for his lapses become clear. The Crimean's name is not Mibble; it is Gribble. He is Sergeant Herbert Gribble Fell, the Sergeant Fell of ill-fame, a deadly and cruel companion for the fallen Clint Belton, who, by the time this revelation is made (p. 296) has failed in everything, even the intent to kill Rome Hanks.

As soon as Wagnal has remembered this concealed but important matter that his memory has suppressed for so long, he then goes on to remember the rest of the resurrectionist song:

Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief,

Knox the boy that buys the beef (p. 296)

Knox was, of course, the doctor for whom Burke and Hare provided the cadavers for the medical college. When they could not dig up fresh corpses, they killed in order to have bodies for him. The significance of the song's conclusion, and Wagnal's suppression of it for so long, is his intense and lifelong revulsion against what he witnessed and participated in, the terrible and senseless deaths of the war, which reduced living, breathing persons to chunks of dead and decomposing beef. More grimly for the novel itself, and its thematic concerns, the long suppression is a sign of revulsion against death, the agent that reduces everyone from eager, living flesh and spirit to the condition of dead beef. The novel is often a roll-call of death, some during the war, some after, most of them senseless: Rome's brother, Ream (pp. 28-29); the boy whose head, detached from its body, that Wagnal picks up on the battlefield (p. 25); Sion, the brother of Pinckney Harrington, flag bearer at the battle of Gettysburg, who marches on a few, endless steps after his head is neatly blown off, as though still desirous of life (pp. 199-200); Una Belton, who dies in Washington, of pneumonia, after betraying her husband (pp. 259-260); a boy wrongly hanged as a horse thief (p. 221); and Rome Hanks, himself (pp. 306-307).

But even larger than the Wagnal section of the novel, large enough to encompass the entirety of the book, is the consciousness of Lee Harrington; and the novel takes its shape, its attitudes and revelations, and even its unconscious and conscious deletions from the kind of personality he possesses. He starts his researches into the past merely to impress a pretty and flighty girl. But the reader knows, more or less from the outset, that this part of Lee's motivation has failed. He has not impressed his girl sufficiently, he will not have her, he will have to give her up. The sonnet which precedes the narrative tells us all this, though we will have to go back later to understand what we have been told so early. The italicized paragraph which follows the sonnet but still precedes the prose narrative makes it clear

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that Lee's involvement is much deeper than the satisfaction of desire or vanity:

You awake, Lee thought, in the vast night of all the years. You awake somewhere in the vast night: everything is around you, all time forwards and backwards and all space. At night, in your bed, you see everything that has been or will be. And you awake at someplace where you never have been, nor ever will be: You awake at Gaines's Mill, lying in the hot, blood-reddened swampweed with Tom Beckham, or you awake with Robert Lee Harrington, carpenter's bound boy, as he leaves Gadkin County, North Carolina, on his way to make coffins in Abilene, or you awake with Romulus Lycurgus Hanks and General Ulysses S. Grant as they stand in the rain on the night of April 6, 1862 at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee. Or you lie awake lying on your own deathbed in a body you do not know.

All these things that the reader is told even before the story begins are mysteries, and it will take hundreds of pages of narrative before they are made clear. This passage, given before the story proper, is repeated over three hundred pages later (Chapter 39, p. 302); and, by then, much of what has been dream and anticipation has become clear for the reader.

The large scale, the careful planning of this structure does cause Pennell to fall into error. A number of chapters near the end of the novel (44-48) have a hurried, skimpy effect, quite unlike the fullness of earlier portions. Because Lee Harrington has to be born to participate so importantly in the story, Pennell conceives that it is necessary to work out the events, however sketchily, that brought him into the world. And so, in these chapters, Nora Beckham grows quickly from childhood, marries, has her son, amid a kaleidoscopic recounting of enough events to make another lengthy novel. This portion of the novel, which makes it tail off rather ineffectively after so much that was excellent, hardly seems necessary for the reader, who might have been trusted to make the required imaginative leap. But Pennell, convinced of its necessity, carried it through, somewhat relentlessly, and hurt the structure of his tale.

