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Johannes Willms. *Paris, Capital of Europe: From the Revolution to the Belle Epoque.* New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997. xi + 436 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8419-1245-8.

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A Story of Modern Paris

The history of Paris has attracted generations of scholars. Yet, Johannes Willms' wonderfully readable account of Paris from the Revolution through the *Belle epoque* offers what he claims to be the first full telling of the city's past by a German author. It seems fitting that this book, originally published as *Paris: Haupstadt Europas, 1789-1914* (1988), reaches an early climax with the fall of a symbol of arbitrary power–the Bastille–two-hundred years before the destruction of the Berlin Wall in the author's own country. Interestingly, it is less the historical lesson that Willms' *Paris* offers than the drama of its story which is the book's focus.

The title promises a history of Paris as "Capital of Europe." This is an ambitious goal, which the author slightly modifies early on to a portrayal of the city as the "political, cultural, and economic nucleus that… controlled… indirectly (the future development) of Europe" (p. 3). Even this is a formidable task. The broad temporal scope of the project, however, is not unprecedented. The *Nouvelle histoire de Paris* series offers several surveys of the history of Paris.[1] Bernard Marchand, in *Paris: histoire d'une ville, XIXe-XXe siecle* (Paris, 1993), and Norma Evenson, in *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven, 1979), have written urban histories bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other scholars have retained the broad time-frame while narrowing the focus–for instance, Anthony Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850-1970* (Montreal, 1970) and Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton, 1996) [see H-France review, Sept. 1996].

Willms brings considerable writing and research skills to his goal of recreating Paris of the "long" nineteenth century. The author has published widely on modern German history and is also a journalist, presently senior editor of culture and the arts at *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich). In *Paris, Capital of Europe*, the author's two vocations complement each other, especially in a fine eye for detail. The text is divided into seven "Books," most of which are set off by political events. Familiar themes emerge as constants in the author's history of the city: concern with the price of bread, the keeping of building workers employed in order to prevent rebellion, the city's drive for municipal independence against the national government, the increasing social stratification evident in the geography of Paris, and the "social fear" (p. 19) of the upper toward the lower classes. Willms reminds his readers that the bourgeoisie was the "victor" of the Revolution of 1789 (p. 26); that the revolution included violence; and that Paris was often an unhealthy place to live. Utilizing a familiar and in some respects outdated vocabulary, the Paris "mob" becomes the "*peuple*" and then a "proletarianized" "*classe laborieuse*." Progress, in this account, is measured largely in terms of improvements in hygiene and standard of living, both of which are better for Parisians in 1914 than in 1789. Prefect of the Seine Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann, under whom the city was transformed during the Second Empire (1852-1870), is grudgingly given much of the credit for these accomplishments. But for the author these benefits come at a cost: the class warfare of "Bloody Week" in 1871 and the ironic situation "that in the same city where the nineteenth century came on the heels of a revolution that promised 'liberty, equality, and fraternity,' it ended in the excesses of the Belle Epoque" (p. 339).

The great strength of *Paris, Capital of Europe* is the panache with which Willms details the story of Paris. Willms' concise descriptions of the city's administrative history and the financial arrangements that underlay "haussmannization" are recommended to any historian trying to make sense of these complicated topics. But even on these issues the writing is not dry or dispassionate. The author's style encourages the reader to side with the "*peuple*" (even when they are sometimes the "mob" or the "*classe dangereuse*") because they win our sympathy. Individuals are the villains: the "dicta-

tor" Maximilien Robespierre, who perpetrated the "Reign of Terror" (pp. 73, 77); Eugene Cavaignac and the Marquis Gaston de Galliffet, the army generals who acted so ruthlessly during, respectively, the June Days rebellion of 1848 and the Commune of 1871; Napoleon III, who appointed Haussmann; and, especially, Adolphe Thiers, whose policies toward the Commune were inspired by "his dreams [of] bloody repression" (p. 314). It is often a story of heroic and regretful events, enlivened by a sense of the macabre and an eye for the picturesque. Willms' Paris is especially the Paris of Louis-Sebastien Mercier, Eugene Sue, Victor Hugo, and Louis Chevalier.

A stated goal of the work is to let contemporaries speak for themselves (p. xi), and so the text includes the observations of recognizable (and uniformly middle- and upper-class) voices such as Mercier, S. P. Hardy, Arthur Young, Honore de Balzac, Hugo, Emile Zola, and the Goncourt brothers, Edmund Huot and Jules. The author also includes excerpts from numerous German visitors to the city whose accounts may be new and therefore welcome to French or English readers. Willms makes good use of memoirs and published government reports.

Much of the material for *Paris, Capital of Europe* however, comes from older secondary sources. A handful of contemporary scholars whose names will be known to specialists are cited, but their interpretations are not reported. For some readers, the narrative style and the lack of historiographical conversation will be a drawback. The book tells a highly engaging tale, but it does not provide an interpretation of the history of Paris. When the author does offer analysis, his choice of sources and topics settles on many of the same lurid and picturesque themes of Louis Chevalier's *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes* (New York, 1973). It is unfortunate that this 1997 edition of a book originally published in 1988 does not incorporate recent historical literature which pertains to Willms' interests.[2] Readers expecting the text to fulfil its promise of taking the account "to the Belle Epoque, 1871-1914" will be disappointed, as only five of the three-hundred and thirty-nine pages are devoted to the period between the Commune and the Great War. The Boulangist movement (1885-1889) and Dreyfus Affair (1894-1899) receive the barest mention.

In the end, the goal of presenting Paris as "Capital of Europe" proves too ambitious. The formative events of the city's history are sometimes placed in a national context, but hardly ever in a European framework. Historical patterns of industrialization, politicization, migration, and disease are not understood outside their narrow impact. One unfortunate result of the narrative approach to this history of Paris is that it nearly trivializes the Revolution of 1789, which is viewed as less important than the attack on the Tuileries of August 1792. For Paris, 1789 may have been of less immediate relevance than 1792, but for Europe (and the rest of the world) this is too bold an argument. The case for Paris as "Capital of Europe," then, is not really made. Nor did it probably have to be. Willms' Paris presents a good story without the artificial device represented by the title.

Eveline L. Kanes is to be commended for her seamless translation, while Willms has assembled a lengthy bibliography which will profit scholars in the field. Otherwise, the book may appeal especially to a popular audience, to study-abroad students spending a summer in Paris, and to non-specialists looking for a recreational read.

Notes:

[1]. Jacques Boussard, *Nouvelle histoire de Paris: de la fin du siege de 885-886 a la mort de Philippe-Auguste* (Paris, 1976); Jean Chagniot, *Paris au XVIIIe siecle* (Paris, 1988); Georges Dethan, *Paris au temps de Louis XIV, 1660-1715* (Paris, 1990); Pierre Lavedan, *Histoire de l'urbanisme a Paris* (Paris, 1975); Jean Tulard, *Le Consulat et l'empire* (Paris, 1983); Philippe Vigier, *Paris pendant la Monarchie de juillet* (Paris, 1991).

[2]. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (New York, 1986); John Merriman, *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815-1851* (New York, 1991); Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago, 1995); and David Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (Chicago, 1996).

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