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Colin Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City*. New York: Viking, 2005. xxv + 566 pp. Maps, illustrations, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-670-03393-6. Reprint ed. New York: Penguin, 2006. \$18.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-143-03671-8.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

Colin Jones has done it again. Following on from his remarkable history of eighteenth-century France, he has succeeded in the almost-impossible: he has produced, in just under 500 pages, a history of Paris that is comprehensive, thought-provoking, and fun. [1]

This is, necessarily, a history of today's city: that is, it is restricted to the administrative boundaries Paris has today and is concerned with explaining how the city came to be what it is. But Jones is equally concerned with emphasizing what has been forgotten historically, and he delights in pointing out what people remember in defiance of official historical record. Since the twelfth century, he suggests, "Parisians preferred myth over memory" (p. 31), although what he shows is often that memory *is* myth. Medieval Parisians liked to think that their city was founded by refugees from Troy, an origin that has the double advantage of making Paris older than Rome and providing a more illustrious ancestry than the small Gaulish settlement that the Romans and later the Carolingians paid little attention to and largely by-passed. Myth is also the memory of Paris that visitors bring with them, even if they have never been there before. Almost everyone knows something of Paris even if what they know bears little resemblance to the real life and history of the city. And Parisians themselves remember a great deal about their city that never happened (as I discovered when I first went there and was fed entirely invented tales of the origins of the Tour Saint Jacques and of the catacombs).

Myth, then, is one of Jones' themes, though he does not use it to organise the book. The narrative is chronological and if there is a central theme it is the relationship between the monarchy and the city. Clovis' decision to make Paris his capital started it on its road to greatness, though Jones concludes that in the year 1000 it "frankly, thus far in its history, had not amounted to very much" (p. 31). It was the Capetian kings who really put Paris on the map as they consolidated their power and associated their capital with their successes. The wall of Philip Augustus was a huge investment both in power and in the city and it was accompanied by a range of architectural and urbanistic developments driven by royalty. There was nevertheless nothing inevitable about this--the crisis of the fifteenth century and the English occupation could have made Paris a very different kind of city. But the English were not very interested in Paris and were driven out, and later French kings returned to build the new Louvre, to straighten streets and to create monuments that reflected the way they wanted to be seen. The Valois rulers mostly treated Paris well, while the Bourbons and their ministers used it to build royal power through the encouragement of science (with accompanying institutions and buildings), the commemoration of military victories through triumphal arches, and the enforcement of public order through both improved policing and the creation of new hospitals in which to incarcerate the poor and the sick.

This may sound like a familiar story, and in some ways it is, though Jones tempers it with a characteristic suspicion of grand narratives. There was no overarching or inevitable scheme. The consolidation of the royal archives in the palace on the Île-de-la-Cité was the result of Philip Augustus losing the royal archives in the battle of Fréteval in 1194 (p. 45). The creation of a vast new hospital system--in part a necessity created by the demolition of city walls--was another way of keeping undesirables out of the city. At the same time it marked the abandonment of the medieval idea that the

view of the sick and poor would inspire piety in the population (p. 164). Jones also wants to show the contradictions and dead ends of royal policy. If Francis I and Henry II tried to make of Paris a “Renaissance showcase,” most of the churches built during their reigns were nevertheless in flamboyant gothic style (p. 115)! Nor does he neglect the other influences that the monarchy had to contend with: population growth and the accompanying problems of supply and crime, the periodic assaults of epidemic disease, a potential rival in the church, and the pride and occasional restiveness of the city merchants. The text is also peppered with well-chosen and amusing anecdotes. Saint Louis reorganised local government and among his efforts was an attempt to limit prostitution by confining it to certain streets: Jones remarks that since these were mainly on the Cité and the Right Bank, “students had to cross the Seine in order to sin” (p. 55). In the sixteenth century devout Parisians picketed brothels and insulted those entering or leaving (p. 114). Late eighteenth-century Parisians spent more on coffee than they did on cheese (p. 191).

The theme of city-monarch relations—a story of power and resistance—works pretty well up to the French Revolution. Even during the eighteenth century, which is covered in a chapter entitled “The Kingless Capital of Enlightenment,” the role of the royal government in shaping the city is central. But following the reign of Napoleon I, I have less sense of a central theme, unless it is “modernity.” Perhaps the city had become too big and its mythology too self-generating to allow even the French state to dominate its destiny, although there is a superb account of Haussmann’s changes. Once again, Jones’ account exposes myths: the majority of “Haussmannian” Paris was in fact built under the Third Republic. At the same time, he suggests, anxieties about modernity encouraged the development of new myths surrounding “le vieux Paris” that was disappearing.

A key way in which Jones introduces additional complexities is by including what he calls “feature boxes.” These are thematic digressions, distinguished from the rest of the text by shading, dealing with aspects of the city that are raised in the chronological narrative but that are singled out for more detailed attention. There is the captivating story of the 2,000 year old death mask of a Parisian child, which introduces two pages on child mortality through the ages, child poverty and abuse, and the conditions that produced both violence by children and the figure of Victor Hugo’s child-hero Gavroche. Many of the feature boxes trace the history of particular monuments or places—the Philip Augustus wall, the Parvis of Notre-Dame, the Procope Café, the Eiffel Tower. A few deal with people, from Saint Genèviève to Marie-Antoinette’s dressmaker Rose Bertin and the black American *danseuse* Josephine Baker. These digressions are well chosen, always entertaining, and enable Jones to explore side-alleys that a strict chronology would render inaccessible.

Knowing the author’s earlier work, some of the choices he makes in this book surprised me. I would have expected greater emphasis on the role of Parisians in building their own city, more on the development of capitalism and of class, and more on the history of science and medicine (though these themes are certainly not absent). There is very little on the Enlightenment, and the Restoration gets short shrift, despite the centrality of this period in the emergence of nineteenth-century bourgeois society and the stellar place of early nineteenth-century Paris in the European scientific world. There is also very little on some of the iconic moments of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Parisian history, the 1848 revolutions and the Commune in particular: it is their repression rather than their creative elements that mainly receives attention, including the sobering comparison between the 20,000 who died in the *semaine sanglante* and the 2,000 killed in the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, the 2,600 executed during the Terror of 1793-94, and the 4,000 shot during the June Days in 1848 (p. 325). May ’68 is also passed over quickly, surprisingly given its place in recent Parisian mythology. This is not criticism but observation. In this kind of book hard choices have to be made. In compensation, the place given to art and literature throughout this book is very welcome, particularly as cultural developments are not seen as reflections of more general trends but rather as actors in the city’s life and mythologies. In place of more conventional approaches to the city’s nineteenth-century history, Jones offers an

extensive and illuminating treatment of the various industrial exhibitions as a way of evoking the changes in Paris and the transformation of the city's image.

The book contains many wonderful illustrations (though some, irritatingly, do not have captions). A series of maps are grouped at the end and would have been more useful scattered through the volume. There is a splendid index which makes it easy to trace themes and concepts as well as individuals. As will be clear from the quotations I have given, the writing is superb: conversational but never condescending, witty but not contrived, evocative and sometimes moving. I learned a huge amount (including some new things about my own period, the eighteenth century). The text is spiced with wonderful images: I particularly like the idea of woolly mammoths grazing close to the Grands Magasins (p. 5). And there are many thought-provoking observations: Paris, observes Jones, is one of the few world cities in which affection forms a central part of its "historical identity" (p. xx).

If you're looking for a book about Paris that will inspire students (and broaden their minds and their vocabularies); for a gift; or simply for something entertaining to read next summer, this is it.

NOTES

[1] Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).

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