
H-France Review Vol. 6 (April 2006), No. 38

Jérôme Penez. *Histoire du thermalisme en France au XIXe siècle: Eau, médecine et loisirs.* Paris: Economica (Collection économies et sociétés contemporaine), 2005. xi + 334 pp. Maps, tables, notes, and bibliography. 39 € (pb). ISBN 2-717-8490-41.

Review by Alex Dracobly, University of Oregon.

Historians have long been aware of the “spa fever” that took hold of the middle-classes in France and Europe in the nineteenth century.^[1] In France, for instance, the number of those seeking water-cures rose from roughly 30,000 in the 1820s to 100,000 at mid-century and to as many as 375,000 by the outbreak of World War I. The total number of French spa-goers may have been high as 560,000 on the eve of the war.^[2] Aside from an article by Paul Gerbod and the informative but often anecdotal book by Armand Wallon,^[3] however, most of the work on this subject has focused either on a particular locality or on a particular aspect of the broader phenomena.^[4]

The signal contribution of Jérôme Penez’s new book is to provide a “total history” of the nineteenth-century spa and spa-going. Penez is the author of a business history of the resort at Chatel-Guyon (his *mémoire de maîtrise*).^[5] The book under review is a much reduced version of his dissertation.^[6] Besides the fuller bibliography and more extensive notes of the original, the most notable cut is the section on business and economics, though every chapter has been compressed. The book is both the product of Penez’s own wide-ranging research and a synthesis of the surprisingly large body of French scholarship on spas, much of it unpublished or locally published.

Penez’s book is organized analytically. It begins with a general examination of spas, their location and frequentation over the course of the century. Penez’s quantitative findings here will not surprise anyone familiar with the topic: the growth of attendance of spas and spa-towns was exponential, and this growth was to a great extent fueled by the middle classes. More interesting is his analysis of changes in the geographical and social distribution of spa-goers and their destinations. Penez’s research confirms that a large part of the clientele of most spas was regional. This changed, however, over the course of the century as spas increasingly drew from a wider geographical area, a trend that appears especially marked with respect to the best-known spas. The social origins of spa-goers underwent a similar expansion but with different effects. On the one hand, there was a distinct widening of the social origins of spa-goers as the possibility of a “cure” became accessible to middle and even lower-middle class clientele. On the other hand, the working poor slowly lost their “rights” to the waters and found themselves “marginalized,” even as the state continued to guarantee (limited) rights of access for indigents and sometimes even paid their way. This process was by no means equal - much depended on the spa, the nature of its clientele, and its locale. The clientele of the Aveyronnais station Pont-les-bains, for instance, remained dominated by peasants and miners (p. 91). Nevertheless the general trend ran in the direction of a “bourgeoisification” of the social milieu of spas and a decline in the presence of the poor and their physical separation from the paying clientele.

In the following chapters Penez turns to the question of why people attended spas and what they experienced once they arrived. The role of medicine looms large. Spa medicine, however, remained suspended between the “rational” and the “inexplicable.” If mineral waters were efficacious, and people frequented spas precisely because they believed that they were efficacious, doctors ran into great difficulties in trying to explain why. Most “explanations” remained descriptive as doctors tried to catalog the various waters according to their mineral contents and correlate these to specific ailments.

Medical hydrology pointed toward specificity in the therapeutic use of mineral waters: specific ailments and diseases required treatment by the waters of specific spas. This would naturally increase the spa-goer's dependence on the doctor's expertise for both diagnosis and the direction of treatment. But doctors met with only qualified success in this respect. While they did manage to carve out a significant place for themselves within spa towns, spa medicine remained one of the less prestigious precincts of medical science. For their part spa-goers often dispensed with doctors altogether, especially after 1860, when the law regulating medical access to mineral waters was abrogated. The reasons for taking waters, moreover, also changed. Prior to the nineteenth century, Penez writes, mineral waters were used "to treat, to heal and not to remain in good health." Increasingly, however, thermalism "became equally a means of conserving one's good health (p. 116)," a practice that ran against the trend toward therapeutic specificity. Penez thus documents a process of medicalization, but one in which the role of medical hydrology in raising the stature of mineral waters was probably secondary to the "more general evolution of a society which was becoming conscious of the importance of medicine and the progressive medicalization of the population (pp. 179-180)."

In Penez's view, "thermalism" was the "child of medicine (p. 181)," but he is equally attentive to the role that leisure played in the spa-going experience. Ironically, the main concern of spa-goers in the first half of the century was boredom. To remain competitive, a spa establishment not only required mineral waters but increasingly a casino, theater, opera, and a park; opportunities for regional tourism and local outings were also helpful in attracting clientele. At one level, this need for "distractions" and "tourism" responded to the daily rhythms of life in a spa-town. Taking waters or a bath took up only a small part of the day. In addition, many spa-goers were not sick at all; after all, the ill were normally accompanied by at least one family member who also needed diversion. At another level, however, the leisurely pursuits of spa-goers were a product of broader trends in everyday life. "Idleness no longer possessed the same virtues it had previously (p. 186-7)." Now "one had to stay busy (p. 187)," even in the pursuit of leisure. But according to Penez these developments never eclipsed the medical function of spa-towns. If leisure activities were more visible than medicine, this was in part due to the desire of management "not to transform the spas into hospitals (p. 214)." Far from medicine being an alibi for leisure, as some historians have asserted, Penez reverses the equation: "Leisure represented a means of concealing behind a show of festivity the more sorrowful aspects of life, those which inspired fear. Recreation served to fend off the prospect of death, for the possibility of participating in numerous activities signified that life was still present" (p. 217).

