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Kate Cambor, *Gilded Youth: Three Lives in France's Belle Époque*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. 323 pp. Notes. Bibliography and Index. ISBN: 978-0-374-16230-6.

Review by Charles Sowerwine, University of Melbourne.

Carolyn Lougee Chappell, in a recent H-France review (Vol. 9, No. 145), points to the “serious challenges” which historians face “addressing the general public,” “unless they are willing to take the advice I once received ...—‘Why don’t you just write a novel?’”

Kate Cambor has addressed the general public with an intimate history of three people whose lives were originally intertwined: Jean-Baptiste Charcot, son of Jean-Martin Charcot, the famous neurologist; Léon Daudet, son of Alphonse Daudet, the patriotic novelist and short-story writer; and Jeanne Hugo, granddaughter of Victor Hugo. Through their families, the children were friends in youth. Daudet *père* was friendly with Victor Hugo and was treated by Charcot *père* for syphilis. Jeanne Hugo married Léon Daudet, quickly divorced him, and then married Jean-Baptiste Charcot.

Neither a novel nor, judging from its title, a revision of Cambor’s Ph.D.,<sup>[1]</sup> *Gilded Youth* is an intimate history based in the period of her Ph.D., mainly using published and secondary accounts. It demonstrates considerable flair and should succeed in engaging the general reader. Each chapter is well crafted and structured, each stands on its own, and each begins with a revealing moment or anecdote to engage interest. Whether it’s Charcot’s famous Tuesday lessons, Alphonse Daudet’s literary circles or sufferings from syphilis and the impact they had on young Léon, or the trio’s closeness in the aftermath of Victor Hugo’s death, Cambor presents a good story of life among the elite of the Republic.

The book then moves to Hugo’s disastrous marriage to Daudet in 1891 and, in a major, central chapter, to the Dreyfus Affair and its repercussions. This first half of the book benefits from a coherence derived from these family links. From here the protagonists’ lives took radically different paths and the story becomes of necessity less integrated.

Charcot *fils* was a modest man who found his vocation as a polar explorer only after the death of his illustrious father freed him from the great man’s shadow. The chapters on his explorations are particularly successful. His story is told with great tact and sensitivity, as is that of his father’s death. The accounts of his expeditions are based on Charcot’s own and his crewmembers’ writings, secondary accounts of explorations, and U.S. newspaper reports, but they are generally sound and enjoyable.

At times, however, enjoyment is balanced by uncertainty because the writer presents imaginative accounts of Charcot’s state of mind without deploying an author’s voice to explain that this is speculation, usually without sources: “The rhythmic swaying and creaking of the craft ... eased the tension that crept through his body after long days spent in the lab or seeing patients” (p. 170); “Although Jean-Baptiste loved working beside his men and reveled in the camaraderie of mealtime, he also enjoyed his solitude and looked forward to retiring to his cabin” (p. 187); “He sighed and returned to his cabin to work. Perhaps, he thought fretfully, he was just tired” (p. 251).

Elsewhere, this tendency to present imaginative reconstruction as fact is troubling. When the Daudets accuse Charcot *père* of engineering Léon Daudet's exam failure, Cambor suggests (again without references) that "Jean-Baptiste in particular was crushed—no accusation could have been more upsetting to him because deep down he worried that it might be true" (p. 109). Did he? Why should we think that? We don't necessarily need specific sources, but we do need some explanation of why the historian thinks this a plausible interpretation and some suggestion that it is only that.

While the explorer gets detailed treatment, Jeanne Hugo gets much less coverage and no effort to imagine her state of mind. She remains largely a cipher, even though she was married successively to the other two protagonists. Perhaps in order to remain accessible to a wide readership, Cambor eschews theoretical musings or questionings about what we might reconstruct or understand about a life lived largely in domesticity. Hugo's unhappy life with Daudet is treated from the outside: while the author suggests (without sources) that "Léon ... was surprised by his wife's capacity for churlishness" (p. 116), she is uncharacteristically circumspect about imagining Jeanne's feelings, although she certainly suggests an interpretation: "there is no way of knowing how she [Jeanne] felt about being bound closer to her husband or the prospect of no longer being the center of attention in their family [after the birth of their son]" (p. 116). Jeanne's subsequent marriage to Charcot gets only sketchy treatment (pp. 176-8) and her life after divorce from Charcot gets only a glimpse in the epilogue, although she was only thirty-five at the time of her divorce and had another thirty-six years to live (pp. 277-9).

Hugo was born just in time (1869) to profit from the Naquet Law of 1884 reinstating divorce and this might have been a lever to insert her into her context. In any case, given that she bore such an illustrious name, was married to three very wealthy husbands, and lived much of her life in society, there is surely evidence to be gleaned from account books, inheritance documents, society pages and the accounts of contemporaries. Michèle Plott suggests that, in the Belle Époque, "French women of this class [the *haute bourgeoisie*] were expected to develop a public, social persona to complement their domestic role."<sup>[2]</sup> Surely traces of this persona could be pursued. Since Bonnie Smith's pioneering *Ladies of the Leisure Class*,<sup>[3]</sup> historians have increasingly sought to reconstruct the frameworks of the lives of well-to-do women.<sup>[4]</sup> Some of their techniques might have yielded a sense of the meaning and constraints of Hugo's life.

