

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 64

Janice Best, *Les Monuments de Paris sous la Troisième République: Contestation et commémoration du passé*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010. 282 pp. Illustrated. 28 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-296-11413-5.

Review by Neil McWilliam, Duke University.

William Faulkner's celebrated adage "The past is never dead. It's not even past", though most often—and most pertinently—cited in relation to America's troubled racial history, could serve as a telling epigram to Janice Best's study of commemorative practices during the early Third Republic.^[1] Revisiting *fin-de-siècle* culture wars from their Parisian epicenter, Best focuses on the ways in which contending ideologies manipulated national history by appropriating statues and public buildings as part of an effort to instill their particular vision of France and its future within the population at large. In particular, Best asserts that many monumental initiatives were haunted by the traumas of recent history, centering on the fratricidal conflict that had devastated the capital during the brief existence of the Commune and its bloody suppression in May 1871.

In a city that bore the mental, physical and political scars of violence, she maintains, the process of rebuilding the ruined fabric of Paris entailed, at least for its new political masters, the comprehensive eradication of signs of conflict that opponents of the new order wished to keep alive as a reminder of repression suffered in the past and as an incitement to revolutionary reawakening in the future. Most obviously, public buildings such as the Hôtel de Ville or the Tuileries, both gutted during "la semaine sanglante", faced the new national and municipal authorities with a dilemma: their devastation recalled the city's recent upheaval, yet both were important repositories of civic and national memory. The contamination of that memory by internecine violence, as much as their physical deterioration, rendered both of these historic monuments embarrassing blots on the landscape. In the case of the Hôtel de Ville, rebuilding the Renaissance structure on a somewhat larger scale neatly served to restore a sense of continuity with the past. For the Tuileries, more radical surgery proved necessary: after protracted debate, the shell of the seventeenth-century palace was demolished in 1882 and its architectural debris dispersed across the city. Beyond these very conspicuous scars on the urban landscape, Best argues, the authorities attempted to repair the city's ruined streets through a campaign of beautification in which statues to great figures of the past played a crucial symbolic and ideological role, emphasizing historical continuity and serving as exemplary models of civic virtue. Yet, as she shows, this consensual model of public edification was repeatedly undermined by vigorous dissent, both within the political realm—where the Paris council was often at odds with national government—and on the city street, where individual monuments could serve as flashpoints for protest and dissent.

Best's argument relates to two broader historical debates, concerning the role and significance of public monuments in nineteenth-century France, and the more localized implications of the Commune for cultural production during the early Third Republic. The former issue is most closely associated with French historian Maurice Agulhon, whose seminal studies of the 1970s and '80s were amongst the first to address important questions relating to the ideological

function and formal characteristics of French allegorical statues and monuments to “grands hommes.”^[2] Agulhon’s analysis of commemorative statuary from the First to the Fifth Republics was built around an implicit teleology that equated the colonization of public space by “grands hommes” with emergent democratic institutions and the pedagogical strategies that subtended them. Arguing that the Restoration and Second Empire were least committed to celebrating exemplary figures (other than kings, generals and the like), Agulhon regarded the commemorative frenzy of the Third Republic as the cultural expression of a more open society built upon values of civic humanism. Regarding the street as a potentially valuable annex to the classroom, legislators, he argued, conceived the representation of national heroes as an incitement to individual self-realization and as a stimulus to patriotic devotion. Though conscious that statuary had the potential to focus dissent almost as readily as it could build consensus, Agulhon placed much of his emphasis on the consensual, ideologically inclusive nature of republican commemorative practices. For his critics, Agulhon takes nineteenth-century proponents of “statuomanie” (a term that carried negative moral and aesthetic connotations that Agulhon largely attenuates^[3]) too readily on their own terms, echoing artists and politicians for whom the “great man” in the city square could serve as a form of tutelary deity for a secular society committed to progress and meritocracy.^[4] Yet, as several specialists in French art and cultural history have suggested, the picture is rather more complex than Agulhon’s thesis would imply.^[5] The incidence of vigorous dispute in parliament and the press over particular individuals selected for commemoration, as well as the occasionally violent face-offs that accompanied the inauguration of monuments (or subsequent ritual surrounding them), points to the ways in which memorialization could focus conflict rather than foster consensus. It is this insight, which has become widely accepted by specialists, that forms a central conceptual thread in Janice Best’s new study.

Professor Best’s work must also be viewed from the perspective of recent publications on the Paris Commune and its cultural legacy during the Third Republic. After a long period of neglect, over the last twenty years art historians have subjected this brief but crucial episode to extensive research, exploring artists’ involvement in administrative and museological initiatives under the Commune, as well as visual imagery relating to the uprising produced both during and after the events themselves.^[6] Most contentiously, Albert Boime’s 1995 *Art and the French Commune* argued that the painful legacy of 1871 cast a long shadow over subsequent representations of Paris, notably in work by Impressionist painters such as Monet, Renoir, and Caillebotte. These and other artists, Boime asserted, envisioned the city in ways that contrived to erase the physical traces and psychological trauma of the Commune and its bloody repression. Monet’s 1876 view of the Tuilleries (Musée Marmotton), he argued, sedulously excludes ruins of the fire-damaged palace from a scene that emphasizes harmony, continuity, and social ease. More speculatively, Boime contends that works such as Caillebotte’s *Floor Scrapers* (1875, Musée d’Orsay) or *House Painters* (1877, Private Collection), in which workers engage in the renovation of urban space, comment allusively on the need to cleanse the city following the widespread destruction of 1871. The Commune, as viewed by Boime, works as a structuring absence in many representations of Third Republic Paris—unspoken, concealed, but always stubbornly present.

