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Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *A Taste for Provence*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. x + 283 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$30 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-32284-1.

Review by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron.

In eighteen short chapters, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz recounts (U.S.) American notions of Provence—starting with Thomas Jefferson’s tour of southern France in 1787 and ending with Horowitz’s own trips in the twenty-first century. Focusing on the years after World War II, Horowitz first establishes a sort of status quo ante. Like Jefferson admiring the Maison Carrée in Nîmes, Americans generally noticed the Roman ruins of Provence but little else. Tales of the rugged landscape and limited accommodations abounded. The first edition of Laurence Wyley’s *Village in the Vaucluse* (1957) was an extended description of what other travelers already knew: Provence was a “traditional” and isolated rural space largely untouched by modernization. Despite some earlier travel accounts and cookbooks heralding the cuisine, Americans did not really “discover” Provence until the 1970s, when Provençal cookbooks flourished, and the region became an important destination for Americans who rented or bought vacation homes. In *Taste for Provence*, Julia Child, Alice Waters, Peter Mayle (whose *Year in Provence* appeared simultaneously in the UK and the USA in 1989), and lesser-known cookbook authors and travel writers receive much attention.

Horowitz is professor emerita of American Studies and History at Smith College, and the book is entertaining in its portrayals of Americana. Horowitz’s detailed description of American cooks’ incredible alarm at using fresh garlic will remind some Anglo readers of things grandmothers used to say. Her enthusiastic personal accounts of shopping and dining prompted me to savor a fabulous *ratatouille* before starting this review. As a playful work in American Studies, the book thus has much to recommend it. Subscribers to H-France need to read it as such, much as we’d read American popular articles and books about France. As the promotional material from the University of Chicago Press puts it, “Summer is finally here.... Some of us will head to the beach or the big city, and the lucky ones amongst us will set off for Provence, land of clear skies and bright sun, gentle breezes scented with lavender and wild herbs.” The book is, in fact, well written and breezy, excellent vacation reading.

At the same time, specialists in French history who expect a monograph will likely be disappointed, as we often are with popular American works on France. While the promotional blurb also states that Horowitz “demystifies” Provence, the book seems rather to explore the myths from within. Provence here is a construction of British and American authors, and its scaffolding can be hard to make out.

Based largely on English-language secondary sources, interviews, cookbooks, travel accounts and guidebooks, the book cannot really consider how American ideas followed, complemented or perhaps challenged French constructions of the space. In 2013, U.S. citizens represented about 1 percent of the travelers to the whole region of PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur); in a sense, U.S. Americans are today, comparatively speaking, few and far between. Even though sometimes more numerous in earlier periods, Americans were always a small percentage of visitors, particularly relative to the French.

Homage is paid here to British cultural assumptions, to the extent that they influenced American ones, thus the lengthy description of Mayle, but since so many of the Americans featured here spoke and read French, surely French notions of Provence had an influence too.

The book seems limited by its primary sources, whose authors did not always acknowledge their social privilege. Clearly, perceptions of social class were operative even if not acknowledged. Horowitz does chide Briton Mayle for watching his sharecropper do all the work before he himself hopped in his private swimming pool, but Americans get off relatively easy. Horowitz notes that in the 1980s and 1990s American buyers of second homes in Provence came “from a wide range of economic circumstances” (pp. 192-93). But let’s be clear; we are not talking about average Americans. Examples begin with Mary Ann Caws, an alumna of Bryn Mawr, and her husband Peter Caws, both university professors, and climb up the social ladder to Atlanta billionaire Anne Cox Chambers, Jimmy Carter’s ambassador to Belgium. On one level, professors are of course not billionaires. On another, whether or not we like to admit it, we constitute part of the American elite, our incomes higher than the median and our travel to France often subsidized or tax deductible. The latter-day writers, professors, and artists catalogued here are less famous than Fitzgerald or Hemingway, who frolicked with Gerald and Sara Murphy on the beach at Juan-les-Pins in the 1920s, but still represent a comparatively well-off slice of American society.

Social distinctions are also important when considering differences among the French. Repeating her sources, Horowitz notes that American tourism was appreciated by the locals, whom David Brooks called “natives” (p. 216). Channeling Mayle, Horowitz notes that “as new residents and visitors swarm in, prices go up, crowds appear...[but] the villagers in Provence don’t mind, for they get to work in construction and services. Those with land make a killing” (p. 225). It’s a generalization begging for analysis. As on the Mediterranean coast, inland tourism creates social winners and losers. Those who own some land can make a tidy profit, if they are willing to sell and move far away. Those who do not own property have increasing difficulty affording housing. As for work, construction jobs are not only tough and sometimes dangerous but also insecure—hence the disproportionate number of North Africans who have worked them in several regions of France. As for the service sector, tourism itself has been quite seasonal in postwar France, concentrated in a few months, especially July and August, so it has never offered tourist regions the prosperity enjoyed by areas with more diverse economies. Old-fashioned as it may seem, if we pay attention to social class, we could better contextualize tourism’s cultural impact.

