



INTRODUCTION

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If the decades around 1900 were remembered in France as a 'Belle Epoque', a golden age of affluence, security and frivolity, that is because they were cast in this light from beyond the trenches of a war that killed well over a million young French men and wounded three million more, disabling many of them for life (McMillan 1985: 77). Viewed retrospectively, the years before 1914 were suffused with the prelapsarian glow of an era blissfully unaware that the most 'civilised' nations on earth could thus choose to butcher their sons in a struggle for power and territory. The term 'Belle Epoque' is nostalgic, and also somewhat elastic. If the historian Eugen Weber defines it as 'the ten years or so before 1914' (Weber 1986: 2), Charles Rearick in another influential study of the period has it cover 'the three decades before World War I' (Rearick 1985: xi), and Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause also imply the broader definition in their anthology of Belle Epoque feminist writings (Waelti-Walters and Hause 1994). In this book we have also adopted the longer time frame, with our central focus on the decades that close one century and open the next. Although the continuities of history and the artificiality of periodisation should not be forgotten, the years between the consolidation of the Third Republic and the outbreak of war do seem to correspond to a particularly colourful, dramatic and to some extent self-contained period both for French feminism and for French women's history.

A term born of nostalgia needs to be treated with a degree of scepticism. After all, this era of modernisation and the consolidation of democratic republicanism was also a period that opened with the massacre of the Communards, accentuated the material inequalities between peasants and town dwellers, workers and bourgeois (McMillan 1985: 48–56), saw the country deeply divided over the Dreyfus affair, and pursued a policy of ferocious colonial expansion. The fact that the Belle Époque straddles the ‘fin de siècle’, with all its connotations of decadence, degeneration and cultural crisis, intensifies the need to ask in what sense and for whom the lived experience of the era was ‘belle’. Avant-garde intellectuals of the period identified themselves with what they depicted as the decadent spirit of their age, ‘a mortal weariness with living, a bleak recognition of the vanity of effort’,¹ though this elegantly languid pose tended to go hand in hand with reactionary, elitist politics, and to be a way of expressing rejection of an emerging mass culture. ‘Decadence’ in the context of the Belle Époque designates the malaise of a certain cultural elite, disgusted by the materialism and republican democratisation of the era, and convinced that they were witnessing the decline of civilisation and imminent victory of the barbarians. It also refers, more specifically, to an artistic trend in both painting and literature, characterised by these same sentiments and hence by an aesthetic retreat from reality into artificiality and imagination.² In its recoil from the perceived democratisation of society, decadence in both these senses seems to confirm that the Belle Époque was an era when social hierarchies were loosened, and the quality of life began to improve for the mass of people. Nonetheless, the France of 1900 was very far from being a homogenous society, and any attempt to define the age must take account of the fact that in terms of material living conditions, degrees of leisure and social and spatial mobility, the lives of individuals differed radically according to class and indeed – given the concentration of French economic and cultural life in the capital – geography.

But cutting across all other lines of difference there was gender: French women did not enjoy the status of free citizens in the new Republic, and the complex weave of expectations, education, family and social pressures that shape identity were utterly different for a woman than for a man. At the same time, women felt the impact of living in a regime that glorified freedom and equality, and their lives were altered, too, by technological progress and the cultural changes that

constituted the new modernity. This book, then, asks to what extent the period 1890–1914 was a ‘Belle Epoque’ for women, against the background of a regime that at once proclaimed the freedom and equality of all its people, and denied both of these to the female half of the population. Its five sections correspond to five broad perspectives on women in Belle Epoque culture and society.

Part I, ‘Feminism and Feminists’, explores the variety of ways in which women claimed political and social agency. The Belle Epoque is the period of what came to be known as the ‘first wave’ of feminism, and saw the articulation of feminist issues that would run through the next century, as well as their translation into political action and protest. But women also contested restrictive definitions of female identity in other ways, through their behaviour and style, through women-centred cultural initiatives, through individual entry into what were assumed to be male-only domains. In the first chapter, we (the editors) examine the fundamental contradiction between on the one hand the extreme gender conservatism of the Belle Epoque, and on the other the impetus towards women’s emancipation provided by both republican principles and socio-economic progress towards modernity. We assess the relationship between political feminism, and that more diffuse and ambiguous form of feminist opposition to patriarchy represented by the ‘New Woman’. In the following chapter, delving beneath later feminists’ alternately idealising and deprecating views of the ‘first wave’, Máire Cross finds evidence of a vibrant, multi-issue feminism from the 1890s on, albeit one divided by class, positions on anticlericalism and views of motherhood. One of the achievements of the Belle Epoque was the remarkable phenomenon of the feminist daily paper *La Fronde*, and Maggie Allison traces the ways in which it provided a platform for political causes whilst steering a delicate path between feminine gentility and feminist militancy. The paper’s founder editor, Marguerite Durand, emerges as an astute manipulator of her own and the paper’s image, whose legacy to French women lasted well beyond the Belle Epoque. Despite its strategic deployment of a traditional femininity, *La Fronde* lent its support to many radical feminist causes and figures, among these the remarkable activist Madeleine Pelletier. Anna Norris charts Pelletier’s early career, pointing out how her feminist tactics involved infiltrating male domains in her capacity as doctor, scientist, freemason and socialist, and arguing for the symbolic force of these (often

