Twilight of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Picasso, Stravinsky, Proust, Renault, Marie Curie, Gertrude Stein, and Their Friends

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The sub-title says it all. This is a book about the elites of Belle Epoque Paris, primarily about the cultural elites, but also about their patrons, high society, industrialists and fashion designers, and all those who made the headline contributions to that Paris which sticks in the popular imagination. It is a sequel to Dr McAuliffe's *Dawn of the Belle Epoque : the Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and their friends* and it has now been followed by her *When Paris Sizzled : the 1920s Paris of Hemingway, Chanel, Cocteau, Cole Porter, Josephine Baker, and their friends*.⁽¹⁾ A 19th-century publisher would have seen in this a three-volume work, which would perhaps have offered a more elegant presentation, but the times are not propitious for such ventures.

In all three she employs the same formula: a year by year account of the comings and goings of various pre-eminent figures. I was initially sceptical. What use a popular history going over territory already so well-combed? But I was quickly won over. Belle Époque Paris high and artistic society was a small world. McAuliffe's method is to analyse this world through its links and liaisons, through its politics and urbanism, to see what makes it tick.

Her method could be compared to Clifford Geertz' thick description, the effort to describe a culture so intensely and so contextually that one thereby understands its meaning and motivation.⁽¹²⁾ Reading McAuliffe, one understands Belle Époque culture (in the broad sense) as a whole, as an organic interaction of a remarkable cast of characters. McAuliffe gives us a wonderful appreciation for the cooperative element of cultural development; much can be said for individual genius, but even more comes from genius interacting with genius, supported by catalysing agents like patrons and dealers, and drawing sustenance from a flourishing urban environment.

McAuliffe has read enormously and with an eye for the striking detail, the crucial link, the vital moment which catalysed a major change in art, technology or even warfare. She has used not only histories and biographies, but also letters and diaries and drawn from them marvellous insights. I have rarely so enjoyed a book I was given to review. It is, to be sure, popular history, but it is first-class popular history. McAuliffe,

who is an unaffiliated historian living by her pen, has much to teach academic historians (who have often been blinkered by narrow focus or theoretical constraints). Shouldn't we academic historians be writing more books like this?

McAuliffe begins with Picasso's arrival in Paris to visit the 1900 Exposition, in which one of his paintings was displayed. With what proves to be a typically sure transition – it is these links that make the book – McAuliffe provides an insightful sketch of the Exposition and its significance, before moving on gracefully to Art Nouveau:

Fantasy, futurism and the exotic flourished [at the Exposition], but if there was a single style in architecture and decoration that prevailed, it was Art Nouveau – or what by then was referred to in Paris as *le style Mucha*, named after the Czech artist whose late 1890s posters of Sarah Bernhardt had set off a frenzy in the decorative arts. (pp. 1–2)

McAuliffe uses a discussion of Mucha's work in the Exposition to move onto his design for Fouquet's fabulous jewellery shop on the rue Royale, providing the basis for subsequent discussions of art and fashion.

McAuliffe then switches tack, proceeding to a discussion of the construction of the Metro and the engineering challenges met under the leadership of Fulgence Bienvenüe, before returning to Art Nouveau through a discussion of Hector Guimard and his designs for the Metro entrances. The chapter goes on to navigate skilfully back to the Exposition and thence to the early career of the perfumer François Coty before proceeding to the 1900 Summer Olympics. With unfailing deftness of touch, McAuliffe moves back to Picasso's moving in to his first flat on the rue Lepic, the site of an automobile race won by Louis Renault in his first vehicle. Using Maurice Ravel's father's role in early automobile construction, McAuliffe moves on to a substantial discussion of Ravel's struggles at the Paris Conservatoire, and thence to the career of the great fashion designer Paul Poiret.

This kind of summary, like the synopses in opera programmes, risks turning a drama into a textbook case of tedium. Let me try again. Chapter two begins with an extended discussion of Picasso's youth and early career in Paris. This discussion is typical of McAuliffe's strengths. It provides the essential background, delves sensitively but without shrinking into Picasso's personal life, turbulent from the beginning, and then goes on, more seriously, to the role that intelligent dealers played in getting Picasso started. Later, she will introduce the patrons and collectors like Gertrude and Leo Stein, whose support was crucial for artists like Picasso and Matisse.

