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Jill Jonnes, *Eiffel's Tower, and the World's Fair where Buffalo Bill Beguiled Paris, the Artists Quarreled, and Thomas Edison Became a Count*. New York: Viking, Published by Penguin Group, 2009. 354 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-670-02060-7.

Review by Matt Matsuda, Rutgers University.

Jill Jonnes' *Eiffel's Tower* is an engaging reminder of the distinctions between scholarly and popular history writing. Jonnes' narrative of America and France in 1889 is quick on its feet and eschews almost any analytic apparatus, deftly unrolling 300 pages of portraits and anecdotes about the markswoman Annie Oakley, Western impresario Buffalo Bill Cody, the American publisher James Gordon Bennett Jr., stockbroker and painter Paul Gauguin, the painter James McNeill Whistler, and inventor Thomas Edison among a panoply of many other intriguing and eccentric characters, some obscure, but most, actually, famous. The overall structure of the work is episodic and serial, a bit like a star-studded movie spectacle in which separate lives are traced across continents and oceans as they gradually come together in Paris in 1889 for the Universal Exposition.

Like a cinematic epic, this one is rich in décor, color, and terrific landscapes, yet also in similar fashion long on description and—for academic historians—short on straightforward critical engagement. As with some genres of popular history, the author does not announce, nor “argue” any particular points upfront, nor articulate a thesis or state any claims for the originality of the work. With a rich base of research and an effortless grasp of detail, she works less like an academic and more like a writer, capturing moods and settings and leaving it to the reader to gradually absorb the semblances of a story from juxtaposed and interwoven set-pieces that move the narrative forward in time.

Any academic having even a vague familiarity with fin-de-siècle France, the history of Paris, or an interest in Universal Expositions will find much here that is familiar. Indeed, Jonnes surveys a terrain that has been very well covered by the likes of Eugen Weber, Pascal Ory, Charles Rearick, Roger Shattuck, Vanessa Schwartz, Joseph Harriss, Jerrold Seigel, and many, many others. It is a bold undertaking just to want to wander down such well-trodden boulevards. Many of the characters and events are overly familiar, and Jonnes has chosen to weave their stories around one of the most famous and chronicled architectural masterpieces in the world: the Eiffel Tower. [1]

If the book has a stylistic conceit, it is to retell the story of Eiffel's Tower from planning, through construction, to inauguration and triumph as the icon around which all of the great men and women of the world will eventually congregate in 1889. Jonnes offers the reader a thoughtful sketch of Gustave Eiffel's life and wondrous engineering feats, and then a leisurely narrative through his firm's design for the tower, the immediate outcry against the monstrous symbol of technological change, and the gradual acceptance and triumph of the tower as a cultural landmark.

Time and detail are given to stories that are already well known to specialists, but will interest general readers: the ways the tower project was widely condemned by both its immediate neighbors and the cultural elite of Paris, who were revolted by its modernist break with classical forms and the untested engineering dangers posed by its unsurpassed ambition. Much is made of the technical specifications,

from iron casting to hot-riveting, foundations and observation decks, and a review of Jonnes' general oeuvre including previous books *Conquering Gotham* and *Empires of Light* shows that she is very much continuing with her longstanding fascination with architecture, engineering, applied science, and urban development. [2] Perhaps the most interesting details woven in here concern the labor complaints brought by Tower workers during the construction, Eiffel's handling of the disputes with concessions and firings, and the lawsuits brought by those living in the tower's shadow and the dread fear that winds would topple the thousand feet of iron girders down upon them, a not unreasonable conjecture in that period—or since.

As the Universal Exposition opens in 1889, trepidation gives way to pride and the tower becomes the symbol of all that is remarkable about France. Some note is made of the cultural milieu of political strife and the lingering damage done to Gallic prestige by the Franco-Prussian War, but this is no textbook work, and the author makes no large or integrated claims about the estate of French republicanism, staying close to her places and people. The Tower is soon mobbed by politicians, journalists, artists, foreign dignitaries, and the millions who formed the general public, clamoring for vistas and an experience of altitude that was inconceivable for almost everyone of that generation.