Horowitz notes that Wyley, in the first edition of *Village in the Vaucluse*, mentions Algerian workers in the village of Roussillon without any commentary. We could take her point and go further with a dip into the archives (I do not know about the departmental archives of the Vaucluse, but those of Alpes-Maritimes are exceedingly rich). Because so much tourist literature—including Horowitz’s sources—effaces those who build, serve, and clean up after tourists, workers can be easy to miss. North African men worked not only in construction in Roussillon but also on roadbuilding, including the Autoroute du Soleil (A8), and on the building of the new airport in Nice, soon the busiest in France after those of Paris. The late 1960s and 1970s, when many Americans flew into Nice in order to “discover” Provence, was also the period in which authorities in the Alpes-Maritimes bulldozed *bidonvilles*, which had housed so many North Africans who built the tourist infrastructure, and herded them into poorly built public housing (ultimately Habitations à Loyer Modéré or HLMs)—mostly out of tourists’ sight and mind. Even Grasse has HLMs, including one only two kilometers from Plascassier, the location of Julia Child’s second home. Clearly, these presumably isolated, lavender-laden paradises existed in a social context.

Frequently the book seems to repeat the language of Horowitz’s sources, which she states often distinguished Provence from the Riviera, an elite American travel destination since the late nineteenth century. The issue for the book thus becomes how Provence was remade for and by Americans, not its continuities with coastal tourism. As Horowitz puts it, “What Provence required was a new definition”

(p. 51); “Americans required it to be reinvented” (p. 69); and “Provence was almost ready to take off as an important place of desire for Americans” (p. 111). The result is a conceptual separation between Provence and the Côte d’Azur; Horowitz notes in the introduction that she’s interested in the “hills of Provence,” not the coast (p. 14). I’m not convinced the distinction works well given the book’s own evidence, not to mention the fact that it was the prefecture in Alpes-Maritimes that worked so hard to get visitors to the coast to venture into the *arrière-pays*, seeing the two as thoroughly connected. Within *Taste for Provence*, many examples blend Provence and the coast. When Horowitz describes Alfred Hitchcock’s “To Catch a Thief,” she refers to Cary Grant’s “house in the hills,” but these are foothills of the Alps that overlook the Mediterranean, not the *arrière-pays* (p. 67). The *grande corniche* on which Grant spectacularly drives has stunning views of the Mediterranean; if we really have to segregate inland Provence and the Riviera, the Riviera gets to keep the *grande corniche*. Moreover, many of the cookbooks here refer to dishes from locales on the Côte d’Azur as well as to those of the *arrière-pays*; if we really have to divide up the two, the latter doesn’t get to have *salade niçoise*.

Even Julia Child, so central to the idea of Americans’ discovery of Provence in the 1970s, was of course no stranger to the Riviera. Her second home, La Pitchoune, may have been imagined by some Americans to be isolated, but it was only fourteen kilometers from Cannes, where she liked the Boucherie Fabre when the butchers of Grasse simply wouldn’t do. Child loved dining at Les Arcades, a restaurant in Biot, some thirteen kilometers away. The airport in Nice, which by the early 1960s had PanAm nonstop jet service to New York, was a mere twenty-five kilometers away.

All that said, this book is in the field of American Studies, not French history, and enjoyable if read for pleasure rather than for work. *Taste for Provence* resembles a playful article in the *New Yorker*, tracking the interests of a certain American elite, those of us with a profound and enduring love of provincial France. It is, in essence, vacation reading *par excellence*, following in the footsteps of a host of English-language popular histories about the “invention” and “making” of the Riviera.[1] If you’d like a good book for the plane, to adapt Julia Child’s famous line, *bon voyage, bonne lecture, et bon appétit!*

NOTE

[1] Mary Blume, *Côte d’Azur: Inventing the French Riviera* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992); Julian Hale, *The French Riviera: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael Nelson, *Americans and the Making of the Riviera* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2008); and Kenneth E. Silver, *Making Paradise: Art, Modernity, and the Myth of the French Riviera* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

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