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Siân Reynolds

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Cultural Connections in the *Belle Epoque*

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J.D. Fergusson, *Anne Estelle Rice in a hat facing dexter*, Conté drawing, Paris 1907. © The Fergusson Gallery, Perth and Kinross Council, Scotland, image courtesy of Alexander Meddowes, Fine Art Broker, Edinburgh. Private collection.

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General Editors' Preface

Density and proximity are two of the defining characteristics of the urban dimension. It is these that identify a place as uniquely urban, though the threshold for such pressure points varies from place to place. What is considered an important cluster in one context – may not be considered as urban elsewhere. A third defining characteristic is functionality – the commercial or strategic position of a town or city which conveys an advantage over other places. Over time, these functional advantages may diminish, or the balance of advantage may change within a hierarchy of towns. To understand how the relative importance of towns shifts over time and space is to grasp a set of relationships which is fundamental to the study of urban history.

Towns and cities are products of history, yet have themselves helped to shape history. As the proportion of urban dwellers has increased, so the urban dimension has proved a legitimate unit of analysis through which to understand the spectrum of human experience and to explore the cumulative memory of past generations. Though obscured by layers of economic, social and political change, the study of the urban milieu provides insights into the functioning of human relationships and, if urban historians themselves are not directly concerned with current policy studies, few contemporary concerns can be understood without reference to the historical development of towns and cities.

This longer historical perspective is essential to an understanding of social processes. Crime, housing conditions and property values, health and education, discrimination and deviance, and the formulation of regulations and social policies to deal with them were, and remain, amongst the perennial preoccupations of towns and cities – no historical period has a monopoly of these concerns. They recur in successive generations, albeit in varying mixtures and strengths; the details may differ

The central forces of class, power and authority in the city remain. If this was the case for different periods, so it was for different geographical entities and cultures. Both scientific knowledge and technical information were available across Europe and showed little respect for frontiers. Yet despite common concerns and access to broadly similar knowledge, different solutions to urban problems were proposed and adopted by towns and cities in different parts of Europe. This comparative dimension informs urban historians as to which were systematic factors and which were of a purely local nature: general and particular forces can be distinguished.

These analytical frameworks, considered in a comparative context, inform the books in this series.

Richard Rodger *University of Leicester*
Jean-Luc Pinol *Université de Tours*

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CHAPTER ONE

Seine and Forth: Paris and Edinburgh in 1900

On 24 January 1890, the Marchioness of Tweeddale drove the first train across the Forth Railway Bridge, just north of Edinburgh. On 4 March, the Prince of Wales formally declared the huge metal bridge open. Among the invited guests at the ceremony was French engineer Gustave Eiffel, whose tower, originally built as a temporary structure for the Paris Exhibition of 1889, was almost exactly contemporary with the bridge, and structurally related to it. These two huge rust-coloured metal structures, one vertical, one horizontal, one made of iron, the other of steel, could be seen as symbols of the new Paris and the new Edinburgh of the *belle époque*, though they are not usually mentioned in the same breath. One French visitor to Edinburgh in the 1890s did however link them in the remark that the bridge was 'infinitely more interesting than the awful Eiffel Tower, since despite the lack of beauty intrinsic to all iron structures which are cold, unlovely and stark, it does at least have the beauty of usefulness'.[1]

Nothing in common?

Paris and Edinburgh, particularly in the period from about 1885 to 1914, might seem like polar opposites, if we confine ourselves to received stereotypes. The *fin de siècle* was after all the time when Paris was still widely thought of as 'the capital of the

[1] Marie Anne de Bovet, *L'Ecosse: souvenirs et impressions de voyages*, Paris, Hachette, 1898, p. 66. [This and all following translations from the French are my own unless otherwise indicated. SR] On the opening of the Forth Bridge, see Colin McWilliam, *Lothian except Edinburgh* (N. Pevsner, ed., Buildings of Scotland series), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p. 436. Following the disastrous collapse of the Tay Bridge in 1879, the Forth Bridge Railway Company formed in 1882 adopted an innovative cantilever structure proposed by Benjamin Baker and Sir John Fowler, and the contract was awarded to William Arrol. While it has occasionally been remarked that the tower is phallic and ornamental, the bridge functional and sturdy, both enterprises had their detractors: Guy de Maupassant hated the Eiffel Tower, John Ruskin hated the Forth Bridge. The Eiffel Tower was originally designed by Emile Nouguier and Maurice Koechlin, engineers in Eiffel's firm. It was on the point of being demolished in 1900, but was decorated with electric light bulbs instead in a canny move by Eiffel; it was eventually saved as a radio transmitter. For full details see Henri Loyrette, 'La Tour Eiffel', in Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, vol. 3, Paris, Gallimard, Quarto (paperback edition), 1997, pp. 4271 ff.

