

The background of the cover is a dense, impressionist-style painting of various flowers, including red, yellow, and white blossoms, set against a dark, textured background of blue and green foliage. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, characteristic of the Impressionist movement.

**RENOIR,
MY FATHER
JEAN RENOIR**

**INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT L. HERBERT**

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RENOIR, MY FATHER

JEAN RENOIR (1894–1979), the son of the painter Auguste Renoir, was born in Paris, grew up in the south of France, and served as a cavalryman and pilot during World War I. He directed his first film, *La Fille de l'eau*, in 1925 and followed it with many others, including his masterpieces *Grand Illusion* (1937) and *The Rules of the Game* (1939). In 1975 Jean Renoir received an Academy Award for his lifetime contribution to the cinema.

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Cover painting: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Garden in the rue Cortot, Montmartre* (detail), 1876

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE spring of 1953, from his home in Hollywood, Jean Renoir wrote to the publisher Bennett Cerf:

I would like to attempt to give form to my own recollections of the conversations I had with my father mostly at the end of his life. I won't quote the exact dialogue which I don't remember, but try to give an idea of my past impressions of such meetings and of the way they influence me today. These conversations were about anything: his past experiences, his childhood, our family, his friends, his admirations, and also very much about his suspicions regarding the fast changes in our modern world.¹

The famous filmmaker was then fifty-nine, and would be sixty-eight when the book was published at the end of 1962. When he and his father began their lengthy conversations in 1915, during Jean's long convalescences from successive wartime injuries, Jean was twenty-one, and Auguste seventy-four. The book is therefore the son's nostalgic reminiscences of his father's old age, when he himself was growing old. Their two old ages are movingly brought together in an effervescent blend of nostalgia for an earlier era.

Probably to give a more lifelike tone to his recollections, Jean put his father's words in quotation marks despite telling Cerf that he would not do so. He had no written records of his conversations of 1915–1919, so he drew upon memory and upon interviews

1. *Jean Renoir: Letters*: edited by David Thompson and Lorraine LoBianco (Faber and Faber, 1994), letter of May 30, 1953.

with many who knew the painter, chiefly Gabrielle Renard Slade (1879–1959), who had been his childhood nurse and one of the painter's favorite models and who was now living nearby in Hollywood. He used a tape recorder and, presumably, written notes, as the two "played the little game of taking a trip back into the past." Gabrielle was his principal source for the period before his birth and his early years: "I hardly know which are my recollections and which are hers." Jean also asked friends and researchers to provide him with lengthy excerpts from early writings about Renoir, and the first half of the book consists mostly of a blend of these with available biographies and histories. In addition, he used extensive writings by his father (these have only recently been published²); he quoted three pages of aphorisms from them and elsewhere paraphrased them by putting their thoughts into reconstructed conversations.

Renoir, My Father has the rollicking and sometimes earthy tone of Jean's postwar films, like *French Cancan* (1955) or *The Little Theater of Jean Renoir* (1969), rather than the critical edges of his greatest films, such as *Grand Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game* (both from the later 1930s). But when the roughly chronological account reaches World War I, the book takes on a greater immediacy, perhaps because Jean's wounded leg gave him more sympathy for his father's condition. One can never again look indifferently at Renoir's later portraits and paintings of nudes after reading Jean's recollections of his father's disastrous arthritis. Despite his infirmity, Renoir would only rarely pause from painting and then—this is the filmmaker writing—

Darkness would invade the studio in the Boulevard Rochechouart, helping him to drift back into the past. I would take advantage of the interval to lift him up and hold him firmly while Grand' Louise refilled his rubber cushion with air. Then, with the utmost care, we would lower him into his chair and settle him in the best position. 'What nasty material rubber is! Give me a cigarette, will you?' He drew a few puffs, than let it go out.

2. *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*, edited by Robert L. Herbert (Yale University Press, 2000).

Equally moving is Jean's account of his father's earlier attempts to ward off the arthritis that eventually crippled his hands by juggling with a *bilboquet* (the cup-and-ball game), and, when that was no longer possible, with a smooth wooden stick.