Léon Daudet is the book's hero, or anti-hero. Cambor gives him detailed and sympathetic treatment without concealing the unpleasant aspects of his character, but she does not analyze sufficiently his broader significance. There is a nice page on his championing Marcel Proust after the war (p. 274) and a vivid evocation of his key role in sabotaging the election of Marie Curie to the French Academy of Sciences (pp. 219-21). On Daudet's politics, however, Cambor fails to join the dots.

The Dreyfus Affair takes up a central chapter, one of the longest of the book (pp. 141-67), so it is curious that Cambor does not focus more on the contrast between Daudet and Charcot's responses. Such a focus would help to insert Daudet into the political context in which he was such a prominent actor and thus to give his story the significance it merits. Charcot was the archetypal moderate republican, ever the rationalist. Daudet was a leading figure in anti-Semitism and nationalism, always the exponent of the big lie and of what Richard Hofstadter called the paranoid style of politics.<sup>[5]</sup> The contrast would open the door to a discussion of the new politics and analysis of what might push someone like Daudet in this direction.

Instead, Cambor plays down the Daudet family's—and Léon's—anti-Semitism. We learn first that the family "shared the anti-Semitic concerns of many of their friends" (p. 106): "concerns" seems a pale word to choose. We learn later that Édouard Drumont, the founder of modern anti-Semitism, "was a close family friend—Alphonse had helped him secure a publisher for *La France juive*" (p. 130); this seems active sharing. And then we learn further on that young Léon "had been a member of Drumont's anti-

Semitic league since its beginning [in 1890], but more out of friendship for Drumont than out of any particularly well-developed sense of anti-Semitism" (p. 145).

Given the Daudets' long-term engagement with anti-Semitism, the general reader needs a sustained analysis. It would help to give fuller treatment of *La France juive*, a foundation text of anti-Semitism: Cambor says only, rightly but inadequately, that *La France juive* was "over a thousand pages of hate-filled innuendo and suspicions about the dangers posed by Jews" (p. 128). *La France juive* was much more than that. It was a landmark in the development of modern anti-Semitism and thus of great consequence for the future: it introduced and popularized the use of Gobineau's terminology to distinguish the "Aryan" and "Semite" "races:" "while the Aryan race includes an infinite variety of organizations and of temperaments, the Jew always resembles another Jew," recognized by "that famous hooked nose, blinking eyes, clenched teeth, protruding ears . . . , the fleshy hand of the hypocrite and the traitor." "The Jew stinks," Drumont added.[6] *La France juive* joined this racist anti-Semitism to a political crusade, focusing the resentments of those who felt displaced by big capital onto Jews and calling for their active exclusion.

Cambor uses relaxed language to describe Daudet's anti-Semitism, but reserves more vivid language for his republican opponents. Thus Zola's unexpected death by asphyxiation in 1902, the result of a blocked chimney, leads to what she calls "paranoid speculation" that right-wing nationalists may have blocked the chimney (p. 166). Given that Drumont's newspaper had published the names of the jurors in Zola's trial with the warning that they would suffer vengeance if the "Italian" (Zola) were acquitted, that thugs from Drumont's league (of which Léon was a founding member) had shot Dreyfus' attorney in the back during Dreyfus' second trial, and that Daudet later helped incite one of his crazed readers to assassinate Jean Jaurès, "paranoia" seems a strange word to apply to this speculation.

Similarly, Cambor calls Anatole France's oration at Zola's funeral "the revenge of the Dreyfusards" (p. 207), a strange way to characterize an oration that expressed admirable sentiments and became a model for generations of students ("Zola was a moment in the conscience of humanity") and expressed what most would think were admirable sentiments: Zola, said Anatole France, "was a moment in the conscience of humanity"; head helped construct "a new order . . . based on sounder justice and a deeper knowledge of everyone's rights" (p. 207). Is saying that "revenge?"

Again, Cambor introduces the founder of Action française as "the thirty-six year old journalist Charles Maurras" (p. 206) and she describes Action française's "two guiding principles" as belief that "France would only regain her former glory if she returned to the divinely ordained form of government that had been so brutally exterminated in 1791" and that "those who currently led France were . . . willfully ignoring or basely abetting the threat posed by Germany" (p. 214). This makes Action française sound like quaint, old-fashioned nostalgics of the monarchy, relics of a bygone age. But, as Eugen Weber established in his classic study, Action française's significance was to infuse monarchism with Drumont's anti-Semitism and xenophobia, to develop the idea that ethnicity was the only genuine source of French identity and nationhood, thus providing a basis for future political movements which abandoned monarchism for modern authoritarianism.[7] Maurras—and alongside him Daudet—were not relics of the past, but proponents of a new politics of the irrational based on scapegoating Jews. For the general public, these points need to be made clear.

