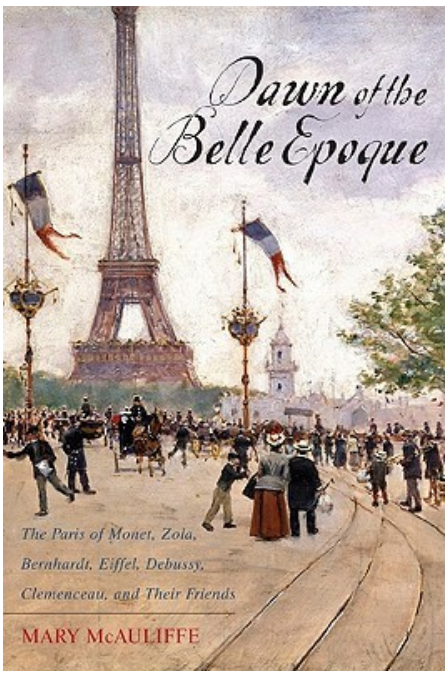

Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends

Mary McAuliffe

Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends

Mary McAuliffe

Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends Mary McAuliffe
A humiliating military defeat by Bismarck's Germany, a brutal siege, and a bloody uprising Paris in 1871 was a shambles, and the question loomed, "Could this extraordinary city even survive?" Mary McAuliffe takes the reader back to these perilous years following the abrupt collapse of the Second Empire and France's uncertain venture into the Third Republic.

By 1900, Paris had recovered and the Belle Epoque was in full flower, but the decades between were difficult, marked by struggles between republicans and monarchists, the Republic and the Church, and an ongoing economic malaise, darkened by a rising tide of virulent anti-Semitism.

Yet these same years also witnessed an extraordinary blossoming in art, literature, poetry, and music, with the Parisian cultural scene dramatically upended by revolutionaries such as Monet, Zola, Rodin, and Debussy, even while Gustave Eiffel was challenging architectural tradition with his iconic tower. Through the eyes of these pioneers and others, including Sarah Bernhardt, Georges Clemenceau, Marie Curie, and Cesar Ritz, we witness their struggles with the forces of tradition during the final years of a century hurtling towards its close. Through rich illustrations and evocative narrative, McAuliffe brings this vibrant and seminal era to life."

Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends Details

Date	:	Published June 16th 2011 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (first published January 1st 2011)
ISBN	:	9781442209275
Author	:	Mary McAuliffe
Format	:	Paperback 387 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Cultural, France, Art, Music

From Reader Review Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends for online ebook

Bev Simpson says

As a Europhile, and being so fortunate to have visited so many of the places discussed, I enjoyed this read. Kudos to the author for the effort it took to put all these known (at least somewhat) characters together in a time frame and an historical context, and develop a fascinating storyline.

Marita says

Dawn of the Belle Époque is a book that may be consumed either all at once, or in delicious bite-sized pieces over a period of time. I chose to enjoy smallish morsels at a time, and then I diverted from time to time to other sources which provided more details on any given subject or person. Result? My appetite has been whet to read much more about various individuals.

It is a chronological account of events in Paris during the years 1871-1900, and pretty much a timeline which provides details on a year-by-year basis of who was who and who did what during this highly creative period in French history. Whilst I call it a timeline, I should add that information is well fleshed out and is not simply presented as statements against dates. For example, the notorious Dreyfus affair is described in a considerable amount of detail. People, history, science, music, literature, art and architecture are all skillfully interwoven to provide a densely woven tapestry of that time. It is left to the reader to pick up the various threads as the information is not spoon-fed to provide one continuous story for each person mentioned, but really, that is not too difficult. However, there is an absolute wealth of information and many interesting snippets.

Recommended to anyone interested in Belle Époque France. It is an interesting period of not only strife and turmoil, but also of fun, beauty and creativity. The book is amply illustrated with coloured pictures.

The novel Paris makes good complementary reading.

