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John Merriman, *Ballad of the Anarchist Bandits: The Crime Spree that Gripped Belle Époque Paris*. New York: Nation Books, 2017. viii + 327 pp. \$28.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781568589886.

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When the writer Colette submitted a news column for *Le Matin* describing a stand-off on May 2, 1912 between French police and two members of the criminal “Bonnot Gang” at a suburban residence in Nogent-sur-Marne, she captured the frenzy and confusion of a crowd gathered to watch the drama unfold. Colette’s *chronique* puts us right along with her “dans la foule,” where men and women jostle for spots, angling for a glimpse of the notorious bandits who had audaciously robbed a branch of the Société Générale bank in Chantilly five months earlier.[1] The crushing, clamorous crowd yells “à mort!” and rushes about with feverish curiosity, but it’s hard to see what’s going on beyond the dynamite smoke—and Colette herself, though sucked in by the “exécrable esprit spectateur” of the crowd, leaves the scene unable to comprehend what she has just seemed to witness. If Colette’s reportage gives us a subjective, limited view reminiscent of Fabrice at Waterloo, John Merriman’s new book *Ballad of the Anarchist Bandits* provides a far more complete overview of the build-up, the crimes, and the aftermath of the Bonnot Gang’s violent spree. Thorough and sweeping, *Ballad* makes use of extensive evidence from Prefecture of Police archives, anarchist memoirs, and secondary sources to take us beyond the specifics of the *cause célèbre*. Yes, we learn details about each key moment (the Nogent-sur-Marne siege, for example, involved fifty armed detectives, about four hundred gendarmes and soldiers, and up to twenty thousand souvenir-hungry spectators), but more importantly, Merriman’s book addresses larger questions about anarchist ideologies and the forces of order in Belle Époque society.[2]

Indeed, after a lively prologue setting the scene of the December 21, 1911 bank holdup on the rue Ordener, Merriman steps back for a wide-angle view on fin-de-siècle French society. Useful primarily for non-specialists, the cultural overview of chapter one recaps certain well-known elements: the link between sped-up technology and modernity, the fascinating lure of electricity in the “City of Light,” the emergence of Art Nouveau style, the urban topographies of post-Haussmann boulevards and Montmartre hills, the power of the popular press under the Third Republic, the upper-class rush to amusement as a way to forget the earlier humiliations of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune, and the ugly side of the so-called “belle” époque.[3] But Merriman’s analysis quickly becomes more pertinent to scholars when he uses such syntheses to reflect on the ways in which the enormous gap between rich and poor fed anarchist thought; through articles in *L’Anarchie*, informal *causeries*, and housing networks, intellectuals and workers united to critique the corruption of capitalism, large-scale industrialization, and government protections of the interests of the wealthy. The following six chapters of part one provide intriguing glimpses into the daily lives of these anarchist thinkers (struggles with illness, commitment to radical hospitality and free love, diets eschewing meat, vinegar, coffee, alcohol, and chervil) and, more crucially, into their internal ideological divisions. Merriman’s nuanced explication of the intramural divisions among “scientific anarchists,” (idealistic) individualists, and (violent) illegalists sets the stage for our understanding of the events surrounding the Bonnot Gang’s banditry; while the police and the press roped anarchists together with *apaches* as unruly agents of crime

and chaos, Merriman helps us distinguish, for example, between a thug like Jules Bonnot—who killed his sidekick Platano in cold blood—and a thinker like Albert Libertad, who wrote editorials about poverty and defied authority by singing anti-war songs in the streets.

Merriman introduces so many members of Parisian anarchist circles that it becomes at times hard to follow their mini-bios, especially when we don't know whether they will play a central part in the Bonnot Gang attacks described in part two. But he also successfully mitigates that confusion by organizing much of his book around a central love story between two sympathetic characters, Victor Kibaltchiche and his companion Rirette Maîtrejean. Victor and Rirette were not directly involved with the violent thefts and murders of the Bonnot Gang, but they were brought to trial as known associates because of their writings in *L'Anarchie*. By giving a starring role to this anarchist couple, Merriman provides us with an effective through-line for the book, which includes their intellectual positioning in part one (Victor and Rirette thoughtfully resisted both the superficial poses of the anarchist *végétaliens* and the senseless brutality of the illegalists), their ambivalent reactions to the crime spree and police dragnet in part two, and the impact on their lives in part three, which lays out the trial and aftermath of the Bonnot Gang's crimes. After imprisonment in France, Victor moved to the Soviet Union, where he wrote dissident tracts and poetry under the name Victor Serge; Rirette died in France in 1968 after having returned to anarchist *causeries* without militancy. The lovers' perspective helps the reader keep in mind the wider ideological and societal stakes of the "crime spree that gripped Belle Époque Paris," even when we're submerged in its sensational details.

