Document généré le 12 oct. 2024 05:35

Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

Four Views of Paris: A Review Essay

Rice, Howard C. Jr. *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, Pp. ix, 156. Maps and illustrations; available also in Princeton paper

Gaillard, Jeanne. *Paris la ville, 1852-1870 : L'Urbanisme parisien à l'heure d'Haussmann; Des provinciaux aux parisiens; La Vocation ou les vocations parisiennes*. Paris : Honoré Champion, 1977. Pp. 676. Tables, figures

Gadjusek, Robert E. *Hemingway's Paris*. New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1978. Illustrations. Pp. 182.

Brassai. *The Secret Paris of the 1930s*. trans. Richard Miller. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. Illustrations. Pp. 200.

Barnett B. Singer

Volume 9, numéro 1, june 1980

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019354ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1019354ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Singer, B. B. (1980). Compte rendu de [Four Views of Paris: A Review Essay / Rice, Howard C. Jr. *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, Pp. ix, 156. Maps and illustrations; available also in Princeton paper / Gaillard, Jeanne. *Paris la ville, 1852-1870 : L'Urbanisme parisien à l'heure d'Haussmann; Des provinciaux aux parisiens; La Vocation ou les vocations parisiennes*. Paris : Honoré Champion, 1977. Pp. 676. Tables, figures / Gadjusek, Robert E. *Hemingway's Paris*. New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1978. Illustrations. Pp. 182. / Brassai. *The Secret Paris of the 1930s*. trans. Richard Miller. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. Illustrations. Pp. 200.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *9*(1), 141–153. https://doi.org/10.7202/1019354ar

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1980

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

BOOK REVIEWS

* * * * * * * * * *

FOUR VIEWS OF PARIS: A REVIEW ESSAY

Rice, Howard C. Jr. *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976. Pp. ix, 156. Maps and illustrations; available also in Princeton paper.

Gaillard, Jeanne. *Paris la ville, 1852-1870: L'Urbanisme parisien à l'heure d'Haussmann; Des provinciaux aux parisiens; La Vocation ou les vocations parisiennes*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1977. Pp. 676. Tables, figures.

Gadjusek, Robert E. *Hemingway's Paris*. New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1978. Illustrations. Pp. 182.

Brassai. *The Secret Paris of the 1930s*. trans. Richard Miller. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. Illustrations. Pp. 200.

In recent years, there has been a spate of books with titles like *Images of the City in the Nineteenth Century*, but qualified urban historians still consider the history of urban perceptions a desirable field of study. How do people view cities? How do they act upon these visions in order to modify their lives and the life of the general organism? Is it going too far to suggest, with the sociologist Robert Park, that the city is in fact a "state of mind"?[1] Certainly a city, far more than the traditional country town, is an ever-changing and changeable phenomenon. It is a Pirandellian sort of animal - it depends on what one makes of it. In a sense, it is a whole congeries of possible lives that can be lived, and the talent or inclinations of those confronted with it will reveal its own deepest essences and attributes.

No one could call Thomas Jefferson untalented or incurious about the possibilities of life around him. Jefferson lived in Paris between 1784 and 1789, and Howard C. Rice Jr. has considered the Paris he viewed and what he did there in *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*, a handsome book filled with illustrations drawn from many sources and with excerpts from Jefferson's own meticulous account books. From such sources we know precisely what Jefferson bought (and could buy) in Paris; we know where he went on his daily pilgrimmages in the city and whom he met there.

In the main, he did not visit parts of the capital inhabited by the working class and artisans. The democrat who idealized American yeomen had nothing but distrust for city "canaille," as he sometimes called them; the aristocrat (and I think the two sides of him always lived in eighteenth century harmony) had the rarefied tastes suitable only for a cultured elite.

No, Jefferson's stay passed mainly on the Right Bank and in the heart of what we might call the official Paris of his day. That official Paris was anything but a static thing in the eighteenth century. Architecturally, the Revolution had happened there

before the actual political Revolution occurred in 1789. Especially noteworthy under the late *ancien regime* was the construction of spacious Cartesian *places*, such as the Place Louis XV, which as the Place de la Concorde would see his successor, Louis XVI, mobbed by a crowd anxious to dip handkerchiefs in his blood; and the Palais Royal - thronged in Jefferson's time with strumpets, petty tradesmen, and soon with orators who at the outset of the Revolution would make this Paris' Hyde Park.