As with Charcot, Cambor presents her reading of Daudet's thoughts as fact, but in this case with more serious consequences. What are no doubt meant to be understood as explorations of his ideas could easily be misread as historical judgments. "He [Daudet] was now able to see the true inner workings of French society: politicians who piously proclaimed their fealty to the Republic while they secretly whored themselves to German interests" (p. 214).

This difficulty is compounded because Cambor, in explaining historical events, sometimes accepts

Daudet's views uncritically. "Hadn't Léon warned a lax and unaware nation of the dangers of German espionage before the last war, and hadn't he been proven correct?" (p. 270). Few historians would accept that German espionage was an important element before or during World War I and, in any case, the anti-Dreyfusards, of whom Léon had been such a vocal leader, had preferred to leave the real spy in place. "The Third Republic ... had stumbled from disaster to disaster since it was formed in the wake of military defeat at the hands of the Germans" (p. 272). That was the view of the right, but the Third Republic had much to its credit. It finally resolved the issues of 1789 and ended the cycle of revolution and repression. It gave France human rights and a democratic framework, resolved the Boulanger, Panama and Dreyfus Affairs, won World War I and survived the depression without allowing indigenous fascism to triumph. And it lasted longer than any other regime since 1789 (the Fifth Republic still has eighteen years to go to equal the Third's longevity!). We need the historian to voice this if we are to understand Daudet's place in twentieth-century French history and politics.

The contrast between Daudet and Charcot might also suggest using their biographies to help us understand the emerging new modes of thought, what I have called the cultural revolution of the Belle Époque,<sup>[8]</sup> which is much more than a reaction to the defeat of 1870-71: as Virginia Woolf famously put it, "On or about December, 1910, human nature changed . . . And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature." <sup>[9]</sup>

Cambor addresses these new modes of thought, but she does not use the story to help us understand their emergence. While such shifts of the zeitgeist are clearly bigger than individuals, the stories of individuals like Daudet and Charcot could illuminate them. It would have been interesting, for example, to focus more on Daudet's reaction to his failure in the examination to become an intern. To fail an examination was and still is a common occurrence in French life. Daudet "had sorely neglected [his studies] during the emotional whirlwind of the previous weeks" (p. 108). He could have accepted his failure, taken a one-year "provisional" internship on offer, and studied hard to pass the next time. Instead, "Instantly he and his family were convinced that some sort of foul play had taken place" (p. 109). They blamed Charcot *père*, assuming that a family friend would subvert a jury of ten distinguished professors in order to revenge Léon's choice of bride!

The Daudets' tendency to blame someone else seems to fit logically with the family's anti-Semitism, for what is anti-Semitism if not the tendency to blame the other? Cambor rightly inserts Daudet into the "new voices" of decadence influenced by Nordau and Barrès (p. 138): "One such new voice belonged to Léon Daudet, who began to take out his anger, which could not be directed against his adored father or his complaining wife, against those institutions and figureheads that, he proclaimed, had propagated dangerous falsehoods and betrayed his generation" (p. 139). But given the depth of her treatment and understanding of Daudet, surely she can help us understand how the zeitgeist operated in this case.

*Gilded Youth* tells us a great deal about human relations among the Third Republic elite, but less about the great cultural and political changes which came as the trio reached adulthood and to which Léon Daudet contributed so much, or about the lives of women like Jeanne Hugo. It presents a vivid picture of its protagonists and their families and, through them, of some of the currents and events of the day. There is much to admire in this book and it is good that someone of Cambor's talents has responded to the challenge of addressing the general public. Cambor seems, however, to have muted the historian's voice to make it easier for the general public. The general public, even more perhaps than the specialized reader, deserves and needs more, not less, of the historian's critical analysis.

## NOTES

[1] "On the border: cultures, immigration, and the struggle for identity in Fin-de-Siècle France," Thesis (Ph. D.), Yale University, 2006).

- [2] Michèle Plott, "The Rules of the Game: Respectability, Sexuality, and the *Femme Mondaine* in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris," *French Historical Studies* 25 (3, Summer 2002): 531-56, p. 538.
- [3] Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).
- [4] Steven D. Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Anne Martin-Fugier, *Les Salons De La IIIe République: Art, Littérature, Politique* (Paris: Perrin, 2003); E. C. Macknight, "Cake and Conversation: The Women's *jour* in Parisian High Society, 1880-1914," *French History* 19 (2005): 342-63; Rebecca Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
- [5] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008; first edition 1965).
- [6] Edouard Drumont, *La France juive* (Paris, 1938), Vol. I, pp. 24, 34, 106; cf. Frederick Busi, *The pope of antisemitism: the career and legacy of Edouard-Adolphe Drumont* (Lanham, MD, 1986), Chapter 3; Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Society and the Making of the Republic* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 55-56.
- [7] Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 199 et passim; Sowerwine, *France since 1870*, p. 57.
- [8] Sowerwine, *France since 1870*, p. 89. For the origins of the concept, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p. 112; Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- [9] Virginia Woolf, *The Captain's Death Bed: and other essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 96-7.

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