The last chapter on "representations" and "perceptions" is something of a hotchpotch. Penez reviews the major literary representations of spas. Given the list of authors--Flaubert, the Goncourts, Maupassant, Daudet, Mirbeau all appear - it should come as no surprise that these images were largely negative. More generally, Penez charts a shift from a romantic image of the powers of nature to an emphasis on the "power of man" in harnessing and controlling mineral waters. This image, however, remained complicated by the fact that the precise workings of the waters were so mysterious. Penez suggests that spas provided a point of linkage between medicine and religion, an intriguing argument but one which might have been strengthened by an awareness of the fine work on this topic by Ruth Harris and Jason Szabo.^[7] Finally, Penez suggests that spas played an important role in the development of a "new image of non-work time" and thus contributed to "the transition between idleness and leisure" (p. 289).

This is a significant book. Although not the "total history" of French spas that it aims to be, Penez successfully develops a picture of the full range and diversity of spas and spa-towns. The work is truly synthetic in this respect: no single type of spa or region predominates. Penez similarly avoids monocausal explanations in his interpretations. The result is a more balanced and multi-dimensional account of spas and spa-going than most of the literature on this topic.

The book suffers from several weaknesses, however. The first is Penez's penchant for nuance. His insistence that a counter-example exists for every example that might be brought forward often obscures the main lines of his argument. Second, Penez's work remains all too French in its focus. Penez deliberately excluded colonial spas from his purview. But as Eric Jennings's recent article on hydrotherapy in Guadeloupe suggests, a comparison of spas in France with their counterparts overseas might have been illuminating not only of colonial practices but also of practices in metropolitan France as well.[8] Beyond an attempt to ascertain the percentage of foreigners at French spas, moreover, there is little sense of how the French "spa fever" fits into and compares with similar developments elsewhere in Europe. Finally, Penez's penchant for complex and multifaceted analysis comes at the expense of vividness. Penez tries to remedy this problem by concluding his study with a "virtual history" of a single quasi-anonymous spa-goer, one Alexis Gabriel Garaudé who took a cure at Cauterets in the summer of 1839.[9] Penez provides a superior analysis but, for this reader at least, the more descriptive approach of Armand Wallon gives a more vibrant sense of what it might have been like to attend a spa in nineteenth-century France.[10]

NOTES

[1] For example, Theodore Zeldin, *A History of French Passions*, vol. 2, Intellect, Taste and Anxiety (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 92-96.

[2] These figures are from the book under review, pages 35 and 37, respectively. In his preface André Gueslin suggests that this is "probably a low estimate," *Ibid.*, x.

[3] Paul Gerbod, "Les 'fièvres thermales' en France au XIXe siècle," *Revue historique* 207 (1987): 309-334; Armand Wallon, *La Vie Quotidienne dans les Villes d'Eaux 1850-1914* (Paris: Hachette, 1981).

[4] For a medical angle, see George Weisz, "Water Cures and Science: The Academy and Mineral Waters," in *The Medical Mandarins: The French Academy of Medicine in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 137-158 and "Spas, Mineral Waters, and Hydrological Science in Twentieth-Century France," *Isis* 92 (2001): 451-483; Douglas Peter Mackaman, *Leisure Settings: Bourgeois Culture, Medicine, and the Spa in Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) examines "bourgeois spa culture"; while Dominique Jarassé, *Les thermes romantiques: Bains et villégiatures en France de 1800 à 1850* (Clermont-Ferrand: Publications de l'Institut d'Études du Massif Central, 1992) centers on architecture.

[5] Jérôme Penez, *Dans la fièvre thermale: La Société des eaux minérales de Châtel-Guyon (1878-1914). Réussite et expansion d'une entreprise thermale* (Clermont-Ferrand: Publications de l'Institut d'Études du Massif Central, 1994).

[6] Jérôme Penez, "L'alchimie thermale: eau, médecine et loisirs. Histoire du thermalisme en France au XIXme siècle," Thèse du doctorat d'histoire, Université Paris VII, 2000. In the United States, this work is available from the Center for Research Libraries.

[7] Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999); and Jason Szabo, "Seeing is Believing: The Form and Substance of French Medical Debates over Lourdes," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76 (2002): 199-230.

[8] Eric T. Jennings, "Curing the Colonizers: Highland Hydrotherapy in Guadeloupe," *Social History of Medicine* 15 (2002): 229-261.

[9] His model was Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: Sur les traces d'un inconnu 1798-1876* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

[10] Wallon, *La Vie Quotidienne dans les Villes d'Eaux*.

Alex Dracobly
University of Oregon
dracobly@darkwing.uoregon.edu

Copyright © 2006 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 redistribution/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