What did Jefferson do on his many visits to that forum? Well, as a chess buff, he surveyed chess players, bought books on the subject and acquired a splendid collection of outsized chessmen. He also sought out ivory-handled knives and clocks from tradesmen in the Palais. He ate well; he attended the theatre or puppet shows, and he posed for the new machine called a *physionotrace*, which could trace profiles. Moreoever, he studied Paris fashions, and maybe with a little prurience, if we trust Fawn Brodie's revision[2] on the subject.

Was Jefferson then merely a leisured *flaneur*? Most emphatically he was not. It is always easy to idolize these historical figures to the detriment of the present, but one is in fact struck by the huge difference between one's own uses of Paris (and of travel in general), and Jefferson's. The difference is a thing called curiosity. It should not be forgotten that the eighteenth century still lay under the sway of the scientific revolution, and that the art of discovery, as one might call it, was still highly prized. It might be an extreme example to cite, but where a modern like oneself drives up the Puy-de-Dome mountain for the view, Blaise Pascal had gone up it to discover the laws of air pressure.

Jefferson was no Pascal, nor even a Benjamin Franklin. But he was a first-rate observer and a shrewd imitator of excellence. Again, imitation was a highly sanctioned art of his century, a century imperfectly released from classical models, still anxious to do things in the "correct" manner, until the Romantics came along and scrambled the view of what was correct. And so Jefferson looked carefully at domes and facades, sketched them and would later reproduce them in a young America thirsty for its own norms. American architecture would owe a good deal to Parisian architects, themselves indebted to the Greeks and Romans. And thus ensues a certain transatlantic urban continuity, changing under local conditions, but mirroring the progress of civilization itself. It is a subject that needs its own historian, an R. R. Palmer of urban studies.

It was not only architecture that Jefferson admired; in Paris he boned up on anything and everything he could: on aerostatical experiments (balloonists miraculously aloft), viniculture, the art of coining money, bookbinding techniques and educational institutions. To be sure he had money, but it is to his credit that he did not spend it only on the equivalent of today's three-star meals you see consumed by matrons from Toronto or Montreal. No "jogger," he yet acquired a pedometer, as well as items less startling to us, like thermometers and the sensational

new phosphoric matches. He had goblets and urns made by specialty smiths and busts by great sculptors. Somewhat of a bibliomaniac, he harvested from bookstores by the dozens and from all the other people - publishers, bookbinders, engravers, stationers - associated with the trade. He picked up new kinds of type for American presses, and "the art of multiplying originals."

Over and over, as one reads of Jefferson in Paris, one question suggests itself, "What *is* a city?" Besides its buildings, besides its shopping opportunities, is it not even more so its people? Is it not the human contacts one is able to make? Peoplewise, Thomas Jefferson found himself in the city at a most fortunate moment. The Enlightenment, by this time, was *une chose acquise*, and free discussion of important issues was perhaps one of the greatest things to be found in Paris of the 1780s. Jefferson, the amateur botanist, was pleased to dine on several occasions with Buffon, and the sculptor Houdon, whose bust of Washington Jefferson intensely admired, also became his close friend. But probably most poignant was his association with liberal, cultured aristocrats like the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, a "son of science," Lamoignon de Malesherbes, with whom Jefferson exchanged tree seedlings and Condorcet, that philosopher who saw infinite, marvellous progress on the horizon for all mankind. None of these men would survive the Revolution they had helped make. All had incarnated a spirit of wide curiosity and diversity that the Revolution could not, or would not, accommodate.

Needless to say, it would not have accommodated a Thomas Jefferson either. A city is a place in time, and, as urban historians might do well to emphasize, events like Communes and Occupations do arise to modify it significantly. Somehow, Jefferson was preserved in good North American fashion from witnessing the effects of a great political conflagration upon the human potentiality of Paris. In 1789 (see his *Autobiography*) he would be consulted by dignitaries invited to the Estates General. How exactly *does* one make a revolution? Being the good diplomat, he made his answers studiously neutral and fortunately left the country before the real turn of the screws came in 1792. Jefferson had never to endure the liberal's dilemma of his time, one for which some of his European confrères paid ultimately with their lives.