The Tower also becomes the convenient marker for Jonnes to draw together the visits of all of her other characters, assembled in Paris for business, pleasure, or escape. She focuses strongly on Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill, which gives the book a sense of what the unarticulated thesis might be. Other characters also appear and reappear, but have much less impact. James Gordon Bennett manages to impress as being singularly mercurial and unlikeable as the editor of the *Herald* newspaper, but apart from his rich-man's antics, he has little of the genuine devious villainy of, say, William Randolph Hearst, and none of the grandeur of a fictional figure like Charles Foster Kane. Similarly, Paul Gauguin, whose lugubrious life and falling in and out with Vincent Van Gogh gain a thoughtful side narrative, doesn't really develop much, and his travails have a perfunctory quality to them.

This is not to say that the book has no keen points, critical structure or narrative plan; simply that the reader draws those from stories rather than academic argument. It is a very entertaining general read and the conceptual schemes are embodied in characters and situations rather than critical exposition or historiography. Overall, Jonnes retains her anecdotal and thick description style. The politics of the General Boulanger Affair pass on by, as does the rise and fall of Ferdinand de Lesseps' Panama Canal Company, but the most significant drama seems to be reserved for the conflicts between Eiffel and Charles Otis about the design of the Tower's elevators and whether they will be completed on time. "History" at times seems to be a background for the story, rather than the subject itself.

Like good historical fiction, however, once the characters are unleashed, there is encounter, conflict, drama, and a number of compelling theses to tease out. One that slowly unrolls is the articulation of a Transatlantic American and French world. Most of the major characters hail from one or the other of those nations, and Jonnes' work is an entertaining study of comparative ideas of civilization in the American Republic and in Gallic Europe.

Much of this will be redolent of Henry James, with the brash, young, clever, reckless Americans so well portrayed by Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill Cody, Thomas Edison, and Gordon Bennett. Oakley and Cody both represent and purposefully stage an American West that no longer exists, and was always half mythic, and good attention is given to the Native American performers, especially Red Shirt and Rocky Bear. Bennett does his time as the maniacal, narcissistic tycoon, hiring and firing employees on a whim and sailing around recklessly on a yacht, while Edison is lionized as a counterpart of Eiffel and Louis Pasteur, a genius and the inventor of everything modern, but with the rough and tumble charm that Parisians expected from American inventiveness.

The inclusion of Whistler and Gauguin also form a nice counterpart to this theme as the Exposition becomes a showcase for representations of art, taste, and culture at a critical moment of historical change. While the widely esteemed Whistler raises the status of American painterly finesse with his elegant compositions, the glum Gauguin continues to stumble along the course of rejection and anonymity along with his confrères, the Impressionists, and Van Gogh, whom he abandons in the south. The rise of an American style is well captured by a French investigator's report that "I would never have believed, had I not confirmed it myself, that the United States, so young a country, could be so rich in works of painting" (p. 160).

It is late in the book that these sorts of tensions actually began to take dramatic form as the French government bids frenetically to save Jean-François Millet's masterpiece *The Angelus* from becoming an American possession at auction. Here we see played out all of the gripping stereotypes: the wealthy Americans buying up great art with their dollars, the French defending their honor by claiming the genius of their "own" culture. In one of the lovely ironies in Jonnes' telling, it is the French conservatives in the government who are disgruntled about saving their patrimony, and will not appropriate the money to save the painting for France, since many of them consider Millet to have been a communist.