nineteenth century', to use Walter Benjamin's later formula. Looking back from 1940, Gertrude Stein, who had arrived there in 1903, wrote that 'Paris was where the twentieth century was'. For most foreign observers, the French city itself came to symbolize the age before the First World War, nostalgically christened *la belle époque*, which one can translate either as 'the beautiful age' or 'the good old days'. Recent historiography has usually treated the expression with irony since, as in most ages of human history, how good a time one was having depended on who one was. In this book, the term will be used simply as a shorthand for the period straddling 1900, without implying value judgements. What is beyond doubt is that during these years Paris was the destination of seekers after cultural pursuits, artistic, intellectual and sexual, a city with a dangerous reputation, whether the smoke of revolution or the cigars of the café-concert. A guidebook of 1898 noted among 'gaffes to avoid' when visiting the French capital: 'Turn a blind eye if you meet a lady or a friend of your acquaintance, in an unaccustomed street or at an odd hour, muffled up, or with a hat pulled well down and a collar turned well up. Forget this meeting'.[2]

Edinburgh's reputation at the turn of the century could hardly be more different: it was that of a staid, climatically bracing, Presbyterian and puritanical city, bristling with well-frequented churches, and peopled with ministers, lawyers, academics and doctors. Morningside was never likely to be mistaken for Montparnasse. Samuel J. Peploe, the Edinburgh painter, remarked exasperatedly as he left for Paris in 1911 that in his home city the women were badly dressed, and 'there's nothing here but healthy-looking people with golf-clubs'.[3] His friend and fellow-artist, John Duncan Fergusson, on a visit home, complained of 'this feeling of Sunday … I tried going a walk [sic] the other Sunday, but people made me want to blow hell out of everything. In their Sunday clothes and faces to match.'[4] Contrast the first impression of the Boulevard Beaumarchais as described by the Italian Edmondo de Amicis, arriving

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[2] *Paris-Parisien*, Paris, Ollendorff, 1898, p. 395; Walter Benjamin's essay 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', is reproduced in his *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge MA, Belknap, 1999, pp. 3-25; cf. Gertrude Stein, *Paris France*, 1940, quoted in Norma Evenson, *Paris: a century of change 1878-1978*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p.1; and for a recent re-statement of Paris's literary claims, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 23-4 and passim. For a discussion of the term *la belle époque*, see Michel Winock, *La Belle Epoque: la France de 1900 à 1914*, Paris, Perrin, 2002, introduction. As he remarks, 'there are two clichés about these years: one is that it really was a beautiful age; the other is that … it was not beautiful at all, and in any case, not for everyone', p. 9. The term *fin de siècle* is open to other objections, notably chronology.

[3] Letter of 1911, quoted in Guy Peploe, *Samuel John Peploe*, Edinburgh, Mainstream, 2000, p. 42.

[4] Letter of 27 September 1915, quoted in Margaret Morris, *The Art of J. D. Fergusson: a biased biography*, Glasgow and London, Blackie, 1974, p. 107. A French visitor in the 1880s remarked that 'Edinburgh is perhaps the place in Scotland where suspension of all activity on Sundays is most strictly observed', Comte de Lafond, *L'Ecosse jadis et aujourd'hui*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1887, p. 2.

in Paris (admittedly during an exhibition, but in the summer of 1878, not long after the Franco-Prussian war): 'between the two rows of trees is a constant passing and repassing of carriages, great carts and wagons drawn by engines and high omnibuses laden with people, bounding up and down on the unequal pavement … [The] faces, the voices and the colors give to that confusion more the air of pleasure than of work'.[5]

Beyond these contrasts of atmosphere and reputation, the most striking differences between the two cities are those of location, size and political history. In their geographical sites, the two cities are very unlike. Paris spreads out its buildings across a wide river basin, ringed round with a circle of hills. It is nowhere near the sea. Edinburgh is perched on several mounds and ridges, with dizzying plunges here and there: 'steep-sided, ice-eroded volcanic stumps, ice-moulded ridges, glacially deepened valleys and pro-glacial basins'.[6] The sea is visible from many high viewpoints, such as Calton Hill and Arthur's Seat, and sometimes at the turn of a street corner. Whereas Paris is a variegated and multicoloured carpet spread out at the feet of Montmartre or the Eiffel Tower, Edinburgh is a fractured combination of the Old Town (south) and the New Town (north), either side of Princes Street. Edinburgh-raised Robert Louis Stevenson saw his home town as two distinct cities:

