One day in August 1886, artist and cycling enthusiast Joseph Pennell fell into conversation with two keen cyclists in a tavern in Yorkshire, England. The local wheelmen mentioned a recent magazine article about tricycling in Italy. It was written and illustrated, they explained, by “those Pennells” — the well-known American illustrator who “went around with his wife or his sister or something all over creation.” Joseph nodded politely and changed the subject. Little did the Yorkshiremen know that they were, in fact, talking to one of those very Pennells.

This story, told by Joseph’s wife (not his sister), Elizabeth Robins Pennell, in The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell, speaks to the minor celebrity enjoyed in the mid-1880s by this unconventional husband-and-wife creative duo from Philadelphia. In the final decades of the 19th century, they explored England and Europe by cycle and went on to publish five illustrated books about their trips, including A Canterbury Pilgrimage, An Italian Pilgrimage, and Over the Alps on a Bicycle, and dozens of illustrated magazine articles. The Pennells, with Elizabeth writing and Joseph illustrating, produced some of the earliest and best cycle-travel writing in the 1880s and ’90s. In the process, they helped invent both leisure cycle touring and couples cycle touring.

Unlike their more famous contemporary, Thomas Stevens — who set off on a high wheel bicycle in 1884 on a sensational globe-circling adventure, chronicled in his popular book Around the World on a Bicycle (1887) — the Pennells didn’t seek high adventure in the remote outposts of the globe. Rather they had more modest ambitions for cycle travel, preferring to cover more manageable distances to what might be considered more civilized destinations — picturesque countryside or places of historical or literary interest — staying at inns and hotels en route. In their charming illustrated narratives, they made a brilliant case for cycle touring as a splendid way for moderately adventurous couples to go on vacation.

The Romance of Work

Joseph Pennell and Elizabeth Robins met in the summer of 1881 in Philadelphia when a magazine editor teamed up the illustrator and the writer to work together on an article called “Rambles in Old Philadelphia.” They hit it off famously. After some success in joint publishing efforts, they decided to make their partnership official and got married in 1884 before heading off to London where Joseph had been assigned to illustrate for The Century Magazine.

Cycling was a shared passion during their courtship and early marriage. In their early years in London — when they weren’t hobnobbing with a literary and artistic community that included Oscar Wilde, Dracula-creator Bram Stoker, and the painter James...
McNeill Whistler — the Pennells spun themselves into a flourishing cycling scene of clubs, societies, meets, dinners, and cycling magazines, where they established themselves as early advocates for the emerging phenomenon of cycle touring.

A Tricycle Built for Two
The Pennells’ tandem tricycle may look odd to us now, but in the mid-1880s, such machines enjoyed a surprising popularity. At that time, the high wheeler dominated the cycling world, but it was not easy to ride — getting on and off was tricky, there was no brake, the design was not compatible with Victorian women’s dress, and riders were prone to taking “headers” off a 50-inch mount. Those challenges meant that the ridership of the high wheeler was mostly confined to reasonably athletic men.

Tricycles, although not as fast as high wheelers, offered some obvious advantages, namely, they were more stable, they could accommodate women’s clothing, and they were well-suited to socializing. (A popular side-by-side tandem model became known as the “sociable.”) As a result, tricycles made cycling much more accessible — to women, the elderly, and couples.

In fact it could be argued that tricycling enabled the beginning of mainstream cycle tourism. Although the machine’s extra weight made it a challenge to propel uphill (the Pennells often had to dismount and push theirs), the tricycle, in general, was only a few miles per hour slower than the high wheel on flat ground, was much easier to stop and start (for those who wanted to take a break or admire the scenery), and could accommodate a couple of bags, as well as a second rider, in the case of tandem models.

For the first time, couples could cycle together — and they did. In his 1887 account of the contemporary cycling scene, 10,000 Miles on a Bicycle, Karl Kron listed several instances of married couples, starting with the Pennells (“the happy pair,” he called them), who traveled extensively by tricycle in the 1880s, and illustrations from the period frequently depict couples tricycling together on both social rides and tours.

Horrid things?
The Pennells, however, were sometimes met with surprise or even astonishment when people realized that they were touring together by tandem tricycle. On their trip from Florence to Rome in 1884, for instance, an Italian innkeeper at Empoli expressed amazement that a signora should ride such a strange machine with her husband. While cycling from London to Canterbury the same year, an English tramp laughed approvingly at the Pennells’ front-back setup: “That’s right! ladies first!” he hollered as they rode past. Others were surprised by how far the Pennells could travel on their tricycle. When they stopped for a break in Neuvy, France, a dapper Frenchman and fellow tricyclist on a shiny machine was amazed to discover how far the couple had ridden that day: “Seventy kilometers! It is too much for Madame,” said
the Frenchman with a bow. Elizabeth silently concurred, “In my heart I was of the same opinion. But I declared the ride to be a mere nothing, and almost apologized for not making it longer.”