Other critical themes assert themselves. Nowhere does Jonnes ever use the terms "discourse," "gender," or "indigenous agency" but she manages to illustrate a number of compelling cases to which readers can add their own scholarly apparatus. Notably, of course, there is Annie Oakley, the woman who could shoot better than a man in one of the most manly of all professions—the use of arms. Again, Jonnes prefers to tell the story rather than analyze it, yet some sophisticated points are made about Oakley's astute self-fashioning, her willingness along with Buffalo Bill to play out the legend of the American frontier, and thus to be able to inhabit roles as a woman and a rough rider with her feminine charm intact. It is a winning portrait of a very smart and amazingly talented woman, marketing an experience of adventure inaccessible to the bourgeoisie—even though she had never lived west of Ohio.

In like fashion, though with less attention, Jonnes draws a portrait of the woman who in turn painted the *Wild West Show*, the French artist Rosa Bonheur, one of the few females accorded a special permit allowing her to wear trousers. By focusing on the indistinction between key male and female self-presentations at the boundary of polite society—in frontier entertainment and the world of bohemian arts—Jonnes offers up a thesis woven around gender representations without saying so.

Equally noted and trenchant is the theme of imperialism. In the French case, this is direct, as the Universal Exposition of 1889 was well noted for its Colonial section in which great simulacra of Cairo, Morocco, and "native" performers carried out their simulated indigenous traditions for the public. There is no post-colonial critique in the largely descriptive telling, but the reader can find the tensions in the performers of colonialism, and also in the extended chronicles of African and Central Asian monarchs, the Persian Shah's grandeur and attempts to surmount the Eiffel Tower, and the King of Senegal's entreaty to purchase Annie Oakley so she can combat tigers in his native realm (as he puts it). [3]

Some of the most painful tensions of empire come to the fore as Red Shirt and other Sioux are informed in Paris of the U.S. Government's plan to buy out and dispossess their home territories back in North America. Though Jonnes does not extend the argument, here is the agonizing conundrum of proud performers acting out the mythology of their own culture for European audiences, while being marginalized at home. In a particularly poignant moment, Jonnes recounts Red Shirt and other Sioux leaders contemplating their fate, so far from home, by going to the *Galerie des Arts* and studying and pondering over long hours paintings of the buffalo and the open plains.

Out of all of these tensions, a number of narratives arise. One is clearly—as the setting of the Universal Exposition suggests—the degree to which culture, civilization, and history are all forms of spectacle and

performance. This is true most obviously for Oakley, Cody, Red Shirt, and Rocky Bear, but also clearly for the impresario-artists and publicists like Whistler and Gordon, who often seem to value their own personalities and antics as their true contributions to the work of culture. For the technical geniuses like Edison and Eiffel, the question is particularly that of celebrity. This is a book which abounds in portraits of great scientists, statesmen, peerless academic artists, world-renowned performers, and monarchs, kings, princes, and royalty of an almost uncountable variety. Lavish banquets and glittering receptions are well attended to, and honors, praise, and glory seem to flow off of every page in a festival of Franco-American self-congratulation.

As such, Jonnes' book is in many ways a detailed study of the meaning of fame, in this instance through the construction and mechanisms by which ideas of achievement and reputation are gained. Most of her characters seem to have some sort of extraordinary talent—for marksmanship, for scientific mastery, for visual arts as with Bonheur and Whistler. Minor characters like Gauguin and Van Gogh appear in the light not of their later recognition, but their contemporaneous inability to fathom or fashion themselves into members of the circles of repute. Perhaps this is one of the lingering legacies of these stories and of the Universal Exposition. It claimed to present the world, and it did—of royalty and bourgeoisie, of technical advance, spectacle, and sure supremacy over the globe, fashioning the future in its own image.

NOTES

[1] Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard, 1988); Pascal Ory, *L'Expo universelle 1889* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1989); Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1968); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999); Joseph Harriss, *The Tallest Tower* (Unlimited Publishing, LLC, 2008),.

Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[2] Jill Jonnes, *Conquering Gotham* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Jill Jones, *Empires of Light* (New York: Random House, 2004).

[3] Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

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