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Rosemary Lancaster, *Women Writing on the French Riviera: Travellers and Trendsetters, 1870-1970*. Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2020. xii + 275 pp. References, index, 20 colour illustrations and frontispiece. \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9789004428751; \$140.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9789004433922.

Review by Melanie Hawthorne, Texas A&M University.

Although that favored section of the French coastline that runs from Cassis in the west to Menton in the east has been the playground of the rich and leisured for only a century and a half, it has attracted more than its fair share of attention, and not only from those whose mother tongue was French. Rosemary Lancaster narrows the scope by focusing specifically on creative women in the century from 1870 to 1970, but does not limit herself to the Francophone in her survey *Women Writing on the French Riviera*. Hence her subjects include the Russian painter Marie Bashkirtseff and the Anglophone Katherine Mansfield, examples, in “Art and Illness” (part 1), of ambitious women who struggled to make their mark despite the handicap of tuberculosis; in “High Life” (part 2), Alice Williamson, Bronislava Nijinska, and Rebecca West, women who reflected the lifestyles of the rich and famous around them; and Colette, Honoria Murphy, and the gastronomes Elizabeth David and Julia Child, women who succumbed to the charms of the natural beauty of the landscape and lived the “Mediterranean Idyll” (part 3).

The introduction begins with a brief consideration of the paradigmatic experience of Edith Wharton, who illustrates the way that, whatever expectations women brought to their adventures on the Côte d’Azur, they were all transformed by what they found there. In a process of mutual exchange, these women took away from their interactions with the place something that influenced “their written records and the remarkable lives they led,” while also leaving their mark that “helped fashion the identity of the Riviera” (p. 2). Lancaster sketches the background of technical and social changes that opened up this region of France, beginning with the advent of railway networks and roads that made otherwise remote villages accessible; how the cultural assumptions that denied women the “grand tour” experience granted to their brothers left them free to explore less well-known and culturally-sanctioned zones; and the role of the Victorians in popularizing seaside resorts that offered a milder climate than the one found on domestic shores. When combined, these features meant that the Riviera “emancipated women in newly creative ways, promoting the region as a locus of cultural diversity and professional development” (p. 9).

As Lancaster points out, many women illustrate this dynamic, so one criterion for inclusion here is that each woman left a written document of some kind (fiction or memoir, for instance). Apart

from some observations on the literary texts, however, Lancaster treats these sources mainly as unproblematic records.

The first chapter focuses on the Nice years of the young Marie Bashkirtseff, who died of tuberculosis before she could realize her ambitions. The background of Russian émigrés in Nice is usefully sketched, and—most fascinating—Lancaster bases her reading of Bashkirtseff's diary on a new and unexpurgated version of her famous diary that only became available in France between 1995 and 2006. Despite the tantalizing information that the earlier version of the diary was somehow adulterated, however, the reader does not get a clear sense of what is gained by access to the new, unexpurgated version. In addition, despite Lancaster's stated emphasis on written records, much of Lancaster's discussion pertains to Bashkirtseff's painting. Lancaster notes the way physical distance from Paris offered Bashkirtseff perspective that matured her painting style, and that her realism was less "idealistically contrived" than that of her peers (p. 39), but there are no reproductions of any paintings to illustrate. (The one exception is confusingly dated as 1882 in the caption but 1879 in the text.) The diary, though a fascinating picture of what it was like to be a young woman, comfortably off, coming of age in Nice in the second half of the nineteenth century, is not subjected to any probing critical questions, but taken at face value as evidence of the subject's true feelings.

The second chapter, still dealing with illness, focuses on the months the short story writer Katherine Mansfield spent in Menton, from 1920 to 1921. Mansfield was "ordered south," as Lancaster puts it (p. 52), to battle the tuberculosis that would eventually kill her. In the absence of antibiotics, sun and good air were standard treatments offered to patients in hopes of keeping them in remission. Lancaster quotes extensively from Mansfield's journal and letters to support her contention that "the Riviera was good to Katherine Mansfield" (p. 53), and one can see why. Beyond Mansfield's own predisposition to thrive best when at a distance from those she was intimate with (John Middleton Murry), her quasi-isolation in the Villa Isola Bella (the author provides her own photo) would be enviable were it not for the illness that led to it. The location, the quality of the local food, and the staff to cook and clean gave Mansfield the peace and routine in which to work, and this "writing retreat" allowed her to produce some of her best work.