It is futile to mourn, with Talleyrand, the *douceur de vivre* of pre-1789 Paris. But clearly, Thomas Jefferson had been there at a most propitious moment, especially given his income, connections, learning and mental elasticity. It is just as clear that he did about as much with that Paris on the edge of cataclysm as any individual of his time could do. Again, one is well aware that he ignored the daily misery, even the poetry of the lower orders, but what European artist or writer, not to mention politician, of his time was yet exploring these strata with any real consistency?

Howard Rice's prose is clear and to the point, which would have suited his subject just fine. The limited paperback edition of this book might stimulate good class discussion, but technically-minded students will "get off" on Jefferson's uses of Paris more than

the socially aware, who will want more involvement with the Faubourg St. Antoine.

In no era, however, do we find many people like Thomas Jefferson. Though it would be folly to call him a romantic, he did have the sort of idiosyncratic, even unique, mix about him we would attribute also to a Rousseau or Wordsworth, who would obviously make of their Paris something far different than he did. Maybe the term romantic is a good one to explore further; maybe it can be used in a wider sense than for the traditional windblown and tortured souls with whom we usually associate it.

Thus Baron Georges Haussmann, the celebrated urban planner of the Second Empire, can be called a romantic in terms of the largeness of *his* conceptions, conceptions of what his city of Paris ought to and could become. In Jean Gaillard's *Paris la Ville 1852-1870: L'Urbanisme parisien a l'heure d'Haussmann: Des provinciaux aux parisiens; la Vocation ou les vocations parisiennes* we get a fresh look at a subject already well known to historians of modern France. The first part of Gaillard's book is the most interesting. Haussmann's execution of Napoleon III's visions represents, for Gaillard, a political or official urbanism which made the state itself a kind of Jefferson, a "person" intensely interested in using Paris for its own benefit. Too bluntly, Gaillard emphasizes the fear of revolution as the one overriding motive for driving large avenues through old districts, but her viewpoint (not to mention her voluminous supporting detail) makes sense. Paris was to be radically changed. Almost like a patient faced with an analyst, this was nothing less than the *mise en question d'une ville*.

What kind of city did Napoleon III and Haussmann envision? They envisioned an airy, grand, prestigious agglomeration of vistas and promenades, a city, as Gaillard so aptly puts it, ridding itself of its introverted tendencies and becoming the greatest urban extrovert in Europe.

Is this characterization going too far? I think not. The motivations the author may consider largely political - build big, cheer up the lower classes, put industry in the city and create full employment, smash areas prone to barricades - but ultimately, the greatest revolution was in the *mental* image, the possibility of Paris each inhabitant would henceforth possess. The city would now become a collective patrimony. It would be a city of facades - marvellous streets, marvellous wrought-iron balconies - and would thereby further a certain French tendency to smugness about its civilization. Perhaps this conclusion is going beyond Gaillard's, but it is made while considering certain core French values, like their emphasis on exteriors over interiors (only lately have they begun to invite each other to their homes, instead of meeting at the cafe), values that may not be so immemorial as we think.

Nor would one wish to underplay Haussmann's work in practical areas like sewage, even less to liken him to Augustus' engineers, who pumped 200,000-odd gallons of water per day into Rome largely for show. The Second Empire reformers were not Albert Speers either - their bigness was livable. (Fortunately, the red herring analogy of Second Empire

"fascism" is one with which modern historians have dispensed, a condition that makes all our judgments more realistic.) But when thinking of the "Paris-made-over" (into what we inherited), one is unable to avoid thinking of a logging site, hidden behind a buffer of trees. Once pierced, an apparently endless forest is revealed as vast devastation consisting of only slash and stumps. The outer facade means everything; interiors nothing. However, this analogy works only in part.

It works only in part because the Second Empire, not simply facade-oriented, also saw a "fever" of apartment building, especially in some of the fashionable new sections of the city, largely on the Right Bank and largely attractive to the bourgeoisie. Proprietors made huge profits. But the lower orders benefitted too because the new Paris could offer them so very much. Paris became a melting pot for provincials, who flooded the city on the new railways and found work there. They also found restaurants with fixed prices and market foods not obtainable in villages that no one after Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*[3] would dare romanticize. They found new stores and multiple diversions and ultimately a new version of self, conditioned by the metropolis, to which they of course contributed their own energies and attributes, broadening the life of the *quartiers*, plumping out the definition of "parisien" - the process working both ways.