In many ways, Best takes her cue from Boime’s overall thesis, though the material she discusses helps her frame a generally more convincing case than Boime’s often wayward treatment of visual evidence allowed. Beyond the obvious examples of the Hôtel de Ville, the Palais des Tuilleries, and the Sacré-Cœur (to which she devotes part of a chapter), Best also argues that statues such as Frémiet’s *Jeanne d’Arc* (1872, Place des Pyramides), Barrias’ *La Défense de Paris* (1883, La Défense) and Idrac’s *Etienne Marcel* (1888, Hôtel de Ville) were decisively shaped by memories of the Commune, both positive and negative. Best ranges across a small but significant cluster taken from the 150 statues erected in the city between 1870 and 1914. The

statues to which she devotes most attention—the three previously mentioned together with representations of historical figures such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Danton, Marat, Ledru-Rollin, La Barre, and Etienne Dolet—are unlikely to surprise most specialist readers. Indeed, Professor Best relies very heavily on previously published studies, and it is only in her extensive quotation of often heated debates within the National Assembly or the Paris City Council that she significantly adds to work that has appeared over the last two decades. The seminal exhibition *Quand Paris dansait avec Marianne 1879-1889* (Paris, Petit Palais, 1989) and its outstanding catalog by Daniel Imbert and Guénola Groud, for example, provide the basis for much of the discussion of commemorative statuary, while the public buildings on which she concentrates have all been the subject of comprehensive monographic study.^[7]

Best's citations from acrimonious debates on the city council over proposals to commemorate divisive figures such as Danton or Dolet effectively underline her contention that the interpretation of the past remained a sensitive issue in the early Third Republic. The theme itself has been extensively explored by historians,^[8] and previous work on public monuments has also done much to highlight the ways in which conflicts over the interpretation and ownership of the past inflected the commemorative process.^[9] Her repeated assertion that the past was both malleable and hotly contested comes as no surprise; what is more striking is the limited degree to which Best explores the implications of this assertion in the reception of public monuments beyond the debating chamber. Her discussion of protests and demonstrations, for instance, is generally restricted to the familiar examples of *Jeanne d'Arc* and the *Mur des Fédérés*, both of which tie in with her focus on the legacy of the Commune. It would have been germane, however, to explore the longstanding attraction of James Pradier's allegorical figure of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde, a rallying point for dissident nationalists and veterans' groups throughout the early Third Republic, and a frequent site of conflict. Similarly, proposals for monuments, and the events surrounding their inauguration, were extensively reported in the press, often in highly emotive terms in which the interpretation of contentious individuals or events was well to the fore. Any consideration of the ideological divisions aggravated by public commemoration can only benefit from exploration of this central resource, which Best fails adequately to exploit.

Best's concentration on the Commune as the principal source of antagonism in debates around memorialization, while highlighting an important theme, tends towards a monolithic viewpoint belied by the very multiplicity of ideological fault-lines in the early Third Republic. Her discussion of memorials to figures of religious intolerance—notably the Chevalier de la Barre, Etienne Dolet, Amiral Coligny and Michel Servet—gives insufficient weight to the antagonisms surrounding the Catholic church, notably in free-thinking circles that were well represented on the municipal council. The issues at stake here demonstrate the degree to which the Commune does not in itself provide a singular, over-arching explanation for the conflicts attendant on public commemoration. The subject of "revanche," barely broached in the text, offers a further instance of ways in which statuary could serve as a focal point for dissidents, notably of the right, who rallied behind groups such as the Ligue des patriotes.

Beyond these instances of conflict, whatever their source, it is important to emphasize a more general point: of the myriad monuments to "grands hommes" unveiled in Paris (and beyond) during the early Third Republic, the vast majority failed to excite the mildest dissent. No fewer than 75 percent of statues were paid for and erected by groups of enthusiasts, often brought together by a newspaper, which would co-ordinate their subscription campaign. Keen to express their admiration for a favored historical figure (writer, artist, explorer, scientist...), they would pool their resources to commission a monument that would then have to win government approval before a site could be authorized for its permanent public display. Most of these monuments were entirely uncontroversial, and contributed to a broader republican desire to

celebrate national achievement and promote the conditions for its future perpetuation. It was only as the number and range of figures that populated the cityscape began to reach epidemic proportions that dissident voices were raised to decry the blight visited on the city by “statuomanie”.

