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Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Paris Under Water: How the City of Light survived the Great Flood of 1910*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. x + 262 pp. Figures, notes, selected bibliography and index. \$27.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-230-61706-3.

Review by Julian Wright, University of Durham.

This book tells how one of the greatest and dampest of Parisian *faits divers* became a story of hope and progress, built on many thousands of individual stories of loss and calamity. Choosing a framework that places a chronological narrative to the fore, Jeffrey H. Jackson has woven together many individual testimonies and personal stories from the events of January 1910, when the river Seine oozed up from beneath central Paris to submerge much of the city in fetid water. The chronological approach echoes rather colourfully the journalistic style of the Parisian press at the time; Jackson's narrative allows the reader to be submerged in the daily round of vivid pictorial description common to organs such as *L'Illustration*. The narrative races along compellingly, starting in darkness and cold on the outskirts of the capital when the water first rose dramatically and devastatingly.

Throughout, indeed, Jackson maintains a careful balance between the experience of the central arrondissements of Paris and the sometimes much more difficult and deadly events that unfolded in suburbs. There is a subtle reflection on this in Jackson's epilogue – in 1910, the disasters of the centre were the source of the greatest publicity, while the explosions, eruptions and sudden onslaught of floodwaters in the suburbs were actually probably more damaging and deadly. But the numbers of dead in the suburbs were not recorded as meticulously as those in the main part of the capital; the intense reflection on new technological methods that followed the flood was devoted to saving the "City of Light" itself; and although prefect of police Lépine sent officers to monitor developments as they affected factories outside the capital, the energies of many were concentrated on the dispossessed of the central districts. So this is indeed a great story of Paris, in which the narrative of bourgeois progress clashes with religious reflections on God's punishing hand; in which the consternation of North American tourists and businessmen echoes loudly by comparison with the largely unheard voices of the surrounding suburbs; in which the historic memory of Parisian political collapse, as in 1871, was carefully prevented from defining the script written by Lépine and président du conseil Aristide Briand, where practical republican competence was the main theme.

The belief in the power of middle-class man to harness the forces of nature was strangely redoubled by the flood. This takes us to one of the most thought-provoking of Jackson's conclusions. His narrative shines a bright focus on many individual stories of human suffering and loss. The mutual support which Parisians offered one another was stretched to near breaking point. The makeshift systems of floating gangways never really offered an effective means of getting about, though Parisians were obliged to use them. The clean-up was wearisome and odious. Nonetheless, the city took pains to emphasize, through its press and through its politicians, that the floods had presented a myriad of opportunities for showing the natural perseverance and good sense of Parisians and their public servants. The saving of the Louvre and the largely successful attempts at restricting damage in Les Halles were held up as examples of this. The presence of leading politicians around the city, exuding calm and efficiency, helped enormously. In 1910, the Third Republic was able to project an image of bourgeois technical competence, bound up with practical, good-humoured social support, through the illustrated media, and especially through postcards (and Jackson suitably chooses many interesting examples). There was a flurry of anxiety when it was suggested that troops were essential for keeping order; but the practical development of the state infrastructure for

dealing with emergencies had at least risen to such a point that Parisians were able to buy into the narrative that all had been well managed, whatever the reality.

An interesting thought is raised, perhaps a little too cursorily: the city never did properly experience a famine, but the national infrastructure must have been stretched to its very limits as the effort to keep the city provisioned went ahead. How many hours was the city from running out of bread? Revolution never seemed especially close in January 1910, but Jackson does not quite test the proximity of civil collapse, in the form of a collapse in provisioning. In the 1870 siege, Parisians had eaten cats and rats; but of course nobody actually starved in 1910. Similarly, the embryonic administrative organs of state welfare were certainly stretched to their limits as Parisians sought compensation for their losses. But even here, the Third Republic was able to tell a tale of compassion that many were prepared to buy into (unless their savings had been washed away with the muddy water).

Jackson's narrative is punctuated by examples of the postcards and photographs that were such a feature of how Belle Époque France told stories about its life and its struggles. Doubtless more could have been done to discuss the way these particular primary sources were constructed, their visual references and composition, and indeed a whole new book could be written on photography in the 1910 floods. Like much of the text, Jackson's dealing with these sources seems to tread a little too often on the side of 'illustration' rather than analysis – entertaining though that may be. But there is a point here: this was indeed one of the great periods of the *faits divers*; illustration and little narratives formed a vital part of how many Parisians wove together their view of the world, the city and the Republic. Like many of the American observers whom he cites, Jackson has tapped into something quintessential about Belle Époque Paris in his choice of the chronological narrative. And his book will make excellent reading, especially for those who enjoy the feeling, when working in Paris, of being part of an urban story, with all its murky undercurrents, dangerous smells and stories of individual human desperation and bravery.

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