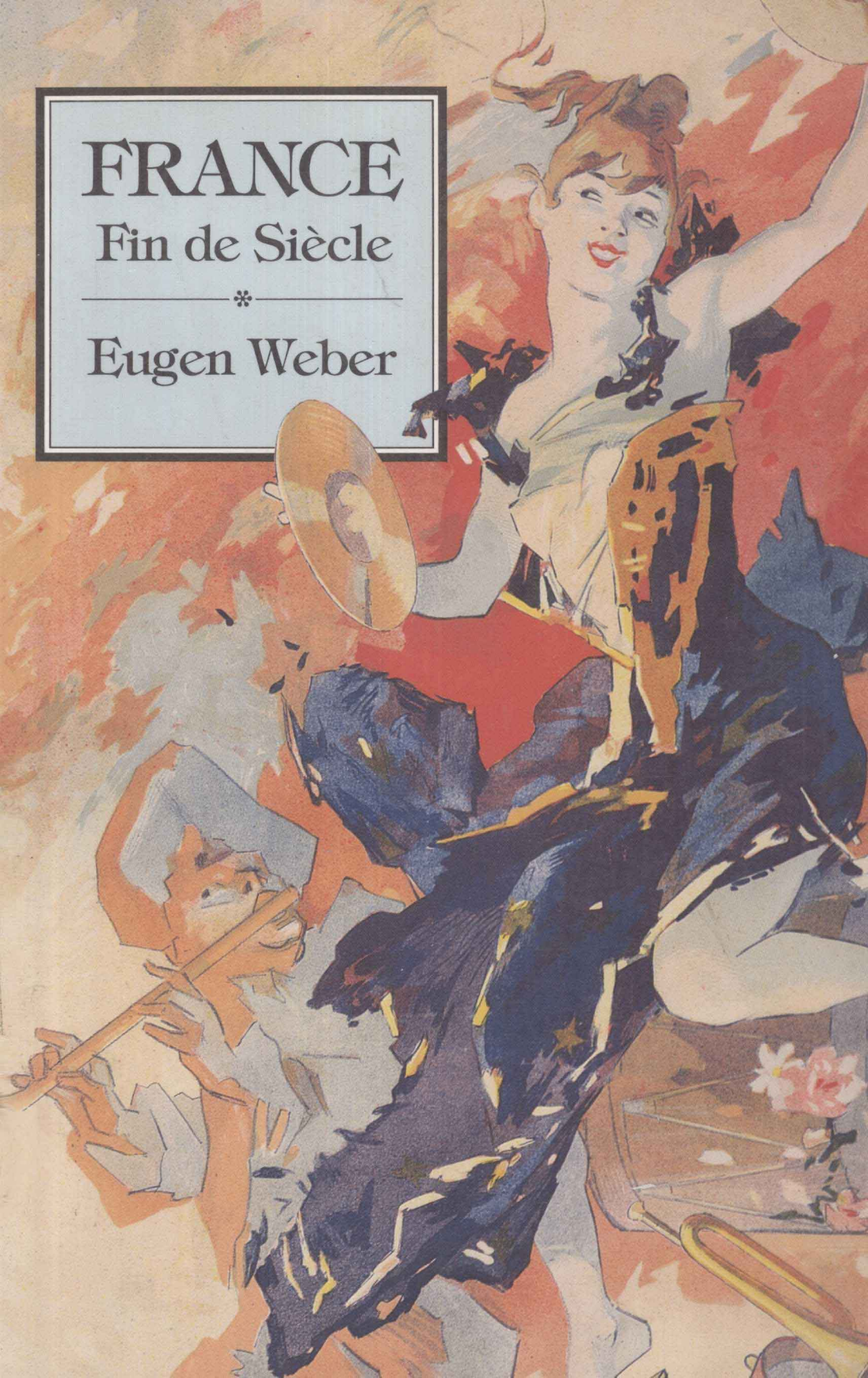
FRANCE
Fin de Siècle

Eugen Weber



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For Joan Palevsky

France, Fin de Siècle

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Introduction

Early in the eleventh century Ralph Glaber, a Burgundian monk, described his world as it had been on the threshold of its thousandth year. Love waxed cold, iniquity abounded among mankind, covetousness stalked abroad, men's souls faced perilous times, manifold signs and prodigies came to pass, and sagacious men foretold other prodigies as great still to come. Since then, no other century had made so much ado about its passing. The French of the 1880s and 1890s referred to themselves as fin de siècle, and since the writ of French fashion swayed the Western World, the term came to mark the close of the nineteenth century as it had not that of any other.

