

## Parisians

*An Adventure History of Paris*

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The book is about Paris. Vertically more than horizontally. It is not a guide book, although one may expect it, it is more a kind of archeological extravaganza. Paris cut up in thin slices of time. Historical vignettes. Thus what we get is a series of loosely connected stories, held together by nothing more substantial than geographical accident. Or is that overstating the case? As such some of the stories, or rather vignettes are more successful than others, more likely to stick in your mind. The story takes its beginning in the end of the 18th century.

This is now over two hundred years ago and seems rather distant. We are to follow Napoleon on his first visit to Paris. A young man, still a virgin, exploring I guess more out of curiosity than desire, the seedy establishment of Palais-Royal, picking up a young prostitute, bringing her to a hotel? Consummation? It is hard to tell, easy to speculate. A writer takes a certain number of liberties, but even in a purely fictional account, there has to be some adherence to fact. Robb is not out to write fiction, may not even faction, so he has to rely on the preserved diary of Napoleon, a diary which not unsurprisingly becomes rather reticent once the drama heats up.

A man who digs may dig up something quite unexpected. And as a digger in archives, Robb may be performing the greatest service to the reading public. Charles-Axel Guillaumont, is such a gem. His rather unbelievable first name betrays his birth and early years in Stockholm. His service to Paris is substantial, preventing a large part of it to cave in and disappear in the Seine. He becomes an architect, but a subterranean one, devoted to stage up the ground, and in the process creating a vast city under earth, as unknown to the public as majestic. What is happiness? To fully engage yourself in a big phantasy, to become its god, to know all of its intricacies. A writer of a novel may attain such a status versus his work, a scientist left alone in a subspecialty may fully bloom. Guillaumont became, as noted an architect, nay but far more than that. The world he created had no rival, and was his own, truly so. What do you find under the ground? The remains of people who once lived. The turnover is tremendous, millions and millions of people have lived, where now only a few thousands may temporarily enjoy life. Thus there is a tremendous accumulation of white bones. Eventually Guillaumont would become part of that anonymous mass. Our physical bodies are doomed, at best they can serve as landfill. For a few of us, our memories live on, long after those who remembered us are doomed to oblivion as well. Yet even such repute is fragile, prey to the vagaries of time and circumstances. The truly great rest on a variety of pillars, thus harder to forget, but most of us may be reduced to a few lines in an archive, spending our postmortem in obscurity until exposed to the hapless eye of a researcher, a digger. But archives are not for ever, the chance of ultimately being seen again across the chasm of time expired, is not guaranteed.

Large parts of the archives of Paris were burned during some incendiary episode during some temporary uprising. The result is of course that a big chunk of history is obliterated, the pearls along with the chaff. Many a story could have been added to this collection, and to collection of like type, which now are for ever gone.

Marie-Antoinette had a Swedish lover. A certain Count Fersen. He tried to help the royal couple to escape. The attempt ended in failure. As I was told as a school-boy, the couple were too vain and in need of comfort, that the carriage they had chosen, was far too big and ostentatious. Robb catches them in a crucial moment. They are supposed to meet, but the queen had no sense of geography, there are no street signs in those days. They are lost in the city, as if in a jungle, and precious hours are lost as well. In the end they were both to be decapitated. The Queen going to the gallows with dignity. How idyllic do not the horrors of the French Revolution strike us now, used as we are to the terrors of recent centuries.

So there is plenty of opportunity to give the background to what later would be the inspiration for Dumas and his Count de Monte Christo, or the opera La Boheme. This is early 19th century Paris, which seems so much closer to us than the late 18th century. There are the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 without which Paris would be deprived of its special fervor. Revolutions that ended in the farce of Napoleon III. Yet, this was a crucial period for Paris. Hausmann who turned this confusing medieval city into an Imperial one, with wide avenues opening up large vistas and inviting foreign armies to invade. The Paris we all know and cherish, is after all the Paris created by Napoleon III.

Gossip never hurts. That Zola cheated on his wife and sired two children on a maid, is something I did not know, but is not so hard to dig up. Nothing really became of the children. Children of great men seldom do. The piece on Proust and the Metro is very weak. And the Notre Dame equation and alchemy even weaker. However, the Hitler's tour of Paris, his one excursion to the city of his youthful daydreams has its points. The Occupation is OK, as well as the Juliet Greco story, and the return of de Gaulle. The best story, which is not unique to the book of course, is the faked assassination attempt of Mitterrand, in which he clearly was complicit. I have read about it before. It is a miracle that he was able to survive politically. This says something about French politics. The concluding vignette of riots in the banlieu could easily have been struck out with little loss.