> From their smoky beehives, ten stories high, the unwashed look down upon the open squares and gardens of the wealthy; and gay people sunning themselves along Princes Street, with its mile of commercial palaces all beflagged for some grand occasion, see, across a gardened valley set with statues, where the washings of the old town flutter in the breeze at its high windows.[7]

It is true that the Seine, already a broad and navigable river by the time it reaches Paris, does divide the city similarly, between Left Bank (south) and Right Bank (north), although the division is not clear-cut socially. Both cities need bridges to connect their two halves. But Edinburgh's 'river' is the picturesque but shallow Water of Leith, marginal to the city centre, and its largest bridges are over streets or buildings, while Paris is punctuated by its many great and picturesque river bridges.

As to size, although both cities were in 1900 comparatively compact, compared with either Glasgow or London, the area covered by the Ville de Paris's twenty *arrondissements* (administrative districts) in 1900 was much greater than that of the city of Edinburgh, and Paris already had a large ring of suburbs, destined to swell even further. The population of the French capital by that time was already over two and a half million. It had long been a populous city, but had expanded mightily in the

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[5] Quoted from E. de Amicis, *Studies of Paris* (1882), in Evenson, *Paris*, p. 2.

[6] G. Gordon, 'The status areas of Edinburgh in 1914', in George Gordon and Brian Dicks, eds, *Scottish Urban History*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1983, pp. 168-196, p. 160. Perhaps unintentionally, this passage suggests a northerly climate too. See notes 59 and 60 below.

[7] Quoted ibid., p. 188; in his *Edinburgh: picturesque notes*, Edinburgh, Salamander, 1983 [1878], p. 26.

nineteenth century, doubling and redoubling from about 550,000 inhabitants in 1800 to 2,714,000 in 1900, rising steeply during the final decades of the century. Much of that expansion was by internal immigration from the French provinces. Only about one-third of Parisian residents were Paris-born, and another 6 per cent were of foreign origin, one of the highest proportions in Europe.[8] Edinburgh's population in 1901 was a mere 300,000 or so, just approaching the size of Paris in 1800, though it too had quadrupled. Between 1801 and 1911, the combined population of Edinburgh and the port of Leith increased from 82,560 to 320,318. Its population growth was mostly in the early nineteenth century, unlike Paris, but another wave of (partly Irish) immigration in the last third of century came with the building of the roads and canals. A majority of the residents were, however, locally born.[9]

In this respect, indeed, Glasgow, not Edinburgh, was the Scottish city which most nearly fulfilled Paris's role in terms of overall size, acting as a magnet for rural immigration. Glasgow already had a population of over 750,000, drawn both from Ireland and from all over the West of Scotland, as it expanded to become 'the second city of the Empire', with its industry based on coal, iron, textiles and later shipbuilding. As an account of Glasgow put it in 1901, while the 'Scots rustic' thought of Edinburgh as a place of tradition, 'Glasgow is the place of his advancement […] for are not Donald and Angus employed there, and is not young Archie going to enter a shop there when he is old enough to leave the stony farm of his fathers?'[10] One major difference between our two cities is here indicated: while Paris was unrivalled within France, Edinburgh had a challenger in the newly enormous industrial city of Glasgow, with its own ancient university and many cultural claims. Since at least the eighteenth century, Glasgow and Edinburgh had been the contrasting and complementary leading cities of Scotland, locked into rivalries that persist today. And this is perhaps the place to say that another, though very different, study could probably be written about Glasgow and Paris. The focus of this book could not accommodate Glasgow's very different trajectory and character, but Glasgow's cultural profile too in the *fin de siècle* is considerable, and will often be referred to in what follows.

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[8] Figures from census tables in Winock, *La Belle Epoque*, p. 365; the Paris population numbered 1,851,792 in 1872 and 2,888,110 in 1911, mostly though immigration. By contrast, 65 per cent of Londoners were born there. See Pierre Casselle, *Paris républicain 1871-1914* (Nouvelle Histoire de Paris (NHP) series), Paris, Association pour la publication d'une histoire de Paris, 2003, p. 129, and for the 6 per cent figure, Colin Jones, *Paris, Biography of a City*, London, Allen Lane, 2004, p. 413.