Why fin de siècle, with the evident connotation that not just a century but an age, an era, a way of life, a world, were coming to a close? The nineteenth century had a habit of putting an end to things. Curtains repeatedly fell upon regimes, revolutions, ruling classes, and ideologies, then rose, then fell again; but those whom history allegedly condemned never ceased dying. At the century's conclusion most of the same types of characters who had been around in 1789, or at least in 1802, still hung about the stage, many of their lines still being repeated to similarly mixed reviews. Trying to make ambition look like principle, or principle look like practice, Legitimists, Orleanists, Bonapartists, Jacobins and Liberals, Bourgeois, Aristocrats, Democrats and city mobs, all took their turn in at least one farewell performance before they returned for more. Meanwhile new characters had joined them (the nineteenth century also liked beginnings!), but to an absent eye, or a skeptical one, the charade need not have looked too different.

With hindsight we can see that the First World War brought down the frames of institutions, ways of life and mind, that had been long crumbling. But there was no knowing this before the nineteenth century ended, before the twentieth century faced the possibility of a worldwide war. After that war was over it became fashionable to refer to the years preceding it as the Belle Epoque, and to confuse that period with the fin de siècle, as if the two were one. Perhaps they were; the bad old times are always somebody's Belle Epoque. But the Belle Epoque, named when looking back across the corpses and the ruins, stands for the ten years or so before 1914. These also had their problems, but relatively they were robust years, sanguine and productive. The fin de siècle had preceded them: a time of economic and moral depression, a great deal less redolent of buoyancy or hope.

And yet a lot took place during these two decades that made life better for a lot of people. Not for all. Better alternatives for the many easily turn into less choice for the few. New aspirations can be perceived as threats, especially when the aspiring begin to raise their voices. Transitions can be diversely recognized: as promise, or as menace. Different social groups see the same phenomenon differently. Even beneficent changes can be troubling: access to better food may stir regrets for the old, rough familiar fare; telephones invade privacy; swifter, cheaper transport frightens and pollutes; shorter working hours forecast idleness. Coarse sensualists welcomed the time of modern comforts succeeding "to periods of force and magnificence," delighted to think that it would go down in history as "the century of water closets, bathrooms, and central heating."[1] Sterner observers deplored the softness and the laxness that the new facilities evoked. Coming too thick and fast upon one another, such impressions could be taken for evidence of present corruption, or omens of imminent decay. That is how some of the most articulate among contemporaries perceived and presented them, in the lurid context of military defeat, political instability, private adversity, public scandal, and clamorous social criticism, to stress the *fin* in fin de siècle that made it sound like an unhappy end.

This is what caught my eye about the circumstances: the discrepancy between material progress and spiritual dejection reminded me of our own times. So much was going right, even in France, as the nineteenth century ended; so much was being said to make one think

that all was going wrong. That need not be surprising. Public discourse turns mostly about public matters—especially politics; and the style of politics calls for catastrophic imagery. A great deal of political debate either takes place on the brink of doom or envisions it looming on the horizon. Doom loomed more clearly in fin de siècle France than almost anywhere else at the time. Since contemporary interpreters and later historians pay special attention to politics, this colors their impression and ours of years when, as in most times, politics played only a small role on the surface of events. As one shrewd observer of his country put it, "politics does not hold in our lives the place it takes up in the newspapers, in [social] conversations, in the apparent existence of a nation. The public life of a people is a very small thing compared to its private life."[2]

Let me say at once that public life is far from irrelevant, because decisions made at the public level can powerfully affect the private one. Political ideas, though, remained the passion or plaything of small elites, until cheap print and popular illustrations extended them to all. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century political interests and ideologies came to stimulate the general public—more general than it had ever been—pervading popular attitudes and expectations, hence the eventual orientation of the land itself.