In a series of three chapters in the second part, Lancaster pivots from artists who sought the Mediterranean climate for their health to those who came for the "high life." The novelist Alice Williamson drew on her real-life adventures among gamblers in the fashionable Monte Carlo of the Belle Epoque era, particularly in her *The Guests of Hercules* (1912), the main text at the center of the third chapter. A more formal introduction to Williamson would have been welcome, since she is one of the less well-known figures of the book. Her melodramatic, escapist fiction is no longer in vogue and her identity was somewhat unstable (she reinvented herself and changed name several times). Lancaster locates her subject in the context of the way Monte Carlo leveraged itself into a luxury sin city in the second half of the nineteenth century. The travel revolution is reflected in Williamson's stories, where "journeys imply risk" (p. 93). Gambling, which soon became a special feature of life in this Las Vegas on the Mediterranean, was also a risky business, and Williamson's set was at the center of the action at the tables where fortunes were made and lost. Lancaster traces the way Williamson weaves this experience into *The Guests of Hercules*, noting that the financial speculation mirrored a form of "social gambling—betting on social advantage" (p. 102) that is often a theme of this and other novels. At the heart of such work, "playing for one's life" is the highest stake of all (p. 104).

The case of Bronislava Nijinska, sister of the superstar dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, is the subject of chapter 4, “The Ballets Russes Years.” Lancaster invokes Nijinska’s “radical treatise on ‘movement’” (p. 114) as the primary text, even though it was not written while Nijinska was a resident of the Riviera. This aesthetic manifesto began as notes and diaries kept during Nijinska’s early years in Kiev (though not published until much later), but it was “crucial to Nijinska’s subsequent choreographic fame” (p. 124). The south of France cannot, then, be credited with *inspiring* Nijinska, though Lancaster’s point would seem to be that it did provide her with the opportunity to *realize* her talent. Lancaster argues that Nijinska is one of only a few female outstanding choreographers (thanks to enduring sexism in the field), and that her work in the 1920s for the Ballets Russes, which had made Monte Carlo its home base, showed her at the height of her powers. Two productions in particular, *Les biches* and *Le train bleu*, are described and analyzed for the way “her ballets [...] render in ‘pure movement’ the character of the very era in which they were performed” (p. 129). Lancaster provides a rich resource here, explaining the background of phenomena such as the famous “blue train” service that brought the privileged to the south in high style and comfort. She is attentive, too, to the changes in gender and sexual norms that informed the frothy content of the performances (which, with the collaboration of figures such as Jean Cocteau, librettist, and Marie Laurencin, set designer, were full of sexually coded allusions). The illustrations, while few, are well chosen and tantalizing; one can only regret that there was no better way at the time to preserve such performances for posterity. Nijinska ended up as part of the Europeans-in-exile community of Pacific Palisades in California, but it was the opportunity to create works on a different coast that led to the reputation she later traded on.

The final chapter in this section features Rebecca West’s 1936 novel *The Thinking Reed* and its indictment of “a whole generation of Anglo-Saxon spendthrifts” (p. 145). It was the time she spent visiting the south of France, Lancaster contends, that allowed West to observe the self-absorbed and entitled behavior of other temporary residents. Much of the analysis entails plot summary, but through this retelling Lancaster shows that along with the class preoccupation, West was interested in gender relations, the two systems working in parallel. “Wealth in *The Thinking Reed* contaminates relationships,” observes Lancaster, primarily because it leaves the privileged with too much time on their hands and not enough incentive to be self-aware (p. 152). Consequently, they are prone to “social fatigue, satiation, [and] the displeasure born of pleasure-seeking” (p. 155), problems that West tracks, critiques, and condemns. The natural beauty of the Riviera was wasted on this self-centered crowd, who merely reproduced the same kind of social interactions they were escaping back home. The “poison” that is money (p. 159) works its evil, and turns the rich into a class of brutes who are incapable of empathizing with “individual distress” (p. 159). Despite her own access to the high life, then, West depicts the unpleasant underside of this kind of privilege. That West herself became wealthy and a member of that class, despite her sympathy for socialism and the lot of the poor, is an irony not lost on Lancaster, though she retains some respect for West’s commitment to critique her situation through fiction. This descent into the Slough of Despond marks the low point in the reader’s journey, and prepares the final section that will uplift the spirit by focusing on writers for whom the Riviera represented an idyllic existence.