Jean does not offer many details of his father's craft but occasionally gives vivid descriptions of the painter at work, bobbing back and forth from his wheelchair to the canvas with rapid, stiffened gestures, the brush strapped to his wrist. His aged father, he writes,

harassed the subject ceaselessly as a lover harasses the girl who puts up a struggle before yielding. He seemed also to be engaged on a hunt. The anxious rapidity of his brushstrokes, which were urgent, precise, flashing extensions of his piercing vision, made me think of the zig-zag flight of a swallow catching insects. I purposely borrow a comparison from ornithology. Renoir's brush was linked to his visual perception as directly as the swallow's beak is linked to its eyes.

Jean also gives firsthand accounts of some subjects of Renoir's portraits, most notably of the dealer Ambroise Vollard. We learn that Renoir chose the toreador's costume in which he pictured Vollard in 1917 in order to suit what he saw as the swarthy man's exoticism. "He was Othello before," he has his father say; "as he grew older, he became Massinissa, King of Numidia."

The particular charm of *Renoir, My Father* lies in Jean's unself-conscious sliding back and forth between himself and his father. He writes that his father "would have been delighted to know that the atom could be split," and then that the painter "imagined that the microbes of a bad cold, for instance, regarded their own solar system, the inside of his nose, as the center of the world." This seems more likely to be Jean imagining what his father could have said than anything he actually did say. If we needed further proof of this merging of two personalities, we would find it in the lists Jean provides of his father's likes and dislikes, hardly to be distinguished from his own. Auguste liked "Burgundian or Mediterranean roof tiles covered with moss; the skin of a healthy woman or child; brown bread; meat grilled over wood or charcoal fires; . . . workmen's blue jeans after they have been washed and mended a number of times."

Among Auguste's views of life that Jean shared is the dislike of "the fast changes in our modern world" which he mentioned in his letter to Cerf. For both men, materialism, machinery, and mass production stifle the individual and degrade nature and artistic quality; it is the "leprosy of modern industry" that Jean writes about when revisiting his father's sites in Chatou. Nearly every modern encounter in the book with his father's painted places and his family's former residences makes him lament their former state. In Provence nowadays, "the little farmhouses, with Mediterranean tile roofs, have been replaced by apartment buildings of reinforced concrete, and the old mill in the valley has become a night club." In Montmartre, Jean deplores the loss of a garden plot near his father's old studio, replaced by an eight-story building.

In his letter to Cerf, Jean said that he would try "to give an idea of my past impressions" of the meetings with his father, "and of the way they influence me today." *French Cancan*, released two years after he began the book, shows that influence because it is a wistful return to the Montmartre of his extreme youth (he was born in 1894) where memory merged with Renoir's paintings. In Hollywood, where he lived after 1940, his wife Dido's garden made him think of "Paradou," the southern garden in Zola's novel *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*. He surrounded himself with furniture and objects from his father's household, "magic carpets which take me back to the years I am trying to evoke." He used his magic carpets to give delightful accounts of Belle Epoque persons like the actress Jeanne Samary, whom Renoir painted long before Jean was born.

Inserting dialogue as though he and the reader were present, Jean seems to have scripted his book as if it were a film. He recalls living after his father's death on the rue Frochot in a building which legend says was built by the elder Dumas, and that reminds him to insert his father's thoughts about Dumas. From the same apartment on the rue Frochot he could see the building where Jeanne Samary lived. He imagines her leaning out the window, or doing her morning marketing on the rue Lepic. "She must have carefully felt the melons to see if they were ripe, and looked with a critical eye at the whiting to make sure it was fresh."

It would be foolish to object to these cinematic flashbacks, because the appeal and the value of Jean Renoir's book is in his imag-

inative reconstruction of the time and the personages of his father's paintings. We do not object to the same kind of reconstructed past in *The Horse of Pride*, the memorable account of Brittany in which Pierre-Jakez Hélias draws on interviews with his father and grandfather to form an equally nostalgic evocation of an era before his own birth. Both books belong on the shelves of those who wish to understand French culture of a bygone era. *Revoir My Father* is that rarest of documents, a book that brings great pleasure while it reveals the thoughts of two great artists.

—ROBERT L. HERBERT