



France, Fin de Siècle

By Eugen Weber

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The end of the nineteenth century in France was marked by political scandals, social unrest, dissension, and "decadence." Yet the *fin de siècle* was also an era of great social and scientific progress, a time when advantages previously reserved for the privileged began to be shared by the many. Public transportation, electrical illumination, standard time, and an improved water supply radically altered the life of the modest folk, who found time for travel and leisure activities--including sports such as cycling. Change became the nature of things, and people believed that further improvement was not only possible but inevitable. In this thoroughly engaging history, Eugen Weber describes ways of life, not as recorded by general history, but as contemporaries experienced them. He writes about political atmosphere and public prejudices rather than standard political history. Water and washing, bicycles and public transportation engage him more than great scientific discoveries. He discusses academic painting and poster art, the popular stage and music halls, at greater length than avant-garde and classic theater or opera. In this book the importance of telephones, plumbing, and central heating outranks such traditional subjects as international developments, the rise of organized labor, and the spread of socialism.

Weber does not neglect the darker side of the *fin de siècle*. The discrepancy between material advance and spiritual dejection, characteristic of our own times, interests him as much as the idea of progress, and he reminds us that for most people the period was far from elegant. In the lurid context of military defeat, political instability, public scandal, and clamorous social criticism, one had also to contend with civic dirt, unsanitary food, mob violence, and the seeds of modern-day scourges: pollution, drugs, sensationalism, debased art, the erosion of moral character. Yet millions of fin de siècle French lived as only thousands had lived fifty years before; while their advance was slow, their right to improvement was conceded.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Weber, historian and author of many books, vividly describes France in the 1880s and 1890s. The everyday life of the people, the role of women, the constant crises in politics, the state of the arts and theater, the appearance of new inventions, the rise of the popular press, and the growth of leisure time are among the many topics covered. Based on numerous contemporary sources, Weber's fine social history is an important addition to the study of 19th-century France. Broader in scope than Charles Rearick's *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1985), this book will be a valuable addition to public and academic library collections. However, a bibliography would have been helpful. Kathleen Farago, Lakewood P.L., Ohio
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Review

Eugen Weber has probably done more to enrich the historiography of modern France than any other contemporary American historian. His trademarks are originality and formidable erudition, both much in evidence in his latest book, which will not disappoint his admirers. *France, Fin de Siècle* offers nothing less than a portrait of an age, viewed not from the perspective of the twentieth century but through the eyes of an inquisitive contemporary tourist, sensitive to surface phenomena...It is a delight to read. This is history as art. (J. F. McMillan *Times Literary Supplement*)

History is clearly becoming more fun. In Eugen Weber's *France, Fin de Siècle*, statesmen and treaties are set aside in favor of the stuff of everyday existence. We learn about bathing, smells, sanitation, domestic quarrels, underwear, sexuality and the bicycle as they evolved during the last two decades of the nineteenth century...[Weber] is interested in an apparent discrepancy of the *fin de siècle*. On the one hand, it was famously the age of decadence--moral, material, and social, castigated or else delighted in by the intellectuals and artists...On the other hand, it was a time of real improvement in living standards and greater opportunities for leisure, sport and social progress...The surface that interests Mr. Weber turns up plenty of remarkable material...But perhaps the greatest triumph of Mr. Weber's approach to history comes in his evocations of the stress and tear of human relations...He also manages to raise anecdotal history to a nearly philosophical level. (Peter Brooks *New York Times Book Review*)

The epoch immortalized by Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* has now found a historian equal to the task of capturing its tones and textures. In this engaging and nicely illustrated book, the eminent UCLA historian Eugen Weber shows that history can be fun and instructive at the same time. (Lynn Hunt *Los Angeles Times Book Review*)

About the Author

Eugen Weber was Joan Palevsky Professor of Modern European History, Emeritus, at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donna Cook:

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Linda Poteat:

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Nicholas Tapia:

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