McAuliffe is gifted at evoking the urban context. She takes two pages to evoke the village atmosphere of Montmartre, at once haven and victim of Haussmann's remaking of Paris, before plunging in to discussions of Matisse, Rodin, Sarah Bernhardt and, surprisingly, Charles de Gaulle, whose father took him to see the divine Sarah in Rostand's *L'Aiglon* for his tenth birthday (which fell in 1900).

From here, the book gathers steam as this cast of characters encounter each other – or fail to meet – in ways that mark their careers. Moving from Zola's role in the Dreyfus Affair to Marcel Proust's famous 1901 dinner for 60 Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards so cleverly mixed that they dined in harmony, McAuliffe deals perceptively with the Affair, the Church's appalling behaviour during the Affair and the consequent separation of Church and state, and the formation of the Socialist Party (SFIO).

McAuliffe's formidable knowledge of the intimate writings of many participants and observers, enables her to deepen insights into these issues. Thus she uses the *Memoirs* of Léon Daudet (he was a guest at Proust's dinner) and the *Journal* of the society priest Abbé Mugnier, finding the passages in which Mugnier's doubts about the hierarchy shine through despite his caution (pp. 48, 101).⁽³⁾ She also manages to slip in the story of Mugnier's (mercifully temporary) fall. He befriended the notorious Père Hyacinthe Loyson, who had been excommunicated following his denial of papal infallibility (p. 192). That was enough for the reactionary Catholic press and for Mugnier's bishop. (Uncharacteristically, McAuliffe misses the chance to follow the

good father's visit to the United States, where he was feted by anti-Catholics and met the heiress he was to marry.⁽⁴⁾

McAuliffe makes equally clever use of the Abbé's comments on or even encounters with artists at key junctures, such as his meeting with Anna de Noailles (p. 207) and his friendship with Marcel Proust (p. 332). Mugnier is only one of many whose letters and diaries she has read with the eye of the gifted historian, finding links and clues overlooked by others in the diaries of the ever present Prussian Count Harry Kessler or the equally ubiquitous Jean Cocteau.

The range of McAuliffe's canvas is remarkable and in this she makes a real contribution. She tells the story of Winnaretta Singer (of the sewing machine fortune), whose artistic and musical sensibilities combined with her marriage to the Prince Edmond de Polignac made her a major force in Parisian culture. Musical evenings at her salon involved 'Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Fauré, and, eventually, Stravinsky' (p. 52), while her husband became a close friend of the American dancer Isadora Duncan, whom he introduced into Parisian society, including to Rodin.

This broad canvas enables the reader to move with constant pleasure from politics to urbanism to sexual encounters (often providing creative as well as destructive sparks), from music – the story of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* is handled particularly well (pp. 57–8) – to art and patronage, from science – the story of Marie Curie, her husband, lover and children is another standout (pp. 61–2, 82 *et passim*) ⁽⁵⁾ – to industry and technology – the stories of André Citroën's building an empire on a special helical double chevron-shaped gear he encountered in Poland, of the Renault brothers building an empire on a vision of lightweight automobiles and a gift for winning motor races (until Marcel Renault was killed in the 1903 Paris-Madrid race) – are recounted memorably. McAuliffe continues the story of the automobile by recounting Monet's passion for the new invention and his memorable family excursion to Madrid, a trip which proved too much for his prized Panhard car but which fortunately left the Monet family intact. And into this story, McAuliffe weaves not only Monet's emotion on finally seeing the paintings of Velázquez and El Greco but also the story of the Michelin brothers and their guide (pp. 93–4). Sarah Bernhardt – part of the central cast – returns to link us to Escoffier and César Ritz's culinary and hostelry revolution, while the effort of the dancer Loie Fuller to obtain radium from the Curies to add light to her dance act led, if not to such use of radium (the Curies were much too responsible to allow that), but to a friendship which in turn brought the Curies into contact with Rodin.

The chapter on 1905 takes us through Matisse's experience in the south leading to his *fauvist* period and through Picasso's traumatic shift from *The Death of Harlequin* toward what would become cubism. And she carries Ravel's struggles with the conservative direction of the Conservatoire over to the revolution which resulted in Fauré's becoming Director and opening the venerable institution to modern composers like Ravel.