[9] Gordon, 'The status areas of Edinburgh', p. 173; cf. Stevenson, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland, The City of Edinburgh*, Glasgow, Collins, 1966, p. 106; and see also an essential book which will be mentioned frequently in this chapter and the next, Richard Rodger, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: land, property and trust in the nineteenth century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 23-25.

[10] James Hamilton Muir (pseudonym for James and Muirhead Bone and Archibald Hamilton Charteris), *Glasgow in 1901*, Glasgow, Hodge, 1901, p. 27.

In terms of political and religious history, to conclude this brief summary of the most obvious differences between Paris and Edinburgh, the two cities once more had little in common. Paris was the focus of French national politics. It had been the theatre of all French revolutionary movements since 1789, its convulsions having world-wide significance. In 1830 and 1848, regimes had been overthrown by violent revolution in the Paris streets. In the very recent past, France had been invaded during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, and Paris had been under siege for several harsh months, followed by a civil war concentrated on the capital. The resulting regime, the Third Republic, was not firmly established for several years and had had a traumatic beginning. The violent end to the insurrectional Paris Commune of 1871 had resulted in the death or exile of many *thousands* of its working-class supporters at the hands of the army, and the burning and destruction of many of the city's central public buildings. (It is in many ways remarkable that by the 1880s, Paris was once more seen as a popular tourist destination, though many came to look at the ruins.)

Edinburgh might be the Athens of the North, but it was but the quasi-capital and administrative centre of a Scotland firmly inside the 1707 Union with England. Its days of turmoil linked to national events were well in the past. It had seen the final failure of Jacobitism in 1745, and over the next hundred years or more 'was becoming douce, class-segregated and greatly ordered'. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, its city fathers were Gladstonian Liberals, and along with the rest of Scotland, it appeared to have settled for a form of 'unionist-nationalism' in which a sense of cultural Scottishness sat alongside integration into the United Kingdom.[11] Perhaps its greatest excitement in the previous half-century was the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843, when the majority of delegates left the Church Assembly to form the Free Church. This in itself provides a major contrast with Paris. Religious conflict in Edinburgh was mostly inside the Protestant faith. The Catholic population (unlike Glasgow's) was comparatively small, so there was relatively little of the sectarian conflict found in the West of Scotland. And Scotland as a whole saw nothing like the central antagonism in France, which pitted republican anti-clericalism against the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this study, the early Third Republic, such conflict culminated in the Separation of the Church and the French State in 1905, a conclusion brought about partly by the Dreyfus Affair (see below and pp. 112-113). The affair convulsed France in 1896-99, and had a particularly high profile in Paris.

Some things in common: legacy of the past

Even such a brief outline of the points of separation between the two cities tells us that the agenda for this book cannot be to force direct comparisons (too difficult)

[11] For a discussion of 'unionist-nationalism' in terms of culture, see John Morrison, *Painting the Nation, Identity and Nationalism in Scottish Painting 1800-1920*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2003, esp. pp. 200 ff., and cf. T. Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, London, New Left Books, 1977.

or to underline contrasts (too easy). But it aims to show how many cultural threads connected Paris and Edinburgh during this period, in ways that have rarely been suspected. To provide some background for these connections, it is appropriate to consider some of the characteristics shared by both cities. Almost from the start, they had both been primarily administrative, legal, religious and university centres. Both housed royal palaces and had been the seat of kings – and queens. Paris was the administrative, political and legal capital of France, with all the concentration of elites implied by that. Edinburgh, while without absolute power of that kind, had inherited the relative power of the past. The 1707 Act of Union had left autonomy to the Scottish legal, educational, financial and religious frameworks. Scottish financial centres, banks, insurance companies, law courts and administration were concentrated in Edinburgh. Its dominance in these respects over the industrial giant Glasgow was the result of past relationships, giving it particular prominence as a British city. Moreover, it had well-established circles of interconnected networks and families – on a smaller scale than in Paris, but similar in function. Like Paris, it had a disproportionately large professional and white-collar population. In 1885, Edinburgh was described as having 'a calm steady character in keeping with the predominance of legal, educational, literary and artistic pursuits, from which it derives its chief maintenance, and [which] contrasts boldly with the fluctuations, excitements and mercantile convulsions which produce so much vicissitude in manufacturing towns'.[12]