Tandem tricycles were more common in the mid-1880s than tandem bicycles are today (except in Italy, where most people had never seen one, and crowds gathered every time the Pennells stopped, folks just wanting to touch the strange machine). But at times, tandem riders, then as now, faced a bad rap from some overly serious cyclists. In *A Canterbury Pilgrimage*, Elizabeth told of an amusing encounter with another tandem-tricycle-riding couple in Sittingbourne. The gentleman waltzed up to the Pennells and announced, “I don’t like tandems. Horrid things. Do you like tandems?” It was the first trip he and his wife had taken on one, and he described the frustrations of their journey, from having to sit behind his timid wife to enduring the insults of passing riders who mocked their pokey pace. He explained that he “had been off his machine a dozen times that morning, fighting men who had been chaffing his machine a dozen times that morning, passing riders who mocked their pokey pace. He explained that he “had been off his machine a dozen times that morning, fighting men who had been chaffing him!” That the Pennells didn’t report experiencing any of the same tandem-induced road rage suggests that the problem was more with this particular tandem hater than with the machine itself.

**Tandem trials and treasures**

Like all traveling couples, the Pennells sometimes teased each other. Elizabeth, for instance, loved to make fun of Joseph’s rough social edges, especially his foreign language skills, which had a tendency to evaporate in the heat of actual conversation. She liked to joke that Joseph spoke French only “after a fashion.” (She, meanwhile, was fluent, a by-product of being raised by French nuns in a convent near Philadelphia.) In her account of their tricycle trip across France, Elizabeth related how, arriving late one night at an inn in Abbeville after a long day’s ride, they were devastated to learn that the inn was full. An exhausted Joseph struggled to express his frustration. “[I]n his disappointment,” Elizabeth quipped, “I--- had lost all his French.” Another time, near Lyon, while coasting down a steep hill, the tricyclists almost ran into a child who scampered onto the road. The youngster was fine but the local Frenchwomen cried foul, calling the foreigners every name in the book. Joseph responded in perfect Italian, “Accidente! Maladetta! Brutal!” It seemed that “[i]n a foreign land,” Elizabeth explained, “in moments of intense excitement, he always bursts out in the wrong language.”

In return, Joseph occasionally hassled Elizabeth about that classic pet peeve of tandem-riding couples: a perceived unequal division of labor. Their tricycle was dual drive, and Elizabeth, although a self-confessed novice, took a definite pride in her pedaling contributions, however modest. Still, Joseph more than once complained that his wife was “more of a hindrance than a help to him” on the tricycle. When the going got really rough, like on a headwind day in France, Joseph could lose his patience. Elizabeth recalled how Joseph “kept telling me that if I did not do my share of the work I should kill him.” It’s a complaint that many halves of tandem couples will have thought, if not dared say aloud.

But these were rare moments of discord, familiar to even the most successful tandem travelers. Overall the Pennells’ cycle-travel accounts convey the many joys of touring new places together by cycle. Elizabeth captures the exhilaration of rolling through the countryside of southern England: “We rode on with light hearts. An eternity of wheeling through

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**LITERARY COUPLES ON WHEELS**

The Pennells were the first in a long line of literary couples who cycled together, some of whom also wrote books about their two-wheeled adventures. In the 1880s, not long after the Pennells first hit the road, Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his wife, Mary Louise, could be seen tandem tricycling together around London on a Humber machine similar to the Pennells’. Around the turn of the century, H.G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds* — and something of a cycling fanatic — liked to ride a tandem bicycle with his wife, Jane.

Two of the best-known husband-wife cycle-travel books appeared in the 1980s. The intrepid English travel writer Eric Newby and his wife, Wanda, explored the cold and wet of an Emerald Isle winter on newfangled “mountain bikes” in *Round Ireland in Low Gear* (1987). But the hands-down husband-wife classic has to be Barbara Savage’s *Miles from Nowhere* (1983), her frank, funny, and endearing account of a round-the-globe cycling odyssey with her husband, Larry, that sees them pedal with hippies in California, dodge hurled rocks in Egypt, dash for toilets in India, and make friends almost everywhere.

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**Listening to a Continent Sing**

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such perfect country and in such soft sunshine would, we thought, be the true earthly paradise. We were at peace with ourselves and with all mankind.” What cycle traveler wouldn’t recognize that sensation?

Even apparent disasters could make for fond memories of a trip, the Pennells discovered. Like the time they arrived at a French inn after a day of pedaling in the rain to find all their belongings soaked. The landlady took pity on them, and soon enough, the couple were decked out in borrowed clothes. Joseph garbed in “a short kilt improvised out of a plaid shawl,” a getup that Elizabeth described as “picturesque,” if not exactly flattering. That night they drifted off to sleep to the sound of rain pouring onto the streets outside their window, not much caring what they were wearing.

