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Orest Ranum, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism. An Essay*. Revised and expanded edition. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. 403 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-02221-3.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

How many of us might hope to see one of our books appear in a second edition thirty-five years after the original one? It is an astonishing thought. Yet perhaps what is most surprising in this case is that Orest Ranum's classic study of seventeenth-century Paris, which first appeared in 1968 and was reprinted in 1979, did not see a second edition long ago. It has remained continuously on university reading lists since its first appearance and has been read by hundreds of thousands of students and many, many general readers.

Reissuing a classic work after so many years is a major challenge. Should it remain unchanged, true to its original conception? In that case it will inevitably be dated, since in more than a generation the writing of history has been transformed. Or should it be totally rewritten, making it in effect not a second edition but an entirely new work? Ranum has opted to leave it broadly the same, preserving the design and most of the prose of the original, but adding a new introduction and one new chapter, expanding or modifying the discussion within some chapters, and including more and larger illustrations. The new introduction, 'Parisian History as Part of French History', opens with a beautifully written depiction of a peasant boy forced by poverty to migrate to Paris, and it provides a clearer overview of the book's chronology and context. The one new chapter, entitled 'The First Women Writers', redresses some of the gender blindness characteristic of most work of the 1960s and introduces the new theme of consumerism.

The overall argument of the book remains largely unchanged since the first edition. It tells the story of the shift from a medieval city to one that, in its administration and elements of urban design, was recognizably a modern one. Part one, headed 'The Medieval Burden', begins with a portrait of Paris in 1600, when—we are told—the city and its people 'remained about what they had been two hundred years earlier'. This is followed by two chapters detailing the relations of the last Valois kings with their capital, the tumultuous events of the religious wars and the League, and Henri IV's eventual victory and triumphal entry into the city. Part two, 'Foundations of Modernity', recounts Henri's step-by-step seizure of control of Paris and his establishment of a rational 'modern' administration. He then used this administration to create the other foundations of 'Modern Paris': he stimulated industry and promoted major building projects—the Grande Galerie of the Louvre, the Place Dauphine, and the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges) are testimony to his good taste; he founded new hospitals for the poor, and laicised the existing ones. Political stability and royal support created a climate of confidence in which private entrepreneurs, too, were willing to invest, and the Ile Saint Louis, parts of the Faubourg Saint Germain, and the Palais Royal quarter were the results. Henri IV, we learn, set the pattern for building in Paris up to the first half of the twentieth century, and in some respects still today.

These sections are followed by the new chapter, which departs both from the chronological development and from the thematic focus of the preceding ones. Centred on women's literary culture and the creation of a 'new literary public', it uses a case study of a *lingère* to show how widespread female literacy was in mid seventeenth-century Paris, while pointing to her taste for luxury consumption. The bulk of the chapter, though, is about aristocratic women's culture, expressed in the salons, in novels, in letter-writing, and through the literary depiction of intimacy in which women writers specialized. It concludes

with a brief survey of the creation of schools for girls. While adding some interesting material, this new chapter perhaps tries to do too much. Its main intention seems to be to suggest that noblewomen's writing changed the culture of elite Parisians, although this point is not incorporated into the book's overall argument about the nature and sources of change across the century. A significant part of the chapter, furthermore, is about female literacy beyond the elites.

The sub-theme of consumerism, dealt with primarily in this chapter and in a number of new pages added to the chapter on 'The Corporate Parisians', but also mentioned elsewhere, represents the most significant modification to the overall argument. Yet the term itself deserves further discussion: what is described looks more like 'luxury consumption' than 'consumerism' in the modern sense. It would also be worth exploring further the connections implied by references to 'the new writing and consumerist culture that women had created' (p. 147). This statement occurs in the context of a discussion of noblewomen's culture, yet the link between elite women and consumerism appears to run counter to Daniel Roche's work on clothing. Roche suggests that in the late 1600s male noble luxury consumption was, if anything, larger than that of noblewomen and that female influence on luxury spending was greater among bourgeois and even working women.[1]

Throughout the new edition there is greater recognition of social and economic change. The first edition portrayed a city where political changes took place at the top and where the efforts of Colbert drove some expansion of manufacturing, but where social conditions and ways of thinking among the bulk of the population altered very little. The new edition omits the paragraphs describing 'a virtually changeless sea of corporate existence', artisans 'hostile to change and blunted to ignore the world', and the virtual absence of social mobility. Gone, too, is the statement that the people of Paris had no love for their city and did not identify with it (1968 ed., pp. 167, 169, 171), though it is still there in the unchanged epilogue. In the place of these sections is an expanded description of corporate life that details the nuances of status, the diversity of the Paris trades, their vital role in the city's economy, and their relationship to the elites who consumed their products.

A new conclusion to the chapter on 'The Corporate Parisians' asks how far the city and its very ordered society contributed to the development of the arts and sciences in the seventeenth century. The answer is mixed: less than Voltaire was later to suggest in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, but to some extent nonetheless. What counts as a 'contribution' is limited, though, to individuals born in Paris or who lived there for some time and to those working in particular fields, so, in the end, only some architects, the occasional playwright, and a handful of philosophers and writers qualify. The Congregation of St Maur and its luminaries Mabillon and Monfaucon are not mentioned, presumably because they worked on theology and history. Instead, the focus is on Marin Mersenne and the circle of intellectuals connected with him, yet I am not sure one can separate these intellectual worlds in the seventeenth century. It would be interesting to broaden the question and to explore further the link between the urban cultural environment in general and the new developments in philosophy, literature, science, and also in history. Only in Paris was there the critical combination of a mass of scholars, the resources of books and manuscripts, the expanding book trade, the audience, and the constant flow of visitors that made these achievements possible.

