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Abstract

Review of Mary McAuliffe. *Twilight of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Picasso, Stravinsky, Proust, Renault, Marie Curie, Gertrude Stein, and Their Friends through the Great War*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 2014. vii + 418 pp.

Keywords

French culture, Paris, Belle Epoque, World War I

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Mary McAuliffe's *Twilight of the Belle Epoque* explores the cosmopolitan scene in early twentieth-century Paris, which nurtured a cultural and artistic world that spawned advances in literature, art, and technology, as the shadows of World War I loomed on the horizon. Consequently, she perceives these years of cultural, intellectual, and technical innovation and entrepreneurial spirit as masking ever increasing tensions and fault lines that erupted in war. The *Belle Epoque* was, therefore, not a golden age. In addition to the class inequalities existing during the era, the world of the elites and privileged that fostered the dramatic changes she notes ultimately undermined its own existence; thus, it was a world slowly falling apart. It was only in the wake of the devastation caused by World War I that nostalgia ascribed to these earlier years a sense that it was a golden age.

Twilight of the Belle Epoque is an intended sequel to McAuliffe's *Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends* (2011), which detailed the era stemming from the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) to 1900. The arrival of a teenage Pablo Picasso in 1900 to visit the Paris exposition is the event that launches McAuliffe's second account, which concludes with World War I. The book's twenty chapters move along chronologically, from the year 1900 to the year 1918. Although the year 1900 is the subject of two chapters, each year thereafter is the subject of a single chapter.

The book, weaving together brief chronological snapshots of famous figures from the era, is constructed like episodes of a serial drama, moving year by year and continuing the adventures of its cast of characters. The book is written in a style similar to that of narrative historian Barbara Tuchman, whose Pulitzer-prize winning *The Guns of August* remains a classic work. Although not in fashion amongst current academic historians, the narrative history approach to writing about the past remains popular with general audiences, for whom this book is primarily targeted. Weaving vast and sometimes seemingly disparate narratives into a cohesive whole is among the greatest challenges in composing this type of work. Overall, the author is successful in meeting this challenge, although there are moments within the book where it seems to be lacking a clear overarching (or unifying) theme or purpose.

McAuliffe focuses on the figures identified in the book's subtitle, like Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Marcel Proust, Louis Renault, Marie (and Pierre) Curie, and Gertrude Stein, but also Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Jean Cocteau, Isadora Duncan, Sarah Bernhardt, Claude Monet, André Citroën, Paul Poiret, François Coty, Charles de Gaulle, Georges Clemenceau, Sergei Diaghilev, Erik Satie, Misia Sert, Gabriel Voisin, the

Michelin brothers, and others more briefly, like anarchist Louise Michel and Guillaume Apollinaire, who was arrested on suspicion of stealing the *Mona Lisa*. This large ensemble of diverse characters can be overwhelming, making it at times difficult to keep track of who has been doing what. It is also difficult, particularly in the first half of the book, to ascertain the unifying threads of the narrative other than the fact that all of these events are occurring within the same year in Paris. During the latter portion of the book, World War I provides McAuliffe with a specific and single unifying device to unite her divergent stories and cast of characters. Consequently, her narrative is stronger once the war begins, as the events are organized around the war and how it impacts her cast of characters as it progresses. Overall, McAuliffe's narrative succeeds remarkably in humanizing these figures through her insights. The book's greatest strength is its ability to recreate on the written page the world of early twentieth-century Paris, helping to make it return to life in vivid detail. We learn salacious details, for example, about Rodin's womanizing ways, Duncan's nights of passion with Gordon Craig, lots of mistresses and affairs, and how individuals like Picasso and the Curies overcame penury and naysayers to achieve success.

Relying primarily on secondary sources and published primary accounts, the book does not present anything new to academic specialists of this era. Nor does it provide anything more than a superficial analysis of the events at hand. Nevertheless, specialists might enjoy how she brings this vibrant era's colorful characters in the arts and sciences to life. The book as a whole provides an engagingly written introductory overview of the era and many of its most interesting people for scholars and students whose specialties are in other periods or geographic areas. Further, because of its year-by-year construction (which generally allows the chapters to stand alone) and its narrative style, the book could also be used as a supplemental source in undergraduate courses to help make the era, or specific years, "come alive."

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