Though the commemorative wave broke rather spectacularly in 1914, Best draws attention to some fascinating instances where conflicts inherited from the nineteenth century continue to reverberate today, and where militants of left and right use public monuments as one means of advancing their strategic interests. Best discusses the fantastic plans to rebuild the Tuileries, first mooted in 2003, and explores the campaign to replace the monument to the martyred Chevalier de la Barre, formerly stationed in front of the Sacré-Coeur, with a statue that since 2001 has adorned the square Nadar in the shadow of the basilica. Her account focuses on the Paris city council, which has made particular (if sometimes contradictory) efforts to rectify the commemorative amnesia surrounding the Commune. Beyond these initiatives, it seems clear that the whole issue of commemoration and its relation to notions of citizenship remains a sensitive one in contemporary France. Nicolas Sarkozy’s rhetorical appropriation of an eclectic pantheon of national heroes during the 2007 presidential campaign and his subsequent efforts to instrumentalize the teaching and museum presentation of national history is striking in this regard. Beyond the “Grand Débat sur l’identité nationale,” initiated in November 2009, and in many ways attendant upon it, the president’s promotion of a “Maison de l’histoire de France”, together with initiatives to “modernize” public commemoration, testify to a persistent desire to use the past and its public celebration to forge an increasingly elusive sense of national unity.^[10] Though the monumental impulse, so enthusiastically cultivated during the Third Republic, may seem quaint and anachronistic today, many of the conflicts and concerns that lent it such vitality in the fin-de-siècle echo down to the present.

NOTES

[1] The phrase appears in Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and was most famously (mis)quoted by Barack Obama in his “More Perfect Union” speech in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008.

[2] See, in particular, Maurice Agulhon, “Imagerie civique et décor urbain dans la France du XIX^e siècle,” *Ethnologie française* 5, no. 1 (1975): 33–56 and “La ‘Statuomanie’ et l’histoire,” *Ethnologie française* 8, no. 2 (1978): 145–173, both reprinted in *Histoire vagabonde* vol. 1, 1988.

[3] See Gustave Pessard, *Statuomanie parisienne: étude critique sur l’abus des statues* (Paris: H. Daragon, 1912).

[4] As an example of this discourse, see the speech by Président du Sénat André Dubos at the inauguration of the monument to Ludovic Trarieux, quoted in *Le Temps*, 13 May 1907: “Plus que tout autre régime politique, les démocraties ont le droit de perpétuer la mémoire de grands citoyens, et d’entretenir le culte civique de leurs exemples et de leurs vertus. Le témoignage de la satisfaction nationale constitue le plus digne et le plus efficace stimulant qu’elles puissent offrir aux hommes, pour déterminer et féconder leurs initiatives. En même temps, par cette consécration raisonnée de leurs actes et de leurs mérites, se dégagent au profit de tous, l’autorité morale et les règles supérieures de conduite qui peuvent seules diriger, désormais, une société véritablement émancipée.”

[5] See, for instance, Albert Boime, *Hollow Icons: The Politics of Sculpture in Nineteenth-century France* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1987), June Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris: An Open Air Pantheon* (New York: Vendome Press, 19989), Neil McWilliam, *Monumental Intolerance. Jean Baffier, A Nationalist Sculptor in Fin-de-siècle France* (University Park.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

[6] See, in particular, Albert Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris after War and Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), Gonzalo J. Sánchez, *Organizing Independence: The Artists' Federation of the Paris Commune and Its Legacy 1871-1889* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), Bertrand Tillier, *La Commune de Paris, révolution sans images ? Politique et représentation dans la France républicaine (1871-1914)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004).

[7] See, for example, Bernard Morice, *Paris en son Hôtel de Ville* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1974), Kirk Varnedoe, "The Tuileries Museum and the Uses of Art History in the Early Third Republic," in Francis Haskell ed. *Saloni, Gallerie, Musei e loro influenza sullo sviluppo dell'arte dei secoli XIX a XX* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1981), Jacques Benoist ed., *Le Sacré-Cœur de Montmartre: un vœu national* (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1995).

[8] See, for example, Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), Jean El Gammal, *Politique et poids du passé dans la France fin de siècle* (Limoges: PULIM, 1999), together with numerous essays in Pierre Nora's monumental series of volumes *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris : Gallimard, 1984-1992).

[9] See, for example, Neil McWilliam, "Lieux de mémoire, sites de contestation. Le Monument public comme enjeu politique, 1880-1914" in S. Le Men ed., *La Statuaire publique au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Editions du patrimoine, 2005): 100-115

[10] See the official reports by Hervé Lemoine, former directeur du Musée des monuments français, *La Maison de l'Histoire de France. Pour la création d'un centre de recherche et de collections permanentes dédié à l'histoire civile et militaire de la France*, April 2008, and by the historian André Kaspi, *Rapport de la Commission de réflexion sur la modernisation des commémorations publiques*, November 2008. Both are available on the website of La Documentation française.

Neil McWilliam
Duke University
n.mcwilliam@duke.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172