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**Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, Eds.,** *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. xv + 344 pp. Illustrations, notes, select chronology, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-84545-021-3.

Review by Cherilyn Lacy, Hartwick College.

Ever since gender came to be firmly established as a “useful category of historical analysis” thanks to the pioneering work of feminist historians in the 1970s and 1980s, subsequent historical scholarship has revisited many established narratives (of political movements and institutions, of industrialization, of intellectual and cultural trends) to examine how women contributed to and were affected by major changes in society. [1] *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914* does this for a rather loosely defined period spanning four decades in the early Third Republic (from the 1880s to the 1910s) that, for all its cultural ferment, political conflict, and social turmoil, would be remembered nostalgically as a golden age by writers of the post-1918 era. This edited collection of twenty-two essays grew out of a conference held in Leeds, United Kingdom, in April 2002 on the theme of women and feminism in France during the *belle époque*, a time when rapid technological innovation was accompanied by euphoria about the triumph of modernity as well as deep anxieties about some of the perceived cultural consequences of this emerging modernity. As several of the essays in this volume note, a great deal of the cultural unease about modern society focused on the “New Woman”, whose more liberated behavior and quest for a career, a cause, or even just entertainment outside the domestic foyer condemned her as “libertine” in the eyes of cultural conservatives.

While the essays are grouped into five major themes, namely feminisms, technology, spectacle, writing, and colonized or “other” women, on a deeper level this project is inspired by a central question very similar to that raised by Joan Kelley Gadol in the 1970s about women and the Renaissance. In their introduction, Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr ask, “[t]o what extent the period 1890-1914 was a ‘Belle Epoque’ for women?” [2] Although the Third Republic saw the expansion of political rights for men, even those among the working classes, women remained excluded from the political sphere. Nevertheless, with the understanding that women’s experiences in France varied according to class, age, education, occupation, sexuality, and geography, the contributors to this volume explore how the rapid technological changes and dramatic expansion of consumer culture of the era afforded opportunities for some women to imagine and enact new forms of womanhood.

Although the first set of essays does touch upon the feminist politics of well-known activists like Hubertine Auclert and Madeleine Pelletier, overall *A 'Belle Epoque'?* shifts emphasis away from the political realm and concentrates instead on the ways that women participated in the public realms of literature and journalism, theater, dance, and art. In this sense, Holmes and Tarr have drawn upon Mary Louise Roberts’ argument that political feminism is merely one facet of women’s resistance to the restrictive norms of womanhood imposed by a patriarchal society. [3] Thus, the second set of essays considers how new technologies such as bicycles, tramways, automobiles, electric lighting and mass printing enabled women to pursue more activities in public as they ventured beyond the confines of the household.

However, whether or not technological advances truly did much to liberate women remains debatable. In her essay on new modes of transport and women’s mobility in Paris, Siân Reynolds acknowledges that working-class women had long enjoyed greater freedom of movement in public than *bourgeoises*,

and that because many working women were employed within walking distance of their neighborhoods their routines were not greatly affected by the new forms of public transport.[4] Noting also that French women generally did not drive automobiles themselves at first, Reynolds concludes that at most, the new modes of transport made it easier for well-to-do women to engage in long-distance travel or venture a little further to do their shopping.[5]

While women eventually adapted to the new transport options, it remains unclear to what degree many women experienced these new technologies as liberating during the *belle époque*, in spite of the alluring, idealized images of women riding bicycles or driving automobiles in the poster advertisements analyzed by Ruth Iskin in her essay. Iskin suggests that such representations of young, attractive women enjoying greater freedom of leisure or confidently engaging in labor that once might have been defined as “masculine” helped make the image of the “New Woman” more acceptable to the social consensus.[6]

While this is an intriguing assertion, it is difficult to assess how greatly tactics of advertising shaped social consensus, or to what extent there was a social consensus about women at all. On the other hand, Naoko Morita’s essay on the dancer Loïe Fuller does offer an intriguing perspective on how one woman manipulated both the technology of electric lighting and the art nouveau fascination with the female form to cultivate a distinctive dance style that elevated her to prominent status as a performance artist. Still, the very distinctiveness of her career leaves the impression that her experience of liberation-through-technology was unique rather than representative of French women overall. Indeed, when considered beside Elizabeth Ezra’s essay on the dissection and reconstruction of women’s bodies by male filmmakers in the early years of cinema, Fuller’s autonomy in cultivating her own self-image seems strikingly exceptional.

Women’s autonomy and their ability to cultivate new expressions of womanhood are explored at greater length in the next set of essays that centers on women and spectacle. Kimberly van Noort examines how women playwrights like Sarah Bernhardt worked to expand the narrow repertoire of roles available to actresses and focused attention on the constraints that marriage imposed on women. Hélène Laplace-Claverie considers the problematic status of dancers and the degree to which they gained freedom from the confines of marital life when so many of them were compelled to rely on the patronage of wealthy men. Similarly, Angela Ryan evaluates Camille Claudel’s sculpture for its innovative representation of human relationships that restored active subjectivity to the female body and positioned groups of bodies without recourse to hierarchy. All of these essays underscore the challenges faced by women artists in seeking to expand the possible expressions of womanhood, as well as their creative reliance on their art as a source of liberation and transformation. Yet it is nonetheless difficult to evaluate the extent to which they had an impact on perceptions of gender or gender relationships, given that for many dancers, and quite unhappily for Camille Claudel, their personal experiences of artistic freedom were tempered by the reality that men still exercised a stifling degree of control over women, financially and legally.

