

---

H-France Review Vol. 15 (September 2015), No. 125

Paula J. Martin, *Suzanne Noël. Cosmetic Surgery, Feminism and Beauty in Early Twentieth-Century France*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014). xi + 157 pp. Appendices, bibliography, and index. 109.95 U.S. (hb) . ISBN 978-1-4724-1188-4.

Review by Mary Lynn Stewart, Simon Fraser University, Emerita.

This slim volume rescues Suzanne Noël (1878-1954) from historical obscurity. Paula Martin portrays Noël as a French pioneer of cosmetic surgery and an innovator in the sub-specialty of facial reconstructive surgery who was famous in surgical circles for improving techniques in the rapidly advancing field of cosmetic surgery between 1920 and the early 1950s. Martin outlines the operative techniques used before and during the First World War, describes and provides line-drawings of Noël's surgical innovations in the 1920s and 1930s and evaluates her contributions to the field. Her sources are Noël's 1926 textbook on esthetic surgery and the eight medical articles she published between 1928 and 1934, a review of the French, English and American medical scholarship on reconstructive or cosmetic surgery from the nineteenth century to the present, and a sampling of the cultural debates over these interventions in the body, including contemporary and present-day feminist debates over the medical necessity for facial and other surgical reconstructions.

Starting the chapter on "Cosmetic Surgery: 'A Boon to Women'" with an account of the mounting advertising pressures on women to be beautiful, increased scientific measurements of model women's bodies, and the burgeoning number of beauty magazines, products and shops in the *fin de siècle*, Martin concludes it with a warning not to assume a simple cause-and-effect relationship between the new beauty culture and the rise of cosmetic surgery. Passing quickly over contemporary and present-day studies on the psychological benefits of (successful) cosmetic surgery, the author lays out Noël's argument about the economic advantages of beauty and of cosmetic surgery and cites cases from Noël's own practice and publications. Particularly compelling are stories about helping women in precarious employment at a time when there was no protection from age discrimination in employment. Equally effectively, the author reminds readers that advances in cosmetic surgery came during and after the Great War, when the loss of many Frenchmen left women less certain of marriage and more likely to earn an income which allowed those who could afford cosmetic surgery to make their own decisions about such procedures. Further contextualizing the continuing growth in cosmetic surgeries, she draws attention to the effect of the depression of the early 1930s on the demand for cosmetic interventions, when many older and experienced women lost jobs.

The book uncovers the impressive volunteer work of Suzanne Noël, notably as a founder of the French Soroptimist Club in 1924 and initiator of eleven clubs in the rest of Europe between 1927 and 1939. The Soroptimists were and are an association of business and professional women who provide a network of support for women and promote better economic opportunities for women, notably by scholarships, one of which is named after Suzanne Noël. The sources are primarily letters, Noël's unpublished history of the Soroptimists and other documents in the Noël Papers in the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand. The account of the clubs themselves is bit thin. One wonders why there are no references to the *Soroptimist Club Bulletin*, given that many issues for the years 1926 to 1931 are available in the Bibliothèque

---

Nationale de France, or to Beatrice Hyslop, *Histoire de l'Association soroptimiste internationale: cinquantenaire 1921-1971*, also in the BNF.

Martin contends that Noël and the Soroptimist Clubs were feminist. She depicts her subject as a liberal feminist who was “politely radical” (p. 59), one who believed in women’s rights and participated in legal demonstrations for the vote. Similarly, she shows that Noël was dedicated to economic opportunity for all women, and suggests the same for Soroptimists more generally. If Noël enlisted only distinguished women for the Paris club, this was because, Noël explained, and Martin does not question, it was difficult to organize a club for women in France, at least partly because French women lacked political rights and experience. Historians of French feminism have paid little attention to the Soroptimists in the interwar period, perhaps because they were moderate and bourgeois feminists. In response, Paula Martin correctly notes that most [or at least many] interwar feminists in France were moderate and bourgeois.

Martin establishes that Noël was unusual in being a woman surgeon and even more unusual in being a cosmetic surgeon by citing the pertinent literature on girls’ secondary and post-secondary education and the struggles over the admission of women to medical schools and medical specialties other than women’s medicine. The biographical details, which rely heavily on two published biographies, include interruptions in her medical training for illness, to deal with her daughters’ ill health, and to assist her first and second husbands, both doctors, set up and run their practices. Yet she also had the opportunity to intern with major aesthetic surgeons at the La Pitié hospital before the Great War and to perform reconstructive surgeries at the Saint-Louis hospital, the primary receiving station for wounded soldiers during that war, before she completed her medical degree. Even the death of her first husband and their daughter, followed by the suicide of her second husband, did not stop her from completing her thesis and acquiring a license to practice medicine legally. Her energy and dedication to cosmetic surgery, Soroptimists, and women’s employment were impressive indeed.

Mary Lynn Stewart  
Simon Fraser University, Emerita  
[mstewart@sfu.ca](mailto:mstewart@sfu.ca)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172