The first of these is Colette, who purchased a villa in Saint-Tropez in 1926. Although she sold La Treille Muscate just over a decade later, the twelve years she spent there marked a time of serenity and inner peace that Lancaster tracks through the memoir-as-fiction *La naissance du jour* (*Break of Day*). Describing the significance of Colette’s years of semiretirement here for her

writing, Lancaster suggests that “setting is the geographic crucible in which the book’s drama unfolds” (p. 181). Although the novel depicts a classic romantic triangle, the resolution is not a happy coupling, but the realization that self-sufficiency and abstinence from emotional entanglements bring deeper happiness. Sexuality is displaced onto a love of land, not people, according to Lancaster, while gardening fulfills the need to be creative. Surrounded by cats and all the natural flora and fauna of her villa, Colette still wrote regularly, but her center of gravity shifted away from the stimulations of Paris and the sensationalism that marked earlier chapters of her life, and her retreat to the south was almost spiritual in its renunciation of the world. Assessing the moral of the novel, Lancaster underscores the value of patience, the opposite of force, and attributes this insight to Colette’s time on the Riviera, the only place she could have learned this lesson. “The South, the leisurely routine it invites, the time it allows for re-evaluation and reminiscence, the pared-down lifestyle it accommodates, are... propitious for one resolved to ease the tempo of life, love with less, relish the day” (p. 195). When the intrusions by fans became too much, Colette resigned this space rather than share it with the world, but the book she wrote there, *La naissance du jour*, was an enduring success, “a sublime homage to a restorative place” (p. 198). For those who may never have the chance to experience the Riviera for themselves, perhaps this loving tribute to the region will give them a flavor of what they are missing (and act as an antidote to the bitter taste left by West).

The personal memoir by Honoria Murphy of growing up at the Villa America, the residence of her celebrity parents Gerald and Sara, also speaks to an idyllic existence, but one with a worm in the bud. Her rich and cultivated parents seemed to lead a charmed life in Antibes, where friends such as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway dropped in, the children hobnobbed with the likes of Picasso, and the family pioneered the pleasures of being *in* or *on* the sea (sailing for pleasure, not as a competitive activity, swimming, and lounging on the beach) instead of just *looking* at it from afar. The children were not overindulged (there were rules for everyone), and they knew love, but nothing could protect the family from the premature death of both of Honoria’s brothers, Baoth in 1935 and Patrick in 1937. The knowledge of these losses to come makes the sight of the sepia family photos in this chapter almost too painful, fixing as they do moments of carefree happiness that the reader knows as an index of death. So, an idyll, yes, but one measured by how irretrievable it is in the present. This world is not Colette’s serene retreat, but a glimpse of a paradise from which one has been cast out forever.

Rounding out this section, Lancaster offers the example of two food writers whose plates and palates were informed by contact with Provence, Julia Child and Elizabeth David. For both women, war, travel, and government employment were significant shaping factors, and both “benefitted from seminal stays in the Mediterranean” (p. 237). The adventurous David (who travelled with cookbooks) came to French cooking through a stay in Antibes and with the friendship of novelist Norman Douglas. Her *Book of Mediterranean Food* (1950) was a revelation in austere, postwar Britain, not just because of the recipes, but through her writing, which invoked “literary luminaries” (p. 245). Julia Child came to Marseille through the work of her husband, but once there, she was in her element. She had taken Cordon Bleu lessons in Paris, but in the fish markets of Marseille—her husband called it a “bouillabaisse of a city” (p. 251)—she came into her own. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and its practical approach made her a household name and led to the TV series for which she is still known. Lancaster illustrates her care and precision in the way she pursued her knowledge of fish species, impatient with the imprecise translations usually offered. The opening chapter, on soup, was “largely conceived in the south” (p. 256), states Lancaster, highlighting the importance of the Riviera for Child’s oeuvre.

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Lancaster also draws attention to the semiotics of how these cookbooks were illustrated. While “Child is a translator, a facilitator,” David is “a romantic, and idealist, and intellectual” (p. 257), but both were writers as well as cooks, and, perhaps, neither would have found their vocation without Provence.

There is no conclusion, since this kind of literary tourism is to be sampled, but does not present a linear argument that leads to conclusions. Instead, a serviceable bibliography rounds out this light but informative and enjoyable survey of the varied ways women have been inspired by that enviable stretch of coastline.

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