This formation of Parisians from provincials is the subject of the book's part II. Based on such indices as height and health of new Parisian military recruits, Gaillard advances the interesting thesis that Paris claimed the sturdiest and most imaginative of provincials, in the way that North America would do (or we think it did) in its era of immigration from 1850 to 1920 or so. But Parisian disdain for the provinces would increase sharply. New Parisians, not unlike the Sinatras of North America, imbibed a sense of swagger from the atmosphere. They saw in the revolutionized plate glass windows of department stores, down magnificent vistas, in restaurants, and at semi-legitimate *bals populaires* what bumpkins could not even imagine. The strutting Second Empire type, vulgar and loud and full of newspaper opinions, is typified in Zola's *Assommoir* by Lantier, ravager also of ladies (in a way that village constriction would never have permitted either). Gaillard might have used such literary examples to support her thesis, but no matter. We do get from her books, however, a clear sense of renewed youthfulness in the city, politically imposed, but creating new mind-sets for its citizens.

Part III is more heterogeneous and need not concern us deeply here. It is important mainly in correlating the effect of the new revamped Paris with political currents of the 1860s especially the rise of militant republicanism. What Gaillard does not say - and what she might have guessed at - is the low attention span that the French have had for regimes and their benefits. In the 1850s full employment and beautification of Paris were new; by the late 1860s they were not, and the employment was not so full. Was this not one reason, along with the others usually cited, why the French, and especially the Parisians, had the luxury to criticize Napoleon III and

Haussmann?

Still, the literal luxury of an expanded and sanitized Paris persisted until quite recently, when once again the city, now choked with cars, would need a new direction. For Anthony Sutcliffe, in a fascinating but difficult treatment, Haussmann's reforms made a central Paris that future regimes could not or would not alter. In the democracy of the Third Republic the provinces would not pay for Parisian facelifts; the center of the city was therefore allowed to ossify, to stagnate, to become a great museum of facades. According to Sutcliffe even the Metro, opened in 1900, was one of a series of panaceas that didn't change the major problem. Today, he concludes, we must "reconcile the survival of one of the oldest and most fascinating city centres in Europe with the tribulations of many of those who have to live and work there."[4] True enough, but should Haussmann be taxed for all of this? What about his positive legacy? By the same token, can one only study why Rome declined and fell and not also enquire why it lasted nine hundred years? Moreoever, these putative changers of Paris might well plunge the city from the frying pan of bottlenecks, let us say, into the fire of standardized and uniform architectural mediocrity, even monstrosity. So argues Richard Cobb, in a characteristically jerky and delightful essay on Norman Evenson's recent *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978*.[5] Cobb finds a planner like Le Corbusier clearly anti-Parisian "in his forty-year campaign against the beauty and variety of Paris. How he *hates* the place! With what sovereign contempt does he treat its mindless inhabitants!"[6] Enough actual damage has been done to justify some of Cobb's animadversions - think of the endless prison blocks of Sarcelles - and that allows us to temper Sutcliffe's views. At all events, why blame Haussmann? He lasted quite nicely.

For even if one came to the Paris of 1925, let us say, one was coming to a Paris - Second Empire Paris - that still made good sense. Certainly those foreigners who arrived at that time found little to criticize here. The Paris to which modernists like Ernest Hemingway, Ford Maddox Ford, Gertrude Stein *et al* streamed in the 1920s was paradoxically the Paris of one sober French Protestant technocrat named Georges Haussmann. A recent cull, mostly from the work of Hemingway or his biographers, devoted to this literary coterie in post-World War I Paris, gives another marination in the now-thickened sauce of a subject that has maybe been worked to death. Still, Robert E. Gajdusek's *Hemingway's Paris* deserves to be consulted, especially by unappeased aficionados of the "lost generation."

These aficionados will forgive the rest of us our feelings of *deja vu*. The least forgivable aspects of those famous writers or *literati* - their snootiness, their insularity, their solipsism, their self-important playfulness - have after all been appropriated (finally) by the mainstream of Western culture in our own period. Not that I presume here to play Tom Wolfe and do to the expatriates what he does to the bright young things (and not so bright ones) of our own time. However, the thought occurs. It has to. Some of Hemingway's lines in Gadjusek's book on how Paris is

a *little* too beautiful in spring or how the city is a fickle mistress, slated to deceive youths, will move only the idolatrous. The historian in me reproaches a relentlessly naïve use of Haussmann's city. I doubt that any of those esteemed expatriates even knew who had made those avenues on which they sedulously trolled for their literary dinners.