While the Pennells may have occasionally bickered over the equality of their riding, they had a remarkably equal arrangement when it came to their publications. Elizabeth wrote the text for their books, while Joseph created the illustrations. This one-two creative punch was fabulously successful, as reviewers praised both the light, satirical touch of her prose and the picturesque charm of his images. *The Daily News* called *A Canterbury Pilgrimage* “The Most Wonderful Shillingsworth Modern Literature has to Offer.”

**Bicycling’s Most Famous Couple**

The American couple’s reputation grew in cycling circles; their London residence became a kind of pilgrimage site of its own. Elizabeth’s diary records several visits from admiring fans, including other couples, such as this one in September 1887: “Mr. and Mrs. Harold Lewis of Philadelphia called in the afternoon — just back from a tricycle ride of 2,200 miles, beating our record all to pieces.” Many credited the Pennells’ books for having sent them off on cycling tours.

In the late 1880s, the Pennells swapped their tricycle for a pair of safety bicycles and continued their travels together around Europe on two wheels instead of three, visiting Germany, Hungary, Spain, and Switzerland. By
looking on & giving thanks that I am alive to see it. Go it Boy! You are your own best pilot, & I hope that no effort of yours will fall into the hands of unworthy loafers who simply look for something to lean against. I am here in the woods hard at work making the most of things & I like it. Life to me is one grand symphony. I am still the man who wants nothing. My kind regards, A. H. Overman

Reading between the lines, one is tempted to deduce that Overman wanted Eastman to know that he, Overman, was never an “unworthy loafer” who tried to take advantage of Eastman’s wealth and influence. And that even though he, Overman, had suffered severe setbacks in business, he was content that he could still afford the essentials in life.

Eastman’s response was polite but terse and aloof. “I was glad to receive your cheerful note and to know that things are well with you and that you are happy. That is the most anyone can get out of life no matter what they do.”

Four years later, in 1926, Overman made another futile attempt to reconnect with his old friend. This time, he reacted to newspaper reports that the elderly Eastman, practicing the sport Overman had introduced him to, had successfully slain an elephant in Africa. “I want to congratulate you on your safe return from your great hunt,” Overman offered. “I have enjoyed immensely your photos in the Sunday Times.”

Another four years later, in August 1930, Eastman wrote his last letter to Overman — this time to Max, the elder son, not Albert. “I am truly sorry to hear about the death of your father. Although I have not had the privilege of seeing him for some years, my remembrance of our acquaintance is very pleasant.”

“Acquaintance” hardly seems a worthy description of the tight bond that once connected Eastman and Overman. In the final analysis, its undoing may be due to the simple fact that the business careers of Eastman and Overman followed opposite trajectories — and the resulting tensions simply proved too much for the friendship to bear.

David V. Herlihy is the author of The Lost Cyclist, and Bicycle: The History. He is grateful to Lori Birrell and the entire Department of Rare Books & Special Collections at the University of Rochester for providing access to Eastman’s letters to his mother (which contain valuable information about his bicycle rides of the 1890s) and to Elizabeth Brayer, the preeminent Eastman biographer, for her assistance.

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Buchanan: The Pennells

the 1890s, they had become, according to Pryor Dodge, “bicycling’s most famous couple,” and at least a few other husband-wife teams such as Fanny and William Workman and Charles and Lillian Willis followed the Pennells’ lead and added their voices to the husband-and-wife riding/writing tradition.

The Pennells appear to have stopped cycling in their early 50s. The latest published account of one of their trips dates from 1902, when Elizabeth would have been almost 50 years old. In her 1897 retrospective article “Twenty Years of Cycling,” Elizabeth looks back on their cycling career and offers what amounts to a kind of manifesto of their semi-serious approach to leisure cycle-touring.

“We never attempted to compete with Mr. Thomas Stevens, who first went round the world on a tall bicycle ... our ambition rather was to visit, on the wheel, places that we wished to see. We never ventured to invade unridable [sic] countries or countinents, if we could help it; we preferred to explore countries where our machines would carry us — not where we should have to carry them — and where there were civilized beds and food and comfort.”

“Those Pennells,” so well known in their own day, have been largely forgotten today, but their literary cycling legacy deserves a new audience. Cycling’s first couple conveyed so vividly in words and images what so many others have since discovered when they set out on a “civilized” two- or three-wheeled adventure — that cycling is, for many people, and couples especially, “the most delightful manner of getting about and seeing a country, of taking a holiday.”

Dave Buchanan is the editor of a new edition of the Pennells’ A Canterbury Pilgrimage and An Italian Pilgrimage (University of Alberta Press). He lives in Edmonton, Alberta, where he blogs about the semi-serious cycling life at dustymusette.blogspot.ca.