Such tensions surrounding individual women’s efforts to pursue a life beyond the established norms of womanhood serves as a theme for the set of essays devoted to women writers during the *belle époque*. Both Juliette Rogers and Diana Holmes focus on women authors whose novels addressed the difficult choices faced by women who, still constrained by social conventions, were nonetheless afforded new opportunities for careers or passionate involvements in the “modern” era. Rogers argues that regardless of a novel’s outcome, it was significant that female protagonists were portrayed as engaging in a critical evaluation of their individual situations and developing the skills to make decisions about their own lives rather than simply following a prescribed role.[7]

The essays by Jeri English, Tama Lea Engelking, Catherine Perry, and Angela Kershaw confront the complex interaction between the efforts of feminist writers to expand the range of ‘thinkable’

representations of womanhood and the critics' and reading public's reception of their efforts. English considers how, despite the fact that Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Vénus* shocked many readers as pornographic and was eventually censored, male writers and literary critics insisted on salvaging gender norms by casting Rachilde herself as a "naïve, innocent girl"—in essence denying her agency by denying even the possibility that she could be offensive.

In a similar fashion, Catherine Perry examines how male critics questioned Anna de Noailles' legitimacy as a writer, despite her tremendous popularity. Engelking explores Renée Vivien's autobiographical novel about her lesbian relationship with Natalie Clifford Barney, and her strategic appropriation of decadence in order to challenge how the genre portrayed lesbianism. And Kershaw engagingly highlights how the reception of Marguerite Audoux's novels about a working-class woman's life varied depending on what middle-class readers were willing to read about such experiences—particularly if the misery of workers was linked in any way to the behaviors of the bourgeoisie.

The final set of essays centers around French women's writings about Muslim women in Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey. All three share the observation that, in the views of French feminists, liberation for Muslim women lay along the path to Westernization. Both Edith Taïeb, whose essay analyzes Hubertine Auclert's investigation of Algerian women, and Margot Irvine, who considers Marcelle Tinayre's popular novels about Turkish women, note that Auclert and Tinayre emphasized the similarities between French women and Muslim women and highlighted their shared oppression. Whereas Auclert denounced the hypocrisy of France's "civilizing mission" in her quest to argue in favor of voting rights for French women as well as Algerians, Jennifer Yee's essay shows that romance literature written by male authors, such as Charles Géniaux's *Les Musulmanes*, tended to justify the "civilizing mission" as a remedy to the suffering of Muslim women oppressed by the "oriental" tradition of the harem. The articles by Irvine and Yee illustrate that this "oriental" harem that so fascinated the French was largely a myth cultivated by French writers themselves—much like the "belle époque", which Charles Rearick has described as a retrospectively conceived myth. [8] Like the post-war nostalgia for the gaiety and cultural exuberance of the "belle époque", French feminists' perspectives on Muslim womanhood were to a great deal reflections on their own circumstances.

In the end, this volume makes a welcome contribution to the history of women, gender, and feminism by suggesting that there can be many paths to achieving the feminist goal of critiquing gender norms and remaking gender relations, and that a delay in political or legal results does not necessarily mean that the efforts made to re-envision womanhood were "feeble". In their essays at the beginning of the collection, Maire Cross, Maggie Allison, and Anna Norris all stress that a hallmark of feminism is its heterogeneity, and that careers of notable women such as Marguerite Durand, editor of *La Fronde*, or Madeleine Pelletier, physician and feminist activist, were filled with seemingly contradictory acts of deferring to and challenging male expectations. As such, Durand and Pelletier illustrate that no single model can be held up as the standard for evaluating a feminist.

Like Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, whose *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque* showcased the vitality and diversity of feminist writings at the turn of the twentieth century, the contributors to *A 'Belle Epoque'?* offer numerous examples that rigid definitions of gender were challenged as vigorously in France as they were in England at this time, albeit perhaps with different methods.[9] Thus, just as the field of labor history has shifted away from viewing the British process of industrialization as the ideal against which industrialization in other countries is judged "delayed" or "incomplete", collections like *Feminisms of the Belle Époque* and *A "Belle Époque"?* encourage us to view feminists in France on their own terms, rather than as lesser sisters of their British and American counterparts. [10]

The essays in *A "Belle Epoque"?*, while brief, suggest interesting lines for further inquiry based on their creative use of printed sources such as autobiographies, novels, newspapers, and book and theater reviews, as well as visual materials that range from sculpture to poster art to still-shots from early

cinema. Some essays will be of interest to literary historians, others to art historians, while the volume as a whole holds appeal for historians specializing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France and historians of gender and feminism.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

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Máire Cross, "1890-1914: A 'Belle Epoque' for Feminism?"

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#### NOTES

[1] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec. 1986), pp. 1053-1075.

[2] Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 137-164.

[3] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), cited in Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, "New Republic, New Women? Feminism and Modernity at the Belle Époque" in Holmes and Tarr, eds., *A "Belle Époque?"*, p. 20.

[4] Siân Reynolds, "*Vélo-Métro-Auto*: Women's Mobility in Belle Époque Paris", in Holmes and Tarr, eds., *A "Belle Époque?"*, p. 83.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[6] Ruth Iskin, "Popularising New Women in Belle Époque Advertising Posters", in Holmes and Tarr, eds., *A "Belle Époque?"*, p. 111.

[7] Juliette M. Rogers, "Feminist Discourse in Women's Novels of Professional Development", in Holmes and Tarr, eds., *A "Belle Époque?"*, p. 192.

[8] Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment & Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xi.

[9] Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, eds., *Feminisms of the Belle Époque: A Historical and Literary Anthology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

[10] Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns*

*in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-century Industrialization," *Past & Present* vol. 108 (1985), pp. 133-176.

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