The romantic in me, however, concedes the use that romantics might still make of the city even a century after Chateaubriand. Hemingway, a romantic? The man who methodically sharpened his pencils at cafes and who bent over notebooks, scalpelling each sentence in a Flaubertian, almost medical devotion to complete truth of style and content? Again we can stretch the definition. By romantic I mean childlike, naïve, unanalytical, accepting, unclaimed by a "realistic" life. Here, Hemingway and his ilk indeed qualify. One should not forget that most of them were still in their twenties, that Paris, compared to the America of Babbitt, certainly allowed one to be what one potentially wanted in his secret heart to be, and that it was above all *new* to them.

The novelty of Paris, indeed of all cities, would make an interesting sub-theme in itself. What did a bum look like through fresh eyes? A Seine Fisherman? A dance hall? A creaking shutter? Sensibly, this book cites a lot of Hemingway's most finely-observed sketches of these (to him) daily novelties. Parisians went on being Parisians, French writers in the main had given up on close observation, which had died with Zola, but Hemingway doggedly kept his eyes open and, to mix a metaphor, his taste buds peeled.

This book full of evocations and pictures has the same attribute as Henry James' travel sketches do. They can make you both love and hate Paris. The smells of comfortless splendour arouse your memory but also make you remember the insufferable and how spoiled one becomes in North America and how much one *likes* it. Hemingway and friends lived ambivalently. Often holed up in toiletless hovels, often skipping meals, they however dressed scrupulously and found occasions for some really fancy feasts or for bashes at the dance halls, with liquor poured out in abundance.

Hemingway used this Paris to harden his new image: modernist, yet primitive enough to love blood sports and to participate in them himself. An exclusive Hemingway mix was ceramically fired here. Paris and its atmosphere permitted him to test the waters, so to speak, of a new artistic style. Also it is undeniably pleasant to write in cafes, and America then had very few of them. It was worthwhile to rub shoulders with such as Joyce or Gertrude Stein or the brilliant and damned poet Hart Crane and to feel oneself sustained by a literary community. How many cities in how many eras had ever provided such a climate for a foreign clique of *literati*? One thinks of fifth century Athens or, to a much lesser extent, of seventeenth century Amsterdam or of Renaissance Florence. But it is also a fact that these American and English writers had almost no meaningful contact with the French cultural community. Perhaps that has no importance since it was the city itself that inspired them. Anyway, the French on their side were quite "standoffish," and if one failed to use the language correctly, one could not expect

final admittance to their world.

Hemingway in Paris helped set a certain imperative for the generation of writers to come; that is, one writes what one is and does. Some consider this largely *pro forma*, that for example he shadowboxed in hotel rooms in order to fabricate a persona. But obviously he seemed authentic enough to impress some pretty fussy characters, fussy, at least, about literary truth, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, for two. These men in Paris already admired Hemingway's inherent modesty toward craft and his respect for literary values.

Such writers used the city and environs as painters of a preceding generation in France had done. And indeed, Hemingway went to museums to study assiduously the use Manet, Degas, Renoir and other impressionists had made of their physical surroundings. The smells of the city, the poignancy of its mist and leaves drove him wild, especially when stimulated by missed meals, liquor or just the intoxication of purpose. Again, Paris is what one makes of it. One can always "do" it on a Michelin Guide, too - there are easier ways to get by.

In the main, Hemingway refused these easy ways out. His lines on pigeons that he stole from the Luxembourg Garden during a harsh winter and then killed for supper have the ring of authentic experience. And certainly he worked. Work, to him, was the kind of cure-all that militarism was to Napoleon. He would let nothing go by. The cheap French leeks he ate in abundance furnished him material for delicate, almost chewable paragraphs. How much should one take for granted as a writer? Cannot too much authorial awareness border on insanity, leaving nothing go by, so that you need a drink to help you close your eyes? Undoubtedly these writers drank partly for that reason. But Hemingway had an austere discipline about him that must also have kept him sane. Rather than be encyclopedic, he made sure that whatever he described he described fully, palpably, so that each Parisian experience was tasted in full. Despite that self-importance and naïveté previously mentioned, the expatriates and physical Paris had a pretty viable marriage going, while it lasted.