unsuccessful) challenges to male authority and misogyny. Finally in this section, Melanie Hawthorne takes as her starting-point the map of Natalie Barney's literary salon, published in 1929, in order to demonstrate how it constituted a (literal and virtual) place where national, generational, cultural and sexual boundaries could be crossed, from the Belle Epoque through to the 1920s. By tracing the links between, for example, writer Renée Vivien and painter Romaine Brooks through their connection to Barney, she establishes the significance of Barney's virtual salon as the site of an imagined international lesbian (and, by implication, feminist) community.

As at any other period, women at the Belle Epoque did not form a homogenous group but were divided by class, income, age and many other factors. Their ability to profit from the technological developments of the time was constrained accordingly. In Part II, 'New Technologies, New Women?', Siân Reynolds' discussion of how developments in transport affected women's mobility emphasises the differences between working-class and bourgeois women, but also demonstrates how the period saw a general enlargement of opportunities for women to travel both within and beyond the city. These opportunities were widely promoted in the advertising posters of the day and, as Ruth Iskin points out, the advertising industry addressed the New Woman as the consumer of a range of exciting new products. While the posters she discusses may appear on one level to offer conventional images of women as objects of the gaze, Iskin argues that their representations of New Women actively enjoying the pursuit of freedom, pleasure and achievement must have had an impact on women's identities and subjectivities

Among the women who themselves contributed to the development of science and technology – the most famous example being Marie Curie – is the enterprising American dancer, Loïe Fuller. Naoko Morita draws attention to the ways in which Fuller's innovative performances drew on the technological, aesthetic and spiritual implications of the 'Electricity Fairy' as well as on Art Nouveau, and made her one of the most celebrated women of the Belle Epoque. However new technologies did not necessarily mean new representations of women. The Belle Epoque saw the birth of the cinema industry and, with it, the pioneering role of Alice Guy, employed by Gaumont from 1896–1907 (McMahan 2002). But, taking as her starting-point the late nineteenth-century phenomenon of the medical operation film, Elizabeth Ezra demonstrates how

the films of Georges Méliès, better known to film historians than those of Alice Guy, utilise the tropes of the cutting up and (re)making of women. Her discussion of cinema, gender and technology suggests that these early cinematic representations of women may be generated by a desire to 'gain control over an elusive and threatening femininity' (Showalter 1992: 134).

The question of the representation of women, of women as fascinating yet disturbing spectacle, is crucial to the Belle Époque, with its enthusiasm for fashion, theatre and the music hall. But if women were frequently the objects of spectacle, they also learned to manipulate their images to their own advantage, Loïe Fuller being a case in point. Part III, 'Woman and Spectacle', focuses on women in the arts – theatre, dance and sculpture – and the different ways in which they express their subjectivity. Kimberly van Noort assesses how women playwrights contributed to making women the subjects of the gaze. Drawing first on little known plays by the internationally celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt, she shows how Bernhardt critiques the specularisation of women and makes women the subjects of action and desire, while highlighting the ways they are limited by their social roles. Her subsequent discussion of *La Halte*, an association which promoted women playwrights, exemplifies how women writers at the beginning of the twentieth century turned to the stage, as elsewhere, as a platform for the expression of their artistic and political views. In the field of dance, certain well-known dancers of the period were able, like Sarah Bernhardt, to accept and exploit their roles as objects of the gaze, albeit at a cost. Hélène Laplace-Clavier focuses on the issues raised by the writings of Cléo de Mérode, Liane de Pougy and Isadora Duncan, and assesses the contradictions and paradoxes of their decision to opt for a career in dance at the expense of more 'normative' lives as wives and mothers. Citing Colette, however, she also points out that the majority of young women who sought a career on stage to avoid traditional feminine roles were often forced instead to accept starvation wages and sexual exploitation.

The career of sculptor Camille Claudel provides an example of a woman determinedly working in a field of representation and spectacle which was conventionally a male preserve. Angela Ryan analyses two of Claudel's key sculptures and suggests that, despite the constraints on Claudel as a creative artist, both through her association with Auguste Rodin and later through her family's ability to have her sequestered in a psychiatric institution, her work challenges the hegemony of

masculine ways of seeing and forges a unique vision of the human condition undistorted by gender stereotypes.