The harsh realities of universal suffrage, long eluded, were coming home to roost: lower and lower sections of the middle classes were ruling in parliament; setting the pace in society, letters, arts; tarring politics, so long a sport for gentlemen, with their vulgar brush. The populace, losing respect for their natural betters, bayed for its turn at the troughs of power. The disorderly, volcanic nature of city mobs was nothing new. The claims of organized labor, its disruptive strikes, the politics of socialism in Chamber, Senate, even the Cabinet, were more disquieting. The deferential society tottered. There was no knowing how long it would take to wane.

Still, public events have received a great deal of attention, and readers interested in political and economic history of France can turn to many excellent studies. Insofar as I talk of politics, I try to present that aspect of public events that was most likely to catch contemporary attention, and my perspective is not that which comes naturally to those who already know how things have turned out.

Other aspects of public life that I survey are literature and the arts,

again, insofar as possible, less from a twentieth-century perspective than from that of the nineteenth century. A good reason for taking an interest in the fin de siècle is that so many literary and artistic movements significant in our time had their roots in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Here too extravagance and high spirits were taken for signs of degeneration. We know better now: like wine and cheese, literature and art confirm that civilization and fermentation go together. Some splendid works have been written with this in mind. But, however significant they were to become, and however much we may admire their products, such schools and movements were marginal and unrepresentative. The narrow trendy public that appreciated novelty for its own sake and patronized one avant-garde after another was itself marginal, and not necessarily typical even of the wider cultivated public. Though sympathetic to the various avant-gardes that have received their share of attention, I have preferred to focus on more run-of-the-mill activities.

Above all, this book is about the permanencies and the novelties that affected private life. The 1880s and 1890s witnessed novelties of fundamental importance to the future: new ways of heating, lighting, and getting about; better access to water and leisure, exercise, information, and distant places. Telegraph and telephones; typewriters and elevators; mass public transport and that wonderful individual steed—the bicycle; electric lamps (I did my courting as a student in a cafe seductively named A l'Electricité)—all are conquests of the fin de siècle. They may have helped palliate the shortcomings of the political class, but they disturbed the more austere who feared for the national fiber. Yet most who gazed upon or read about such wonders did not enjoy their use, or did so only after long delays. It is important to remember how close to medieval conditions many French still lived; and no less important to know that other possibilities were henceforth available, envisaged, coveted, eventually obtained. If things changed slowly, nevertheless, they changed, and in significant ways. Reaction to change set the character of the period.

As with politics, so with everyday life. It was during the fin de siècle that the virtualities of earlier decades were carried to realization, before the twentieth century made them available to all. Modern productivity, relatively soaring, called up a mass demand from modest customers. It did not better all, far from it; and it doled out its relative plenty

selectively, providing more textiles, coffee, newspapers, bread, wine, cheap fares, and music halls than roasts, shoes, art, or decent housing. Still, millions of French now lived as only thousands had fifty years before. We are in the habit of deprecating improvements that affect only some of the people, and not all of them. That is as it may be. But not everything happens at once. That several million of the middle class learned to take for granted new clothes, fresh food, sugar, travel, print, schooling for their children, was no little matter. Equally important, the advances of some pointed the way to others. The less privileged, unlike those of earlier ages, expected to accede to the advantages of their "betters." While their advance proved slow, their right to it was henceforth conceded. Every decade brought them something on account.

Food, clothing, and shelter matter more, or more immediately, than a free press or universal suffrage. When the former concerns do not demand all your attention, you can give thought to the latter. For people of modest means this was just beginning to happen. Food improved; there was more of it even for poorer folk, and more drink too. (It was not until the later nineteenth century that alcoholism became a problem.) Wearing apparel also improved, and became more standardized. Those who mourned the passing of popular costumes had not had to wear them. Those who had worn them preferred ready-mades, which they were beginning to be able to afford. They could also enjoy better cheap entertainment, too vulgar for the cultivated unless they went slumming but a treat for those who had rarely danced even to a fiddle; and colored images—calendars, posters, advertisements—more lifelike than anything that they once had bought at fairs, and far more glorious.

Those details that helped maintain the difference between social orders were being whittled down: literacy no longer set the fortunate few apart; like dress, speech and manners grew (slowly) more similar; and patterns of consumption moved a little closer. Social homogeneity was very far away (it remains so today), though some already were denouncing it as an alarming reality.

