



Seven Ages of Paris

Alistair Horne

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When Paris was a small island in the middle of the Seine, its gentle climate, natural vineyards and overhanging fig trees made it the favorite retreat of Roman emperors and de facto capital of western Europe. Over two millennia the muddy Lutetia, as the Romans called Paris, pushed its borders far beyond the Right and Left Banks and continued to stretch into the imagination and affection of visitors and locals. Now the spirit of Paris is captured by the celebrated historian Alistair Horne, who has devoted twenty-five years to a labor of love.

Seven Ages of Paris begins with the reign of the forceful Philippe Auguste, who greatly expanded the Capetian kingdom before devoting himself to fortifying the city and to the construction of the Louvre. Paris shed blood in the Hundred Years War and in the religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots and prospered under Henri IV's reconciliation. His grandson, Louis XIV, built the famed palace at Versailles and patronized the playwrights Molière and Racine. With the ancien régime swept away by the Revolution, Napoleon ushered in the Imperial age, and, subsequently, the Second Empire. Partly to dampen Paris's revolutionary zeal, Baron Haussmann modernized the city: avenues were widened, squares expanded and the medieval market at Les Halles razed.

Horne portrays the Prussians bivouacking on the Champs-Élysées in 1871. Paris bounced back after the war: the 1900 World Exposition showed off an electrified Champs-Élysées and the Métro station entrances in the Art Nouveau style. Most visibly, the Eiffel Tower went up in 1889 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Revolution.

The hubris of the Belle Époque led straight into the Great War. The Armistice and the Paris Peace Conference sealed a phoney peace, and when war resumed the city suffered four terrible years of occupation and was visited by Hitler himself. Liberation brought the last of Horne's seven ages, the Fifth Republic, headed by de Gaulle.

Seven Ages of Paris also recalls the women who defined Parisian life—from Héloïse down to Josephine Baker. With an elegiac description of the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Horne brings to an end a brilliantly written history of the world's most captivating city.

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