If the plastic arts were a particularly closed domain for women, this was less the case in publishing. The Belle Époque was a period of huge expansion in literature, and saw a proliferation of women writers, many of whom (like the women playwrights) have since been lost from literary history. Part IV, 'Women, Writing and Reception', explores the ways in which gender shaped both the production and the reception of literary texts. By writing within traditionally feminine genres, women writers could more easily gain access to publication; but this did not prevent some female authors from appropriating the higher status 'masculine' genres, including the often misogynist discourse of decadence. Critical reception was often patronising or downright hostile, in line with the prevailing doctrine of artistic creativity as an essentially masculine pursuit. Juliette Rogers examines popular 'middlebrow' novels of the period that deal with the conflict between women's new professional ambitions and their personal lives. Though few of these have been read as oppositional feminist texts, Rogers argues that in fact they gave popular currency to important feminist ideas. She shows that what might seem to be cautiously conservative plots are often simply acknowledging, for their readers, the real difficulties of becoming a professional woman at this period. In her discussion of the best-selling work of Daniel Lesueur, Diana Holmes demonstrates how the popular romance, a 'feminine' genre with little cultural status, was an easier point of entry for women writers than the more prestigious literary categories, and how the romance could serve as a space for women to explore the constraints on their lives and imagine utopian alternatives.

Jeri English turns to a writer who made her name by flouting hegemonic assumptions about the relationships between sex and gender, and between gender and genre. In her analysis of two prefaces to novels by Rachilde – one preface written at the Belle Époque, the other in the 1980s – English demonstrates how the highly ambiguous work of this decadent woman writer has been legitimised in entirely opposing ways for very different reading publics. The lesbian writer Renée Vivien also worked within a genre associated with hostility to women, but Tama Lea Engelking argues that Vivien, rather than internalising the misogynist discourse of decadence, appropriates this very effectively for feminist ends. Rebutting the many biographical readings of Vivien's work, Engelking

points to a crucial difference between the poet's short, sad life and the positive creative charge of her texts.

Catherine Perry is also concerned to show how the critical reception of women writers and their place in literary history have been shaped by an excessive attention to biography, and by derogatory images of femininity. In her discussion of the work of that Belle Epoque publishing sensation, Anna de Noailles, Perry shows how assumptions about both gender and ethnicity determined the interpretation of Noailles' work, and how Noailles actively resisted this process. Angela Ker-shaw looks at the phenomenal success of *Marie-Claire*, the first novel by the working-class writer Marguerite Audoux, and the more muted reception accorded to the postwar sequel, a novel which provides an illuminating perspective on women's working conditions at the Belle Epoque. She finds that a bourgeois readership was more able to accommodate proletarian fiction before the First World War than in the more conflictual climate of the 1920s, but also attributes the critical and commercial triumph of the first novel to Audoux's finally conservative stance on both class and gender.

The final section, Part V, 'Colonised and Other Women', highlights the fact that the Belle Epoque was a period of reflection on women's lot in other cultures as well as in metropolitan France, thanks in part to women travellers who reported on the condition of women in France's empire as well as in other exotic climes. Pioneering feminist Hubertine Auclert travelled to Algeria in the late 1880s and drew attention to the contradictions of the Third Republic's attitudes towards Algerian women, particularly in articles in her broadsheet, *La Citoyenne*. As Edith Taïeb points out, Auclert underlines the hypocrisy of the ways in which the values of the Republic are refused in the treatment of Algerian women (especially with regard to arranged marriages, polygamy, rape and the lack of education for women), and insists that it is only by according women equal rights with men, in France as well as in Algeria, that a 'democratic Republic' will be assured. Travel writing by women was also able to demystify some of the myths of the Oriental woman to be found in mainstream French culture of the period. For example, in the two male-authored novels analysed by Jennifer Yee, one addressing the situation of women in Turkey, the other women in Tunisia, the case for progress and modernisation is undermined by a continuing nostalgia for, or imperialist acceptance of, an exotic and tragic vision of the Orient, embodied in women who are victims of Islamic oppres-

sion and require liberation by the West. In contrast, as Margot Irvine demonstrates, Marcelle Tinayre's travel writing subverts dominant visions of the Orient. Her account of her visit to Turkey explicitly challenges representations of 'disenchanted' Turkish women and highlights similarities in French and Turkish women's struggle for emancipation. If Tinayre chooses not to address cultural differences, as Auclert had done, her concern for solidarity with women of other cultures is nevertheless indicative of the international perspective which informed the writings and politics of Belle Epoque feminists.

As these various approaches to the Belle Epoque suggest, a significant number of French women sought to express and disseminate their different, gendered visions of a changing world. In doing so, they asserted their right to an active place in the political, social and cultural processes that would determine the nature of the new era, and thus laid the foundations for the self-determined emancipation of women, one of the most significant developments of the twentieth-century Western world. The nature of women's changing experience during the Belle Epoque, the limitations but also the inspiring extent of their achievement, form the subject of this book.

Notes

1. 'une mortelle fatigue de vivre, une morne perception de la vanité de tout effort' (Bourget 1883: xxii).
2. For the gender implications of decadence and women writers' relationship to the decadent aesthetic, see below, Chapters 15 and 16. Henceforth, following majority practice, we have used 'decadent/ce' with a lower case 'd'.