Other objects of late-twentieth-century apprehension caused tremors one hundred years ago: pollution, crowding, noise, nerves, and drugs; threats to environment, to peace, to security, to sanity private and public; the noxious effects of press, publicity, and advertising; the

decline of public and private standards; the rising tide of transgressions imperiling law and order. The commonweal, then as now on its last legs, looked on itself as into an abyss and shivered.

There had always been innovation; no generation had passed without novelties. Now change became the nature of life, novelty a part of the normal diet, served by institutions like the press and news agencies—dedicated to it, or to its invention when in short supply. The fin de siècle is the age of material novelties, of news, of *faits divers, nouvelles à sensation*—of scoops and beats and bulletins, newsbriefs and sensational tidings; the time when fashions—in dress, politics, or the arts—became clearly defined as being made to pass away: change for the sake of change.

Just because all this sounds familiar, it is good to remember how different it was. The past is another country, and fin de siècle France is a foreign land through which we stroll, recognizing figures, monuments, and landscapes that are familiar: Symbolists, Impressionists, and Neo-Impressionists; the servant problem and the labor problem and the problem of foreign labor; the threat of English words invading the French language (*franglais* had been denounced as early as 1856),[3] that of tourists defiling remote beauty spots, and that of having to get away in summer. We are the more surprised by differences that take us unawares: men lifting their hats in greeting but keeping them on in certain rooms; the cumbrous confinement of women's skirts; ringing coins to hear if they sound true; dueling; the problems posed by walking amid cobblestones, horse-droppings, mud, or dust; the ubiquity of horses and the noise they made; bad smells; the danger from food adulterated by private enterprise or else by swift natural decay before the age of refrigeration; the paucity of clean linen; the rankness and violence of political invective and much of private life.

I restrict myself to surface phenomena, accessible to the inquisitive tourist: us. Profound realities may stir the imagination, but most of life passes on the surface. This is where I mostly look, stopping to examine those aspects of the fin de siècle that catch my attention, attempting to describe and to illustrate them. In the end, you may feel as I do that it is as absurd to expect conclusions *from* historical epochs as *to* them; but that things were not so dark as they were sometimes painted, that the age faced serious problems seriously and generated positive solutions to some of them, that the ultimate French man and woman were those who stood fast and said there was no need to fret: "faut pas s'en faire."[4]

A bad novelist and delightful letterwriter, like so many of his nineteenth-century peers, Prosper Mérimée once declared that what he really liked in history were anecdotes, "and among anecdotes I prefer those where I think that I can distinguish a true picture of the customs and characters of any given period."[5] I tend to agree with Mérimée, as I do with the geographer Vidal de La Blache, who insisted that we should not be afraid to multiply examples.[6] You have been warned.

The stucco figure surmounting the main gate of the 1900 Exhibition was almost twenty feet tall and dressed in clothes designed by a fashionable couturier: Paquin. It soon came to be known as *la Parisienne*.

1

Decadence?

End-of-century trips less lightly off the tongue than fin de siècle. This may be why the term remains associated mainly with France, where it was coined while the nineteenth century still had a while to run. Just what it meant at first was not entirely clear. It could denote "modern" or "up to date."[1] But novelty went with uncertainty and a certain insecurity, and eventually a certain decline of standards.[2] A shoemaker could be praised for being a traditional cobbler rather than fin de siècle.[3] Soon the negative connotations of the term drove all others out. When, in 1891, a judge described young lawyers as fin de siècle, the press found this too harsh, likely to evoke "legitimate protests."[4] That same year, a provincial newspaper's attack on the local prefecture as fin de siècle led to a duel and court action that ended in a fine for the defaming sheet.[5] And when a Paris court judged a blackmailer who lived off his wife's prostitution, it was to hear him explain that he was no more than "a fin de siècle husband."[6] The words were everywhere; they could be applied to anything and everything:

> Fin de siècle! partout, partout
> . . . il sert à désigner tout.[7]
>
> Fin de siècle! Everywhere
> . . . It stands for all that you might care
> To name . . .

Since art imitates life, when it does not inspire it, literature soon adopted the vision. In 1891 Joris Karl Huysmans (naturally) denounced "the ignoble spectacle of this fin de siècle."[8] But more vulgar,