In Brassai's *The Secret Paris of the 1930s* we have yet another Paris, another version of this human and monumental congeries. Brassai, or Gyula Halasz (to give him his real name), has written the text to accompany his contemporary photographs and it is very good. He tells us that he arrived in Paris in 1924, from Hungary one would guess. There he espoused a taste for photography and had the idea of capturing on film the Paris *saugrenu* - anything but the spots visited by tourists. This would be a largely human portrait, and like a naturalist, Brassai would not shun the vulgar but rather court it with love.

For intellectuals or avant-garde writers of his day, there used to be a kind of liberationist pantheon, about as compulsory as public school, so it is fitting that from the outset of his text he mentions Nietzsche, Stendhal and Dostoyevski as influences, as unlockers in his enterprise. For they too had been inspired by the unconventional and even the plainly lawless. It is significant that one of Brassai's walking buddies was Henry Miller,

then advancing boldly on his own sexual frontiers in a city that was made for such research and full of what was once considered "evil" in the majority of the Western World. Needless to say, the liberationists have been bypassed. It is as though they had tramped as pioneers on foot through a dusty pass, only to be caught later in a traffic jam of cars speeding over the paved freeway of eroticism.

The word "artist," too, has been pretentiously irradiated of late, but we can safely call Mr. Brassai one. Recently someone characterized art as simply going beyond what the market requires. Perhaps it is also a kind of oblivious passion, or, at least, that element needs to be there. And this photographer certainly had it. His obsession made him photograph Parisian gangsters in their lairs, lovers in attics, two-bit pimps, and on several occasions it nearly got him killed. Once a gangster pulled a switchblade on Brassai and was about to make short work of him, but somehow (like Dostoyevski before the gun barrels) he was spared. He had a number of photographs stolen or burned. Two of his cameras were smashed. He had to overcome much hostility and to learn in Parisian streets the skills of diplomacy and psychology.

Brassai begins with a group of night photographs he took from the top of Notre Dame in 1932, having first persuaded the *concierge* to let him climb up. The photographs come out mostly as milkiness and Paris seemed bathed in something protective. Then come shots of street fairs, with what to us look like pretty tepid "beautiful girls" revealing their delights - a thigh here, some lingerie there - to those who will pay. The photographer omits the bumping cars and all the rest of what has been largely taken over in France by gypsies. "Conchita," a main attraction at the fairs, is shown between two servicemen having beer at a cafe. She has "kiss-me" or spit curls plastered to her forehead, and the men, who might be airmen or sailors, have racially distinct faces. One is undoubtedly Breton, the other, more swarthy, from the South somewhere. The historian lingers over this photograph. These were the kind of men who would eventually have to defend the "domestic" France that Brassai portrays here and who one cannot help but view from the vantage point of 1940. Kind France, saucy France *would* go under. The point weighs heavily. One thinks of Churchill's warning to Andre Maurois in 1935 to the effect that one should not write literature nor think of art but think only of and write about the state of French aviation!

Aviation, the radical innovations of Heinkel and Messerschmidt, did not interest Brassai, obviously. That was a different world. His, for one, was a night world. It was a Paris inhabited by entertainers or by poets searching for bits of inspiration. Secondly, his was obviously a world unconstricted by the demands of family. So he had the leisure and inclination to be drawn to what was bizarre and inverted about the city. In Haussmann and Brassai we have a pleasing contrast; the former builds the sewers and the latter paws around in them.

Along the Seine he ranged, searching for subjects in the wrap of obscurity. One night, probing at crates, he found human dwellers

inside one who might have stepped directly out of Paleolithic times. Like the gangsters they were wary of police and stool pigeons. The police were the worst because they even made you take a bath, removing the dirt that according to bum philosophy protected one from the cold in winter. The bum's wife, Doudou, goes off to the Halles Market to beg at five each morning. A cat nestles also in the rags. The picture of our bum hugging the cat shows a genial glaze in his eye revealing a certain independence and charm co-existing. Again, one wonders, what would such Parisians do after 1940? Would they continue opting out?

Brassai gives us interesting historical data. Where there were some 12,000 bums in Paris of the thirties, by the seventies there are only about 2,000 left, reduced everywhere by the demolition of the central markets, by police and, perhaps, by civilization. Are bums important? Is it important to know that they have different standards of hygiene and think nothing of re-smoking butts picked from the filthy pavement? That they can sleep twenty-four hours under the traffic's roar, sprawled in the street? Is it important to know their version of Paris? Perhaps it is. In general Brassai seems to have been drawn to people with shaky allegiances. We know that many con-men, perverts, thieves would simply adapt under Vichy and start new rackets, including the selling of Jews to the Gestapo. So the realistic historian sees matters differently from an artist like Brassai.