Aside from its structural effects and defects, the book is distinguished by its ability to evoke a scene by rendering an accumulation of details. The battle scenes at Shiloh, Gettysburg, and elsewhere are

marked by this careful attention to the small and telling observation that reveals a whole picture. During Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, Pink Harrington notices a general in an overcoat, and says

It was General Dick Garnett. He was just out of an ambulance and still sick, but he rode in with the men in his old Union army overcoat. I don't think I had ever seen him before and I never saw him after. He was killed that day. I waited until Eighteen eighty-seven to find that out in a piece in the *Century Magazine*. (p. 198)

The same clarity and fullness of detail make the battle scene memorable:

Now that they had us out in the middle of the field, the Yankees opened right up with their cannon. Another solidshot or a shell that didn't explode hit Abner Snead in the right leg and tore it off. The blood spattered on Jud and Reese. Behind Abner a diagonal line of men went down — maybe six. Lige Boggs — Lacey said later — got that solidshot or unburst shell in his belly. It went clear through him and rolled and skipped away on the field as Lige lay bloody and flopping with his guts spillin' out — but already dead, like a chicken with its head cut off (p. 198).

The use of such careful detail work is not limited to the scenes of climax or of battle; it often occurs in small character-building scenes. In an episode that occurs after the war, Myra Hanks, Rome's daughter, goes into his room to look in his bookcase for a book. The case contains what one might have guessed, for Rome is an educated man: volumes of Livy, Suetonius, Darwin, Bacon, Scott, Byron, Shakespeare, "and *Napoleon and His Marshals* by J. T. Headley and a lot of other things that were all too deep for her. Papa was a great reader and smart as a whip" (p. 220). The other items are unexceptionable for a reader who is "smart as a whip," but Headley isn't. Pennell knows, and expects, somehow, for the reader to know, that Headley's books sold in enormous quantities in the 19th Century and would be on many people's shelves, probably unread.

Napoleon, published first in 1846, had gone into fifty editions by 1861, and *Washington and His Generals* was "one of the five secular books to be found on the typical American bookshelf."⁸ Headley was the author of whom Edgar Allan Poe said, "He acts upon the principle that if a thing is worth doing at all it is worth doing well: — and the thing he 'does' especially well is the public."⁹ Knowing all, the reader must make his own judgment about Rome Hanks, who is always presented, by characters in the novel, as heroic and admirable

in every way. A passage such as this undercuts the presentation just a little. The reader may come away still admiring Rome for his heroic and human qualities, still thinking well of his intellectual equipment, but, at the end, a bit suspicious of his weaknesses.

Pennell's novel repays the reader and, even more, the rereader. That it stands, forty years after its original publication, worthy of attention, is a tribute to its author's talents. Fortunately, these talents were recognized by the reviewers who praised the novel even while voicing their objections to its defects. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Hamilton Basso said, "Mr. Pennell, with any luck at all, ought to have a long career as a novelist and, I hope, a happy one."¹⁰ It seems a pity that Pennell did not have a long career as a novelist, that he fell silent after only one more attempt. He might well have become a prolific and powerful novelist of the 1950's. Or, it is possible, in that mysterious way with authors, that he had written as much as he had to say and nothing more could be contributed to the genre during the remaining years of his life.

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NOTES

1. Joseph Stanley Pennell, *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters* (Sag Harbor, New York: Second Chance Press, 1982). Other reprinted novels from the press include Halldor Laxness, *The Atom Station* and Mark Schorer, *The Wars of Love*.
2. Based upon some material sent by Second Chance Press and upon correspondence with Professor Paul Rossman.
3. "Transciency," *Poetry*, 43 (October 1933), 13.
4. Richard Ely Danielson, "Rome Hanks," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 174 (October 1944), 133.
5. "Best Seller," *Time*, 44 (August 7, 1944), 90.
6. Hamilton Basso, "Books," *The New Yorker*, 20 (July 15, 1944), 66.
7. Orville Prescott, "Outstanding Novels," *Yale Review*, 34 (Autumn 1944), 191.
8. Quoted in the article on J. T. Headley in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, this statement originally appeared in the *New York Nation*, in 1866.
9. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902, reprint by AMS Press, 1965), XIII, 209.
10. Basso, 69.