The modifications to the new edition do not substantially change the book's argument, but they do add colour to the picture of the middle and lower classes. They also temper some of the earlier judgments. Whereas in 1968 the image presented of medieval Paris was one of religious fanaticism, ineffective administration, and blind traditionalism, the new introduction asks 'could some medieval centuries actually have been more "democratic" than the Parisian governance prevailing in the seventeenth century?' 'This idea', Ranum rightly observes, 'challenges our one-directional sense of progress' (p. 4). Yet other sections of the book seem to conflict with this awareness of change. The title of part one, 'The Medieval Burden', remains the same, and the picture there is very much of a city with 'closed, stagnant corporations . . . still medieval, elitist, and . . . hierarchical' (p. 42). Likewise, 'Parisians remained

transfixed in fanaticism' (p. 56). A second significant modification in the new introduction is the more nuanced view of Louis XIV. 'Clouds from war and defeat were not the only deeply negative consequences of Louis XIV's authoritarian manner of governing', writes Ranum, but also the expulsion of the Huguenots. The origins of 1789 and even of the Terror 'lay in the triumph of the visionary-utopian, rule-creating authoritarianism of the absolute state' (pp. 10-11). Few historians would argue with these statements, yet they contrast strangely with what in the body of the book remains a strikingly positive image of Louis XIV. There, Louis remains a hero, his reign (at least while Colbert lived), 'the golden age of enlightened monarchy' (p. 335). If Louis ignored the terrible conditions in Paris at the end of his reign, we are told, it was largely because his ministers kept him in ignorance.

These inconsistencies are hazards of revision. More significant in determining the extent of the changes to the new edition is Ranum's approach to history. His view of Paris remains essentially a top-down one, and while there is a little more attention to the lives of ordinary people in the new edition, he remains most interested in issues of high politics, of government, and of art and science. For him, it is primarily the actions of a small number of princes and ministers that drive history, and he is unashamedly partisan: public-spiritedness and progressive thinking were the monopoly of a very few elite individuals. Henri IV, with a little help from Sully, built hospitals, restored taste in architecture, and forced the city government to repair the fountains and clean up the city. Louis XIV's wisdom was expressed more in his choice of subordinates, notably La Reynie who 'brought a degree of law and order to Paris virtually alone' (p. 349). Colbert also did great things, and Saint Vincent de Paul, Anne of Austria, and Corneille get honourable mentions, the latter for 'tempering' the French aristocracy. If middle-ranking administrators are occasionally admitted to have played some minor role in the changes that took place in the government of Paris and in the great events of the period, it is because they followed faithfully the orders they were given by their enlightened superiors. The opponents of the Crown, on the other hand, were fairly uniformly misguided. The Seize, leaders of the League, were motivated by self-interest and religious fanaticism (pp. 54, 59). The members of the city government and of the Parlement come across, with few exceptions, either as self-interested or as too afraid of the 'wild behaviour of mobs and armies' to behave in a public-spirited fashion (p. 61). The *canaille*--the word appears repeatedly--were superstitious and wild. Perhaps this was not surprising, given that their family life--indeed that of seventeenth-century Parisians generally--was 'sordid' and loveless (p. 246). Differences of historical approach aside, these judgments seem to me a little too sweeping, and I think it a pity--since Ranum has chosen to make some fairly substantial modifications--that he did not revise them in the light of a generation of work in social and political history.

Admittedly, as he points out at the start of his bibliography, our knowledge of Paris has not benefited from this work as much as that of the provinces (p. 381). Yet there are some fine studies, most of them included in Ranum's bibliography--though curiously that of Leon Bernard is not--and there is much work on religious and social life and on other places that is applicable to the French capital.[2] Ranum knows more about seventeenth-century Paris, and particularly about its political and artistic life, than almost anyone else in the English-speaking world. Even though the new work has not greatly changed his interpretation, I would have welcomed--perhaps in an epilogue--a discussion of the new approaches and their implications for our understanding of the city.

Despite these reservations, the new edition of *Paris in the Age of Absolutism*, beautifully produced by Pennsylvania State University Press and sumptuously illustrated, is very welcome. The first edition was an innovative political history, elegantly written, and displaying great sensitivity to the role of urban planning, architecture, and the culture of the French and Parisian elites. It retains all of these qualities, even after so long, and is still a pleasure to read. It is fascinating to observe just how far ahead Ranum's original work was, in certain respects, of much that was being written in the late 1960s. While he eschews what he sees as the jargonistic language of 'political culture' and 'representations', he nevertheless uses the concepts. And his global vision of seventeenth-century Parisian politics as a struggle between a religious idiom and a 'heroic', chivalric noble culture, with the absolute monarchy

skillfully using elements of both in order to transcend both, remains a challenging and valuable one for both students and scholars.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 107-16.

[2] Leon Bernard, *The Emerging City* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1970).

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