But the artist certainly makes you smell his Paris. To fastidious North Americans the odours of that city even now are probably more striking than they are to Parisians themselves. It would be quite a shock to go directly from say, Copenhagen, where one can almost literally eat off the streets, to Paris, where the food is everywhere and so are the smells. These odours range from marvellous to something less than marvellous. Whole books, for example, would be written on Parisian toilets, and indeed Brassai has a section in here on the urinals of his period, or "Vespasiennes." Brassai's section on the cesspool cleaners of the 1930s is vivid. On certain nights he went around with them and watched as they introduced a pump into reeking holes in the street. The pumped excrement would end up on a barge in the Seine. It was a dirty job but fascinating sociologically. Certain areas had their own consistency of leavings, depending upon how much water was run that day. At night the cesspool cleaners, an intrepid fraternity, would repair, as artists did, to a bistro reserved only for them, and without even washing their hands would dig into sausages and cheese and bad wine. Their faces in the photograph look nothing if not palpable. Charles Peguy, the intellectual's intellectual, once groaned that he wanted to touch the real, the untamed. He should have come to one of these night spots! Brassai's assistant, probably like most of us, was unable to eat a thing at the bistro. He was still overcome by this other Paris.

Working his way through criminals, some of whom look like Jimmy Cagney (or did Jimmy Cagney look like them?), Brassai moves on to lovers and shows a number of couples in cafes or on park benches, well-combed, perfumed, made up, about to embrace. Is romance still in the air? Again, that depends on the beholder. One

makes his own Paris. A couple of years back Mr. Vernon Duke (Dikelsky) died. He had made his own modest contribution to romance by composing a tune called "April in Paris," and in recalling it one is struck by how much a city is an image or figment dependent in our century upon the media. What one sees is styles, modes of behaviour fantastically blown into universality but also transmuted under specific conditions into something all their own.

On goes Brassai to popular dance halls ("Bals populaires"), where again the poses of lower-class patrons seem perfectly congruent with movies of the era. And then the book grows increasingly off-colour in its latter part, although this also depends on one's definitions. The street walkers he depicts seem recently debarked from farms in Brittany or the Auvergne. Such photos provide us a visual archive of just what was once found to be "sexy." Certainly these women would have difficulty qualifying today. Paris used to lead the world in this regard or was far up in the major leagues. Today the major leagues are everywhere, and certain Parisian prostitutes now wear jeans and might be seen walking down the streets of a small North American town, if it weren't for their accent.

One thing this underworld provided Parisians was a source of colourful, constantly-renewed slang, in the way that *sabras* used to coin new Hebrew terms each day. The fat girls of the Rue Quincampoix were called bedbugs or codfish; a pimp was, and still is, a *maquereau*. The city as an energizer of language is another fascinating subject in itself. Underworld slang at times became so *recherché* and snobbish that its own members had difficulty deciphering it.

Brassai, by the way, has this bold way of theorizing that the French have always had. Prostitutes, in his view, lacked normal paternal and maternal affection. They were scared creatures, dreaming constantly of marrying and having a house but constantly in hock to their superiors, harassed by the police, losing their money as fast as they made it. In the photographs, none of that would be apparent. Only a business-like disposition comes through.

Somehow Brassai managed to introduce himself into what were then called houses of illusion or houses of tolerance, before they were closed in a puritanical fever after the Liberation (1946). In a way the name "house of illusion" appropriately stands for what Paris meant to the Hemingways and Joyces. Somehow Joyce felt freer to recall his Dublin from this vantage point than had he felt back in Dublin. Paradoxically, the more closed worlds - Joyce's Dublin, Wolfe's Asheville, N.C. - have claimed better novels and novelists in our century than the more open. Of course there were all kinds of bordellos here catering to different classes. Arthur Koestler, in the spirit of sexual enlightenment, considered it worthwhile that husbands and wives of the better, supposedly more repressed classes could go to such places in Paris and have drinks with unclad ladies of ill repute. This was good mental hygiene. Picasso and a number of other artists were also inspired by these milieux. Houses had all sorts of motifs, including Chinese, Arabian or Greek interiors. The ones

Brassai has photographed don't seem so very wild, however. He shows us a well-combed client playing cards with a fussy obese madam, who like some English duchess once described by Horace Walpole, has "mountains of neck." The girls she offers who are shown half-dressed also seem ordinary by our standards.