And sensational they were. In the eleven short chapters of Part Two, Merriman tracks, vividly, the accelerated pace of crimes perpetrated by Bonnot's loosely-defined "gang" (which included Octave Garnier, Raymond Callemin, Étienne Monier, André Soudy, and Eugène Dieudonné, along with a number of "associés des malfaiteurs"): the December 21 robbery and murder of a bank employee, the dramatic escape in a stolen car, the subsequent series of carjackings, murders, and narrow escapes as police pulled their dragnet tighter, the media frenzy surrounding the "Crime of rue Ordener," the dramatic siege in Choisy-le-Roi resulting in Bonnot's death on April 28, 1912, and the stand-off at Nogent-sur-Marne days later that killed Garnier, the capture and trial of surviving members, and the execution by guillotine of Callemin, Monier, and Soudy. One fascinating element that emerges from the incidents is the importance of France's nascent car culture at the start of the 20th century. Bonnot was himself a mechanic known for automobile repair and strong driving skills. The "bandits en auto" shocked Paris with their use of speed in the getaway from La Société Générale. Their audacity in stealing luxurious models like the Delaunay-Belleville and the Dion-Bouton touched on the class gap in car access, and even *L'Auto-Journal* seemed to take a perverse pride in featuring this modern new tool of crime. Merriman's book provides interesting context on early Taylorism, the masculine and nationalist leanings of Michelin advertising, and the joint excitement and anxiety surrounding automobile culture.[4] With the Bonnot Gang's exploits featuring dramatic car-related moments—speeding around trams and buses during a getaway, shooting at cops who jump on a running-board, etc.—it's no wonder that films like the *Fantômas* series (1913-14) and *Bandits en automobile* (1912) used them as fodder. This is the crime spree that seems to have started the cinematic cliché of criminal car chase scenes.

The publicity for Merriman's book calls it a "rollicking read," a "fast-paced and gripping" tale, and I'd have to agree. Merriman has mastered the art of synthesis needed for a successful trade (i.e., general audience) book and he manages, through imagistic detail and pacing, to build suspense even when the historical outcome is known. As for scholarly readers, we know we are in expert hands; *Ballad of the Anarchist Bandits* builds on Merriman's extensive previous work on French *faubourg* culture, the Paris Commune, modern policing, and anarchism in the fin-de-siècle. The book historicizes French anarchist thought in useful ways, demonstrating for example how the thuggish violence of the Bonnot Gang discredited intellectual and political anarchism in a lasting manner. Still, I would have liked to see a bit of reflection on potential parallels between the Belle Époque events and today, such as Merriman provides in a brief preface to the paperback edition of his 2009 book *The Dynamite Club*, on anarchist terrorism.[5] How can early twentieth-century terrorist attacks on innocents, internal disputes of

sedition, and state versus anti-state violence help us understand the global situation of our early twenty-first century? Can the brutal police repression of anarchist demonstrators be likened to events prompting the Black Lives Matter movement? When a burglar in 1912 yells “Long live Anarchy!” before putting a bullet into his own head and thereby spurring easy associations between anarchist thought and criminality, might that reverberate with today’s cries of “Allahu Akbar” from suicidal attackers? Perhaps such connections would be too hasty. But Merriman’s book inspires genealogical reflections on modern forces of order and chaos through its rich, incisive analyses of the Belle Époque bandits and their wide-reaching exploits.

NOTES

[1] Colette, *Œuvres*, 4 vols (Paris: NRF Gallimard, Éditions de la Pléiade, 1984-2001), ed. Claude Pichois et al., II (1986), 610-613. See Anne Freadman, “Being There: Colette in the Crowd,” *French Cultural Studies* 19:1 (2008): 5-16, and Andrea Goulet, “Du massacre de la rue Transnonain aux ‘drames de la rue’: Politique et théâtre de l’espace,” in Marie-Ève Thérénty ed., “La Rue,” *Romantisme*, 171 (2016): 53-64.

[2] In this way, it has as much in common with broad cultural studies like Eugen Weber’s *France Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) or James Cannon’s *The Paris Zone: A Cultural History, 1840-1944* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015) as with other recent books organized around one particular crime, such as Aaron Freundschuh’s *The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Montaigne and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[3] Merriman’s work continues to resonate nicely with that of Dominique Kalifa, whose *La Véritable Histoire de la “Belle Époque”* (Paris: Fayard, 2017) has recalibrated French perceptions of that period.

[4] One of Merriman’s sources on car culture is James M. Laux’s *In First Gear: The French Automobile Industry to 1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1976), which could be put into dialogue with Mathieu Flonneau’s *Les Cultures du Volant: Essai sur les mondes de l’automobilisme, XXe-XXIe Siècles* (Paris: Autrement, 2008).

[5] John Merriman, *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

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