

Paris, City of Dreams: Napoleon III, Baron Haussmann, and the Creation of Paris

Mary McAuliffe

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The re-creation of Paris from a medieval urban maze to the city of lights and boulevards comes to life in Mary McAuliffe's historical exposé *Paris, City of Dreams*.

When Louis-Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, took power in France and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III in 1852, he hoped to realize the dream that he had harbored for decades: of rebuilding Paris, transforming the cramped, unsanitary city of popular uprisings and barricades into a city of light, with magnificent buildings and boulevards perfect for armies on the march. To make all of this happen, he needed to find a man to carry out his vision, and he chose Georges-Eugène Hausmann.

Paris's transformation is chronicled in meticulous detail. Accounts of Hausmann's relentless remodeling of neighborhoods are interwoven with the life stories of individual Parisians of renown, including Victor Hugo, Sara Bernhard, and Emile Zola.

The upheaval that Paris experienced in the period was immense. Not only did Hausmann rebuild the city, but Emperor Napoleon III was a despot who brought France to its knees with a war against Prussia and a failed invasion of Mexico. The relation of such tumultuous events is detached in tone; there is simply too much detail to take in.

The elite Parisians whose lives are chronicled become difficult to tell apart or sympathize with, while everyday Parisians—whose homes crumbled into dust, who had their livelihoods upended, and who lost their lives on the barricades to the causes of democracy and liberty—are absent. Among the many wonderful photographs and illustrations, only one shows a Paris neighborhood before Hausmann remade it.

Paris, City of Dreams is an enlightening and overwhelming story of a tumultuous and transformative Parisian period.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (May / June 2020)

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