Helynne says

The heart and soul of this incredibly rich period of French history and culture always seems to be the Impressionist painters, and author Mary McAuliffe describes with many facts and anecdotes the faith, determination, setbacks, and heartbreaks of these daring, innovative artists on the long, hard road to respectability and acceptance into the Salon. But there was so very much more going on in France during the Belle Epoque (1871-1914) beginning with the end of the Franco-Prussian war and ending at the start of World War I. She begins with a description of how France struggled after Paris was under siege by the Prussians. Many starved, and even after the Prussians pulled out, the whole country was left in poverty as well as struggling in spirit. McAuliffe describes in excruciating detail the actions of the radical Paris

Commune—a group that attempted to set up a left-wing government—and their bloody fate. After their defeat, the surviving radicals were not pleased to see the Cathedral of Sacré Cœur, which represented traditional monarchal and Catholics values-- taking shape at Montmartre, the heart and soul of where their movement began. Fortunately, France rallied from the trauma and the forthcoming artistic energy was dizzying in its quantity, quality, and scope. Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, Pissarro, Morisot, Dégas, Seurat and their successors—Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec and VanGogh—persisted in their new concept of painting. (McAuliffe seems to have a special spot in her heart for Berthe Morisot, sister-in-law to Edouard Manet, and the only native French woman painter to succeed in the Impressionist movement, while maintaining her femininity and tender motherhood toward daughter Julie). Also, Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel brought new eloquence to sculpture, Debussy, Satie and Ravel composed innovative music, Zola began his long career as novelist and chief defender of the wronged Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, Sarah Bernhardt dazzled the stage with her bold interpretation of an array of theater roles, Marie Curie began her work that would lead to the discovery of radium, César Ritz began plans for the world's classiest hotels, Frédéric Bartholdi began designing the Statue of Liberty as a gift to the United States, and a brilliant iron engineer named Gustave Eiffel was designing bridges, securing the framework for the Statue of Liberty, advising plans for the Panama Canal, and, of course, supervising work on his famous and controversial tower, which would become the focal point of the centennial world exposition of 1889. (Incidentally, all the jokes about the Eiffel Tower looking unfinished and much like a child's erector set are true—in reverse. McAuliffe calls the tower "a sort of gigantic and perfect erector set—the classic children's toy that in fact was eventually created based on Eiffel's famed methods" [188]). The 1889 fair also had demonstrations of the telephone, phonograph, and hot air balloon, (and here Bernhardt distinguished herself not only as actress, sculptor, writer, and painter, but also as a balloon adventurer). At one point during this time, a chandelier fell at the Opéra Garnier, killing one person, injuring others, and inspiring Gaston Leroux's novel *Phantom of the Opéra.* This was also the period of Art Nouveau, whose central artist was a Czech immigrant, Alphonse Mucha, who became famous for an advertisement of Sarah Bernhardt in *Gismonda* as well as numerous other posters that are still popular today. Beginning with Le Chat Noir, the modern cabaret was born, and another café, Le Lapin Agile, became a favorite hangout for the talented, avant-garde anti-establishment contingent. And it was during this time that the first tunnels for the Paris Metro were being dug, and the beret was coming into its own as quintessentially French headgear. Eugène Poubell, prefect of the Seine issued strict laws governing street cleaning and garbage collection (thus giving his name to the modern French word for garbage can [199]). McAuliffe includes descriptions of the political events of the day—with Georges Clemenceau as a central figure—and the eclectic political-social climate that, unfortunately, contributed to the rising tide of virulent anti-Semitism in France that would culminate at the end of the century in the Dreyfus affair, which split the country in two—Dreyfussards, who believed the French-Jewish colonel was unjustly accused of treason and imprisoned on Devil's Island, and the anti-Dreyfussards, who persisted in upholding lies and cover-ups about his supposed guilt. Due in part to Zola's courageous defense of Dreyfus, which was much at Zola's own expense, Dreyfus was eventually exonerated and repatriated. He rejoined the French army and served during World War I. The horrific anti- Semitism increased in France, however, "invoking the language of genocide and extermination" (312). My only disappointment in this study is that McAuliffe did not mention much about the filmmaking industry that France gave to the world during this era, beginning with the Lumière brothers, then with the fantastically imaginative early films of the talented Georges Méliès. Nevertheless, this book is an incredibly rich study of the marvels of the period and filled not just with historical fact, but also with innumerable human interest anecdotes about the events and people who contributed to such a phenomenal period in French culture and how it came to affect the rest of the world.

Noah Goats says

Loved this book. Belle Epoque France is a fascinating time and place, packed with brilliant and important people in every field of human expression from the arts through the sciences: Monet, Clemenceau, Hugo, Bernhardt, Curie, Debussy, Zola, Eiffel, Satie... the list goes on and on. Mary McAuliffe relates the history of the Belle Epoque by weaving together the stories of these people's lives, and the result is a highly readable book.