I must leave the rest of the pre-war story to the reader and turn to McAuliffe's handling of the war years. I confess a yearning for a slightly different structure. My first thought was that I would have put the First World war at the start of the third volume of such a triptych. But McAuliffe's structure enables her to tell us how the war transformed the lives of her immense cast and how so many of them contributed to it. The extraordinary efforts of Marie Curie in improving care for the wounded are one of the many stories McAuliffe unearths. Another is Edith Wharton's opening of a workshop for unemployed Parisian seamstresses.

There are many touching notes as well. I was particularly affected by McAuliffe's close attention to Alfred Dreyfus' war service: he was in his late 50s but gave himself heroically for the country which had treated him so badly. I was moved as well to learn that Maurice Ravel took a stance against chauvinism. Having proved his patriotism by finally getting into the army despite age and ill health, he refused to join the 'National League for the Defense of French Music, which proposed to ban all public performance of music by German and Austrian composers not yet in the public domain' (p. 307). The sad story of Ravel's decline as a result of his war experience and his mother's death could, however, be treated more clearly. Ravel wrote

some of his most intimate letters to his wartime godmother, Madame Dreyfus' (p. 322). 'Wartime godmother' misleads as a translation of *marraine de guerre*. 'Wartime godmothers' were volunteer pen pals to help soldiers maintain their morale. And by failing to name Madame Dreyfus, McAuliffe opens the possibility of confusion with the wife of Captain Alfred Dreyfus; Ravel's *marraine de guerre* was Mme Fernand Dreyfus, who unfortunately doesn't rate an entry in the index.

Including the First World war in the Belle Époque also enables McAuliffe to point to many changes during the war which foreshadowed the new world of the 1920s: Chanel, Coty, Citroën and Renault all took huge leaps during the war, but so did artists and musicians:

On the afternoon of May 18, 1917, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes presented the premiere of *Parade* – the joint production of Cocteau, Satie, Picasso, and Massine – at a gala benefit for several war charities. ... Apollinaire contributed a program note in which he described the ballet as "*surréaliste*," thus giving a name to the surrealist movement soon to come. (p. 329).

McAuliffe's discussion of this remarkable artistic event, like that of the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* (pp. 248–50), not only informs but also brings the reader inside the event, as if s/he were living all the drama the protagonists were undergoing.

McAuliffe's book makes sense of the many events and phenomena which made up Belle Époque Paris. She has studied the forest while paying close attention to most of the tallest trees. Thanks to her, one has a far better sense of what shaped this remarkable moment in history.

The book is immensely accessible, a great read for neophyte as for professional historians, but perhaps most enjoyable for the educated lay reader, the reader for whom we should all be writing more. The cast is big, to be sure, but many names will be familiar and McAuliffe never fails to identify the names without condescension and without interrupting the flow of her narrative. I couldn't put the book down. Nor will you.

The book is well-presented, with copious and useful end-notes and a full bibliography. It wants only better quality reproduction of the illustrations and a better index. Perhaps Rowman & Littlefield, emboldened by this success, will produce the boxed three-volume edition of which I dream, enhanced by a complete, cumulative index and a portfolio of properly reproduced plates.

Notes

1. Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Dawn of the Belle Epoque : the Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and their friends* (Lanham, MD, 2011); *When Paris Sizzled : the 1920s Paris of Hemingway, Chanel, Cocteau, Cole Porter, Josephine Baker, and their friends* (Lanham, MD, 2016). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, NY, 1973), pp. 3–30. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Arthur Mugnier, *Journal de l'abbé Mugnier (1879–1939)* (Paris, 1985). Cf. Ghislain de Diesbach, *L'abbé? Mugnier : le confesseur du tout-Paris* (Paris, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Timothy Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism : France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2010), pp. 1 ff. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Though, uncharacteristically, McAuliffe misses the point in recounting that the chair of the jury at Marie Curie's doctoral examination expressed congratulations (p. 82). 'Félicitations du jury' is the highest accolade that can be bestowed on a successful candidate and its use in this case suggests that the jury understood the significance of Curie's work. [Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

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