Article:
Holmes, D orcid.org/0000-0001-9079-3582 (2022) The Belle Époque: a cultural history, Paris and beyond. Nineteenth-Century Contexts: an interdisciplinary journal, 44 (5). pp. 548-550. ISSN 0890-5495

https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2022.2140993

The Belle Époque: A Cultural History, Paris and Beyond, by Dominique Kalifa, translated by Susan Emanuel, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021, 252 pp, $30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780231202091.

When people think of France, among the most immediate images to spring to mind are those of 1900s Paris – Paris, city of love and romance, with its Art Nouveau metro signs; brightly-lit brasseries and cafes where artist and intellectuals debate into the night; wild dancing of the *can-can*; husky, mournful women's voices singing of lost *amours*. Mythical views of the years around 1900 have become deeply entwined with popular perceptions of French identity. In *The Belle Époque*, first published in France in 2017 and now readable in a fluent translation by Susan Emanuel, Dominique Kalifa undertakes not another history of (roughly) 1890-1914 – a period already studied in some excellent works of cultural history, many of which the book references – but something rather different. His book seeks to understand how the years widely known as the 'belle époque', both in and beyond France, came to be characterized in this way, and what purposes are served by so retrospectively rosy a view of a whole era.

Kalifa opens by asking how the people who lived through those years saw themselves. Whilst acknowledging that our access to the collective structure of feeling of any period is limited, since only a select section of the population leaves a legacy in print, he is helped by the French enthusiasm for surveys in these early decades of the Third Republic. Enquiries published in both popular and highbrow press confirm a widespread sense of living in a time of progress, technical innovation and – ironically, given both the colonial wars of those years and the impending horrors of World War I – peace. Thus the retrospective view of the 'belle époque' is not without some basis in contemporary self-perception. Nonetheless the dominant wisdom (which I for one had hitherto accepted) has been that the sense of those years as full

of a national joie-de-vivre, gaiety and freedom arose from nostalgia after the cataclysm of World War I. Kalifa convincingly undermines this view: he finds little trace of a mythologized 'belle époque' in the 1920s, but charts how fascination with the era develops in the 1930s after Paul Morand's provocative and decidedly hostile portrayal of *1900* appeared in his book bearing that title. Reception of Morand's essay was lively, and it was followed by a spate of memoirs, re-issues of literary works (by for example the decadent novelist Jean Lorrain) and a vogue for realist *chanteuses* of the 1900s. The vast family sagas or *roman-fleuves* that also enjoyed much popularity in the 1930s concentrated their narratives in the Belle Époque years. All in all, the scene was set for the emergence of a full-blown mythology of the period that took off, somewhat disturbingly, under the German Occupation. Hitler's plans for France's place in the new Nazified Europe cast the country as a cultural and gastronomic playground, an image that drew on the frivolity and licentiousness associated with the era of the *can-can*, the Moulin Rouge and Maxim's. Occupied Paris abounded in musical shows with titles such as *Amours de Paris.* Myths, however, are endlessly malleable, and at the liberation the myth of the Belle Époque could be repurposed to emphasize the radical, anti-clerical dynamism of the Third Republic, a welcome self-image after the national humiliation of the defeat and occupation. The 1950s saw the re-opening of Maxim's and the Moulin Rouge, a number of high profile films (most famously Becker's *Casque d'Or* in 1952, Renoir's *Can-Can* in 1955 – and beyond France Minelli's *Gigi* in 1958) that popularized the décor, costumes and dramatic potential of the decades surrounding 1900. For Kalifa, the key years for the creation of the Belle Époque myth were 1945-60: popular characterization of France became irretrievably associated with a joyous, erotically charged image of 1900s Paris, that could also usefully connote social liberties, tolerance and equality. Later of course this view was rightly punctured by historians as well as writers and film-makers to emphasize all those excluded by this presumed affluence, freedom and jollity, from

the working class to women and colonised peoples, but the image remains a potent one. In 1981, Kalifa notes, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York staged a prestigious international exhibition entitled *The Belle Époque, 1890-1914*, curated by fashion journalist Diana Vreeland and reconstructing key sites of Parisian life from Maxim's to the Bois de Boulogne. Other similar exhibitions followed, as did a fashion for 'retro' postcards and posters of the era, film biographies of colorful figures from those years, and popular fictions – both literary and televised – set in the immediately recognizable décor of 1900s France. The potent image of the Belle Époque, associated primarily with France or more precisely with Paris, is alive and well.

Kalifa's thesis that underpins the whole book is that we make and remake the past according to the needs of the present, but that this does not reduce the past to a mere retrospective construction: some degree of truth about the experience of our ancestors can be discovered and known. If the Belle Époque is so durably interesting and imaginatively rich, it is in part because those years saw the birth of so many features of our own modernity: the petrol engine, aeronautics, electricity, cinema, mass culture, abstract art and modernism… as well as feminism and trade unionism as large-scale, highly mediatized movements. This is an engaging book that re-affirms some of the important dimensions of the era's history whilst tracing, primarily, the history of its representations and emergence as a powerful myth. As befits a book about the relationship between an ever-shifting present and the past, the author reminds readers from time to time of his own present, as he writes in the 'magnificent research library' (p.127) of St Andrews University in Scotland, or undertakes interview surveys with a group of his students in the Place de la Sorbonne, Paris, trying to ascertain what people understand by the 'Belle Époque'. An added poignancy comes from knowing that Kalifa died only three years after the book's first publication, his rich and original contributions to cultural history prematurely cut short. This, his last book, constitutes a

valuable addition to the existing historical studies of a vibrant era, by charting the history of how an era popularly deemed ‘belle’ has been represented, imagined and used.

Diana Holmes

University of Leeds, UK

DIANA HOLMES is Professor of French at the University of Leeds. She has published widely on French women’s writing from the late nineteenth century to the present, ranging across the hierarchy of culture from ‘high’ to ‘low’ brow. Her books include *A ‘Belle Epoque’? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914* (Berghahn, 2005) co-edited with Carrie Tarr, and *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool University Press, 2018), which won the MLA Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies, 2019. She co-edits the Manchester University Press series *French Film Directors*.