McAuliffe begins with the catastrophes that were the Franco Prussian War and the Commune, and then goes on to show how the French rose from the ashes to rebuild Paris and reach some of France's greatest heights in the arts and sciences. Her writing is gripping, and even though I've read a fair amount about the Dreyfus Affair, McAuliffe's account of it was unputdownable. What a hero Zola really was. Your inner Francophile will love this book.

Alex says

I mean, yeah, right? And Susanna really liked the sequel.

Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says

Much time has passed since I finished reading this enjoyable book, which, from a review perspective is bad and good.

It's bad because I quickly forget details, especially after I start reading another book; it is very possible I'd mix the details of the previous read with details from my current read. How unfortunate and embarrassing would it be to be describing the beauty, the innovations, the influences, and even the ugliness of Paris and its surrounds and characters during the late 1800s and discover I've thrown in a detail about the sex-based society of the Bonobos?

It's good because I can see which details from the book have stuck with me, making this more a review of me as opposed to a review of the book, I suppose. What stuck?

The Curies - the way the book touched on the love between them, the amazing intelligence and determination of Marie and the devotion and encouragement of her husband Pierre in a time when women were generally regarded as not being capable of significant contributions to science or art or....

Berthe Morisot - how both her marriage certificate and her death certificate listed her as having "no occupation."

The confirmation that artistic genius and insight do not necessarily originate in those inhabiting the moral high ground.

Now on to the Bonobos.

Susan says

After I finished "Luncheon of the Boating Party" this came through my hands at the library and I saw a golden opportunity. This book covers the 20 years from the Commune to the turn of the century. With a year for each chapter, the stories of all the historical figures, mainly in Paris are told in parallel. It's easy to read and follow that way (though not a page turner) and it gave me context for a lot of facts and people I know about but couldn't connect before.

Dvora says

McAuliffe intertwines the political, military, social, engineering, literary, and art history of France from the period of the Commune, 1870, to the Paris exposition of 1900. You don't find many books that discuss all those topics together, so if you've read about the political history of France and have read about the Impressionist artists, and you know that the Statue of Liberty was a gift of the French to the Americans, you may well enjoy seeing how they, as well as the Eiffel Tower all fit together. Sometimes it feels a bit disjointed because no one person or project or event was delved into deeply at any one time. This is because McAuliffe explains it all year by year. There will be a short discussion of, say Eiffel, and then it jumps to Clemenceau or Le Chat Noir or Berthe Morisot. But in doing that, McAuliffe follows the people and events in their own time frame and for me it was great to see what things were happening at the same time and how they interacted and influenced each other.

Possibly, because no one person or project or event is delved into deeply at any one time, you don't get as emotionally attached to the protagonists as you might if a whole chapter or a whole book were dedicated to any one of them. The exception to this distancing, for me, was the explanation of the Dreyfus case. Even broken up into bits, it landed a big punch.

Rosemary says

Full of interesting information about Paris and some of its famous citizens. If you are a Francophile and a history buff, you'll enjoy this book.

Philippe says

Sadly, I couldn’t bring myself to finish this book. After about a third I threw in the towel as I was getting bored and nervous at the same time. The chief problem has already been flagged by a number of other reviewers. The narrative is built around a timeline stretching from 1870 to 1900, with a year-by-year sequence of chapters. Each chapter is then conceived as a mosaic in which a more less fixed roster of luminaries makes its appearance. The effect is, on the one hand, highly disorienting. For example, in chapter 10 the story switches in the space of just a few pages from Manet to Dumas jr to Sarah Bernardt to the Statue of Liberty to the basilica of Sacré-Coeur to the Panama Canal to Flaubert and Goncourt. And this kind of pacing is kept up for several hundreds of pages. On the other hand, the unrelenting fragmentation brings with it a curious effect of stasis, as if one is reading the same story over and over again. McAuliffe’s perfunctory development of her characters is partly to blame for that too. These famous artists, political leaders and

artefacts remain two dimensional creatures, frozen in cliché-laden poses: Clémenceau the agitator, Debussy the womanizer, debt-ridden Claude Monet, thoughtful Berthe Morisot, kittenish Sara Bernhardt, …

