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Susan K. Foley and Charles Sowerwine, *A Political Romance: Léon Gambetta, Léonie Léon and the Making of the French Republic, 1872-1882*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xvi + 315 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-20686-1.

Review by Kristen Stromberg Childers, Independent Scholar.

Léon Gambetta lived a life of personal and political drama in the eventful years of the early Third Republic. From his famous hot air balloon escape from a besieged Paris in 1870 to his untimely death in 1882, Gambetta was never far from the center of constitutional and diplomatic debates that animated French political life. In *A Political Romance*, Susan K. Foley and Charles Sowerwine bring to light another side of Gambetta the statesman, that of a lover and intimate correspondent. Using the letters he exchanged with Léonie Léon, a courtesan who became his mistress, the authors reveal his personal feelings, passions, and insecurities as well as his public successes and failures at the National Assembly. The result is a compelling history of private life in the late nineteenth century, lived under circumstances that both illuminate the particular cultural and gender norms of the age and signal the rather timeless concerns of men and women involved in unconventional relationships, for whom public and private lives are often in conflict with societal mores.

Gambetta rose to national prominence when in November 1868 he testified in defense of republican journalists being prosecuted by Napoleon III and became famous as a fierce critic of the Second Empire. Léonie Léon was in the audience that day, and although it would take her four more years to catch Gambetta's attention, she embarked on a campaign to win him over with her wit and intelligence, as well as her feminine charms. Léon had a child by a former protector, but the father of her son had recently been dispatched to the provinces and she needed to cultivate new prospects in order to survive financially. What may have begun as a practical quest, however, soon became much more and, after some persistence, Léon succeeded in establishing a personal relationship with Gambetta that was mutually satisfying in political, romantic, and social terms. The two exchanged messages almost twice daily, and Foley and Sowerwine have tapped this remarkable trove of 1076 unpublished letters between the lovers to build a rich and personal history of French social life in the 1870s.

Léonie Léon was the daughter of a naval officer from Guadeloupe and lived a peripatetic life until her father became commandant of the garrison at Dunkirk. She attended a convent school there and gained a broad education in language, literature, history and mythology--elements of which she would weave into her letters to Gambetta later on. The family's fortunes took a turn for the worse when her father, Emile Léon, fell ill and was diagnosed as insane. Refusing to eat, he died in the asylum at Charenton, leaving his wife and daughters in poverty and bereft of social standing. Léonie Léon was left with few other options than to become a courtesan, the mistress of a man wealthy enough to keep her and her mother and sister from destitution. The family moved to Paris and, by 1864, Léon began a liaison with Louis-Alphonse Hyrvoix, the man responsible for Emperor Napoleon III's personal security. Hyrvoix claimed paternity of Léon's son, but in 1867 he was exiled to a bureaucratic job in the provinces where she couldn't follow and she found herself once again in dire circumstances.

Gambetta hailed from Cahors, the son of a French mother and a successful Italian grocer, and went to Paris to study law after passing the baccalaureate in 1856. He became a rising star among the republicans and was well-liked as an exuberant and gregarious man by his colleagues. In November 1868, the *cognoscenti* all wanted seats to attend Gambetta's sensational performance in defense of Charles Delescluze, a journalist and opponent of the regime, and although his client was punished with a harsh sentence, Gambetta's powerful speeches made him into a national figure. Léonie Léon initially lost out in the pursuit of Gambetta's affections to another woman, Marie Meersmans, who was also in the audience that day, but Léon set her sights on winning him over and he finally consented to meet her in April 1872.

While their early relationship encountered some hiccups, Léon and Gambetta began a daily exchange of passionate letters that was to continue until the accident that eventually took his life. The letters were filled with love and longing as well as self-doubt and concern; they expressed not only the couple's physical relationship but also more mundane details about daily life and routines. As Foley and Sowerwine point out, the fact that they did not live together meant that these epistles also concerned "their reading, their rambles in the countryside, their trips to the theatre and the Salon, and the Parisian life in which they were so deeply immersed" (p. 3). Indeed, Léon and Gambetta were intellectual and emotional partners as well as lovers, writing to each other about political matters, the books they had read, and their concerns about the health and well-being of family members.