Neither Paris nor Edinburgh was essentially industrial, although in neither city was industry negligible; in both cases there was much artisanal production, and a quite varied industrial sector, including textiles and clothing, food and drink, but no single really dominant or staple industry. Building and printing (and in Edinburgh's case brewing) provided much employment. In Paris, the centralization of publishing and administration led to large-scale printshops in the city centre and hundreds of smaller shops in every *quartier*. Printing with its allied trades was also one of the key industries of Edinburgh: in 1861, '3000 inhabitants were engaged in printing, binding and typefounding. […] The building trades occupied the largest workforce: 7000'. Otherwise, brewing, leather, glass, brass and rubber manufacture, and the food and garment trades occupied much of the working class. Although Edinburgh was surrounded by coalfields, few miners lived inside the city; and textiles, while present, were not a dominant industry.[13] Both city centres were still marked by the survival of artisanal production: that population of small craft shops, linked to the growing luxury consumption by the middle classes. In Edinburgh this meant 'printing, lithography, book-binding, portraiture and picture framing, watchmaking, jewellery, precious metal-working, the furniture trades, bespoke clothing … house

[12] Rodger, *Transformation*. p. 20. Cf. ibid., p. 18: 'The power and influence of the Edinburgh middle classes is difficult to exaggerate'.

[13] Ian MacDougall (ed.), *Minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council 1859-1873*, Edinburgh, T. & A. Constable, 1968, pp xvi-xvii.

repairs and maintenance, hairdressing, gardening and domestic service'.[14] In Paris, the category known as *articles de Paris* covered a huge range of products manufactured in the artisanal workshops of the capital: 'games, musical instruments, buttons made of horn, bone, wood etc; […] wigs and hairpieces; fans; corsets; […] cutlery […] umbrellas and sunshades; whips, artificial flowers, leather goods' – and so on, occupying some 25,000 workers in 1860. Colin Jones points out that 'There would still be far more shoemakers and tailors than car-workers in the [Paris] region in 1914'.[15]

Both cities had also had major episodes of urbanization in the nineteenth century. In Paris, the most drastic intervention was the remake of the old city under the Second Empire (1852-70) directed by the prefect, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-91), in the course of which much of medieval central Paris was destroyed to create broad avenues, bourgeois housing, and green open space.[16] In Edinburgh, the creation of the New Town had occurred over 50 years earlier, starting in the late eighteenth century, and carrying on into the first decades of the nineteenth: it had meant the building of what was virtually a second city to the north (and to a lesser extent the south) of the insalubrious centre, the Old Town. In both cities, and this applied to both old and new housing, the typical town dwelling was the *immeuble de rapport* or tenement block: residents were used to dwelling in flats (apartments) on separate landings in houses of four, five or six storeys. A Paris *immeuble* and an Edinburgh tenement were not always strictly comparable in other ways but both were quite unlike the broadly low-rise houses of much of London for example (see Chapter 2 below). And in both improvement schemes, trees and greenery were introduced, breaking up the residential blocks.[17]

In each city too these defining episodes of city planning had given rise to a new kind of segregation. Whereas before it had often been vertical – rich people on the

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[14] Rodger, *Transformation*, pp. 20-21; cf. ibid., note 53: 'Among the many small businesses listed in the 1881 Post Office directory for Edinburgh were: 'artificial flower makers (8); bird and animal stuffers (15); baby carriage manufacturers (29); billiard table makers (4); cabinetmakers (167); carvers, gilders and picture framers (46); fishing tackle makers (16); gunmakers (8); gardeners (75); hotels (90); refreshment rooms (67); musical instrument makers (29); photographers (43); pocketbook casemakers (16); umbrella makers (16).'

[15] Cf. Jones, *Paris*, p. 413; list of articles from the *Dictionnaire du commerce*, quoted in Albert Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de Paris*, Paris, Laffont, 1996, pp. 686-687.

[16] See David P. Jordan *Transforming Paris: the Life and Labours of Baron Haussmann*, Chicago, London and New York, Free Press, 1995. It is noteworthy that 'transformation' is used of works on both cities, cf. Rodger, *Transformation*, see note 9 above.

[17] In Edinburgh's New Town, this typically took the form of private squares, never a feature of Paris; but between 1884 and 1900, the Edinburgh corporation added 563 acres in six purchases at a cost of £151,000 to the ratepayers, Richard Rodger, 'The evolution of Scottish Town planning' in Gordon and Dicks, *Scottish Urban History*, 71-91, p. 85. On the New Town more generally, see A. J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1966.