It seems to me that McAuliffe, in effort to dramatize these postures, at times does not adhere to what is known as historical fact. That is another major defect of this book. For example, McAuliffe describes the critical reaction to the first private, 'Impressionist' exhibition in 1874 as 'hostile bordering on hysteria, including warnings that this art form was so inherently vile that it threatened pregnant women and the moral order.' Reality appeared to have been rather different. In Scott Schaefer's excellent essay 'Impressionism and the Public Imagination' in xxx we read: "The 'Première Exposition' was widely covered in the press, with about 15 articles written about it. Of ten important reviews, six were very favorable to the concept and execution of the show itself, although somewhat mixed in their opinions of the individual paintings. Four reviews were thoroughly negative. (…) three of the six favorable critics were unstinting in there praise of the artists and their works." So, McAuliffe seems to be right in asserting that the exhibition was not a commercial success, but it critical reception was far more differentiated than she makes us believe (and, perhaps, not at all unusual in 1870s Parisian critical landscape).

The impression of blandness is reinforced by McAuliffe's stilted prose that, as other reviewers have pointed out, tends to rely on fixed, formulaic turns of phrase. To me the language feels fake, feeding the suspicion that the author, despite an impressive bibliographic apparatus marshaled at the end of the book, does not master her material. Oddly, in other cases, McAuliffe fails to capture opportunities to enliven and dramatize the book's narrative by simply reciting the facts. To give just one example, by the early 1870s Edouard Manet had been painting for over a decade without really encountering critical or commercial success. In 1872 he was 'discovered' by the important dealer Durand-Ruel. McAuliffe doesn't mention this fact in the chapter devoted to the year 1872, but she casually brings it up later, when the timeline has reached 1880: "… the dealer brought twenty-two of Manet's works – the first time the painter really sold anything." In Beth Archer Brombert's biography of Manet (Edouard Manet: Rebel in a Frock Coat), the story assumes much more weight and relief. Citing Durand-Ruel's memoires, we learn that the dealer bought two lots of paintings on two consecutive days: one lot of 23 (not twenty-two) canvases for 35,000 francs and another lot for 16,000 francs. This would have been a remarkable windfall for any artist and Manet used to proceeds to lie low for a few months and move into a new, giant studio in a former fencing school. This is the revealing kind of detail that we miss in McAuliffe's narration. 'Dawn of the Belle Epoque' is detailed in a cavalier, gossipy kind of way but does not really draw the reader into the fabric of this fascinating era. As a final example of the 'wrong' kind of detail, in her discussion of the year 1886 McAuliff mentions Debussy as spending his time reading at the Villa Médicis in Rome (where he was intitled to stay as prize winner of the Prix de Rome): "… he had read widely and gravitated toward the avant-garde Symbolists (among them, André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Mallarmé)". In 1886 André Gide was just 17 years old and had published literally nothing …

Is it possible that Mary McAuliffe wanted to write a book that would strike the reader in the way an impressionist painting impacts our eyes? A collection of disjointed dots and brush strokes that, considered from the right vantage point, radiates with sense and life? If so, 'Dawn of the Belle Epoque' unquestionably represents a failed attempt. Two stars. To be avoided.

Tras says

Superb. Thoroughly enjoyed the way the author wove the stories of so many prominent artists, musicians,

engineers, authors, politicians, actors et al, into a fascinating, entertaining, and coherent whole. Will be jumping right into the 'Twilight of the Belle Epoque'.

Sharen says

Fascinating people in a fascinating era. Mary McAuliffe's research is impeccable and this social history/biography moves through the timeline from 1870-1900 at a lively pace. Never a dull moment! Recommended.

Jaylia3 says

Dawn of the Belle Époque has a cast of hundreds, but because many of them are well known, including Zola, Monet, Marie Curie, Gustave Eiffel, Debussy, and Sarah Bernhardt, it’s not hard to keep track of them. Details of individual lives are reported, I learned for instance that Degas was petulant, conservative and stubborn, but the book also has a broader scope. Almost every year from 1870 to 1900 has its own chapter, covering the politics, personalities, mood and culture of Paris as it moved toward the new century.

While some aspects of the Belle Époque were not so belle/beautiful, notably the Dreyfus affair, it’s a fascinating era. A hundred years after the French Revolution, France was still deeply divided. Republican heirs of the revolution clashed with anarchists, and they both brawled, sometimes literally, with citizens who wanted a powerful Catholic Church and a return to rule by the monarchy or an heir of Napoleon. The back of the book has sources notes and a bibliography.