Léon's keen interest in politics and passion for the Republic is perhaps the most striking theme in the sources. Foley and Sowerwine describe the Republic "as almost a third party in their relationship," noting that Léon wrote to Gambetta, "I want you to devote yourself completely to this Republic, your goddess, whose supremacy in your heart I accept" (p. xi). Léon was not simply the dotting admirer, though, and felt free to offer concrete advice and strong opinions about Gambetta's political affairs. She expressed her displeasure when he chose an upscale *hôtel* as headquarters for his newspaper, *La République Française*, fearing that the Right would criticize him for profligacy. She also sent him a "harangue" criticizing his stance that France should not accept Bismarck's invitation to attend the Congress of Berlin, a position he later reversed (p. 163). In his letters, Gambetta often praised Léon for her wise counsel and attributed his successes in parliamentary politics at least partially to her positive influence on him.

Léon herself was apparently disinterested in the first women's rights congress held in conjunction with the International Exhibition of 1878, and Foley and Sowerwine argue that "[l]ike most people of the day, she could not even imagine women as political actors, so deeply rooted were the gender structures of her day" (p. 168). And yet Léon's remarkable insight into current political events and her readiness to share her advice with Gambetta complicates this belief. It may have been that Léon did not advocate women's suffrage or a prominent public role for women in politics, but the very fact that she followed political affairs so closely, and that her wit and intelligence were factors that drew Gambetta to her, would argue that some form of women's political participation was within the realm of the possible. It would have been interesting if the authors had explored this contradiction further, as Léon seemingly provides a case study of just the kind of woman that republicans feared would undermine democratic government. Foley and Sowerwine point out that Gambetta has not enjoyed a reputation as a "founding father" in French history, but his ability to effect compromise in consolidating the constitution of 1875 was an unprecedented achievement in Republican politics. Could it be that Léon's "wise counsel" played a role in shaping this compromise and a vision of the Republic that a majority of Frenchmen could accept?

A Political Romance also brings to light another unexpected subversion of gender norms in describing the way in which Gambetta pressed Léon to marry him but she consistently refused, fearing she would tarnish his political reputation and harm his career. In contrast to the stereotype of a mistress hounding her lover to legitimate the relationship, Léon declined his offers of marriage and feared that as his wife

she would be shunned by society and provide ammunition to his enemies. When Gambetta died, Léon therefore had no right to any part of his estate, and had to rely on the kindness of his friends and associates for her support. The portrait of Gambetta emerging from these letters reflects a thoughtful and compassionate man who wished to make Léon's life better, encouraging her by arranging medical care as she battled with depression, commiserating with her over an unpleasant family situation, and rejoicing in her son's accomplishments in school. The letters offer a rich and compelling image of life for a bourgeois couple in the 1870s, and Foley and Sowerwine draw out their significance in a captivating way that enhances and deepens our understanding of the Third Republic and one of its luminaries.

Léonie Léon and Léon Gambetta were educated and engaging individuals caught within a social framework that conflicted with their private lives and experiences. *A Political Romance* depicts the difficulties of a couple unable to live as a married pair due to Léon's past as a "fallen woman," a past that would have been politically detrimental to one of the heroes of the Third Republic. Now that the current President of France resides in the Elysée Palace with a woman who has been married twice before but is not married to him, one is tempted to declare that such moral restrictions on family and marriage are a quaint relic of past centuries. The former First Lady, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, has nonetheless urged the current one, Valerie Trierweiler, to become a "legitimate wife" of President Hollande in order to ease the public's worry about her role. The fact that almost two-thirds of the French population is said to disapprove of Trierweiler suggests that such attitudes may not be entirely forgotten today.

Kristen Stromberg Childers
Independent Scholar

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