On he goes to specialized dance halls, such as the Bal Negre in Montmartre, where classy ladies danced with handsome Blacks from the colonies. Then comes "Kiki of Montparnasse," singer in lowlife bistros beside bluff accordionists, living out a typical life of broken loves and money troubles made famous by Piaf, cursing with charm, singing off-colour songs, ending up a wreck from drugs and drink. Later there are pictures of the goddesses at the Folies Bergère. *Undsoweiter.*

In a way this is the Paris of Colette, especially of her *An Indulgent Husband.* It is the kind of book one can read once with pleasure but only once. It is interesting; it is diverting, but Churchill was correct in stating that tanks and military problems in general ultimately proved more interesting.

Brassai saves his trump cards for the end, and if he is proceeding on the standard of shock value, one cannot blame him. These last photos in the part labelled "Sodom and Gomorrah" seem more redolent of Weimar Berlin than they do of Paris, for one would expect that homosexuality, pervert balls, etc. had been far more prevalent in the former capital. This must certainly have been a minority phenomenon in Paris. Anyway, we have night clubs here where women attired in tuxedos look nothing if not masculine, squiring angular haunted creatures who in those days must have really considered themselves outside the pale. The male dancers are similarly striking.

So here is yet another Paris, a very different one from Thomas Jefferson's. Where Jefferson searched out the useful, Brassai searched out the bizarre and "nasty." What if Jefferson had gone to Paris to find prostitutes and Brassai had taken offbeat photos of glassworks or printing presses? Fashions change quickly, and we can be certain that others will see Paris in their own idiosyncratic fashion and re-make it anew.

Barnett B. Singer
Department of History
University of Victoria

NOTES

1 Park cited in H.J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), p. 1. Dyos' contribution, as well as S. G. Checkland's, makes my point about perceptual history in the urban context.

2 Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Norton, 1974).

3 Subtitled *The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1941* (Stanford: Stanford: University Press, 1976).

4 Anthony Sutcliffe, *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), quote p. 332.

5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

6 Richard Cobb, "The Assassination of Paris," *New York Review of Books*, 28 (February 1980), p. 16.

* * *

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF VICTORIAN LONDON

Wohl, Anthony S. *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977. Pp. xiv, 361.

Jones Gareth Stedman. *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pp. xiv, 419.

British urban historians, led by the pioneering work of the late H.J. Dyos, have increasingly demonstrated that many aspects of the Victorian period and after cannot be comprehended without digesting their detailed findings and reflecting on their conclusions. Historians trained conventionally twenty years ago in political and economic fields have had to come to grips with the work of Dyos, Sutcliffe, Stedman Jones, Tarn and Jackson, to name but a few. This adjustment is essential for teachers of history both because many students are deeply interested in the social effects of urbanization and because it is necessary to integrate the urban dimension with traditional history in order to shed new light on our own research. For example, what historian would now claim to understand the decade of the 1880s without an acute awareness of the housing crisis which preoccupied politicians, churchmen, journalists and the general public. Yet to open the standard biographies of politicians such as Gladstone, Chamberlain and Salisbury is to read hundreds of pages about Ireland, Egypt, radicalism and electoral reform with scarcely a mention of housing in Gladstone's case and only fragmentary references to Chamberlain's and Salisbury's interests in urban problems. Is it not profoundly revealing that Wohl can demonstrate that Gladstone was "totally uninterested" in housing reform, whereas Chamberlain and, to a greater degree, Salisbury had keen insights into the dilemma and constructive policies to deal with some housing and casual labour problems? Moreover, Wohl is surely correct to claim that, until the Fabians, the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party, as well as other socialist groups, are studied with greater reference to the urban crisis (in London especially), we shall be limited to incomplete rehashings of internal political struggles, personality dissections and stale reviews of their programmes for change.

It is a mark of Wohl's achievement that in his ranging study he should force us to re-examine traditional views of politicians and parties, philanthropy and governmental finance, while at the same time presenting the fullest examination to date of urban dilemmas in Britain's capital. While London was not in the vanguard of many important urban reform movements, he justifies yet another study of that city in terms both of its sheer size when compared with other British cities and its unique importance to the United Kingdom and Western Europe generally. If his book lacks the analysis of the de-industrialization of Victorian London, carefully developed by