Michael says

Mary McAuliffe has produced a well-researched, well-organized, and delightfully readable book that covers the cultural history of Paris from the Commune to the death of Zola. In this period that saw the rise of Impressionism and Symbolism; the musical beginnings of Debussy, Ravel, and Satie; the construction of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty; the opening of the Ritz paired with the innovative cuisine of Escoffier; the dominating stage presence of Bernhardt; the beginning of the political career of Clemenceau; and the playing out of the Dreyfus Affair, the author finds time to note the lesser-known history as well. The lives of Berthe Morisot and her daughter Julie Manet, the complicated family life of Monet, the roles of Le Chat Noir and Cabaret Au Lapin Agile in the artistic life of the city, the *agon* of Rodin, and Misia Natanson's role as muse, all find attention and meaningful connection with the evolution of Paris in this remarkable work. It must be read by any with an interest in the fabled Belle Epoque and a love for the City of Light.

Mary says

McAuliffe's research and obvious love for Paris comes through loud and clear. She struggles a bit to tie the lives of her subjects together in tidy knots. Sometimes I felt like I was unravelling a skein of yarn which the cat undid in a frenzied moment.

Gwen says

A bit scattered, but full of great tidbits and anecdotes about all of Paris' luminaries

---

Rebecca Grace says

First, let me say that I agree with the negative reviews from other readers, yet I loved it anyway. I do think that the author achieved an "Impressionistic effect" by telling the history of Paris from 1871 through 1900 in chronological order, with each chapter recounted in a smattering of many anecdotes in the lives of the prominent artists, writers and musicians who shaped the era. I can understand how those unfamiliar with the historical cast of characters would find this confusing, but those who are already familiar with Sarah Bernhardt, Emile Zola, Claude Monet, Claude Debussy etc. will have no trouble keeping track of who is who. Moreover, this organization of the book makes it much easier to get a "snapshot" of the mood of what was going on in Paris in a given year than organizing the book with entire chapters devoted to each historical figure, as some reviewers have suggested. After all, this is the way we come to know the politicians and celebrities of our own time -- not by reading their complete biographies ahead of time, but one headline and one news story at a time, interspersed with other news stories and headlines and weather reports and such. If the author's goal was to transport us to the Dawn of the Belle Epoche and enable us to experience the era through the eyes of those who lived through it, she has succeeded. I especially enjoyed the perspectives from Berthe Morisot's daughter and the excellent account of the connection between the Dreyfus Affair and the art world.

✲ Jennifer says

An excellent encapsulated history of Paris and France from the events of the commune until 1900, focussing on the lives of the Impressionists, authors, actors, and musicians of the time. It's a great book for those that are interested in history without the academic analysis and statistics - it read like a novel.

Full review: http://jenn.booklikes.com/post/108866...

Camille says

This book deals with an interesting topic and is well-written. I liked the photographs.
However, I think there were a lot of problems. First of all, the author talks about many famous artists, but never really explained who they are in detail. It was not an issue for me as I already know a lot about this topic, but I feel it could be difficult for someone who is not familiar with this period of history. I found that Ms McAuliffe just started describing events without much of an introduction. It was as if the beginning of the book was missing.
Secondly, I found the structure of the book difficult to follow. The historical period is dealt with year by year. This is very good if one is interested in a year in particular, like I was whilst using this book for research. However, it is very tedious to read from the beginning to the end. It feels very repetitive as the

same people and events are mentioned again and again, chapter after chapter.

Carol says

The Belle Epoque, an age from roughly the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the onset of WWI in 1914. McAuliffe examines the earliest phase of the period, up to the turn of the century. As the term indicates, this was an era of wonderful cultural flowering. In literature, giants like Zola and Hugo were active. The list of painters and sculptors who emerged seems endless, including Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Monet, and Rodin.

"To tell this incredibly complicated story, Ms. McAuliffe uses an interesting technique, one that might be identified more with fiction than nonfiction. Arranged chronologically into 28 chapters year by year from 1871 to 1900, the book consists of short scene-like vignettes featuring key historical figures and their actions during the year in question. Thus Dawn of the Belle Epoque reads more like a novel than an academic history."

McAuliffe does not ignore the seamy underside of this glittering picture. She pays ample attention to the political turmoil, beginning with the horrors of the Paris Commune and ending with the disgrace of the Dreyfus Affair, which virtually dominated French political discourse for years. This is an excellent and honest portrayal of an exciting and vital era in European history.
