

# 2010

## H-Diplo

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*H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.*  
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

**H-Diplo Book Review of David Robin Watson. *Georges Clemenceau: France.*** (Makers of the Modern World Series). London: Haus Publishing, 2009. xii + 220pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, chronology, further reading, index. US\$19.95 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1-905791-60-6.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-France.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Robert J. Young**, University of Winnipeg

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Reviewing this work requires clearing one early impediment. David Watson's new book is one component of something much larger, that being an ambitious, thirty-two volume series entitled "Makers of the Modern World." The handsome cover makes that instantly obvious, but simultaneously perplexing. Immediately beside the series title is a second, apparently subsidiary, more thematically defined, series namely "The peace conferences of 1919-1923 and their aftermath." I say "apparently" only because, by chance, I know that both titles appear on another new Haus volume, that by Sally Marks on Paul Hymans. The uncertainties created by two series titles on top of the volume title could have been dispelled in an Introduction common to all volumes in the "peace conferences" series, explaining how it – so precisely defined temporally – is designed to fall under the capacious umbrella of a "Makers" of modernity series. This is the responsibility of a general editor, not that of the authors. What such an Introduction might have done, should have done, is simply flesh out one key line from the press release for Professor Watson's book. The "Makers of the Modern World" series, we are told there, "describes the personalities, events and circumstances surrounding the countries that were remade after the Paris Treaties." Had a more fleshed out version of that appeared as an editor's foreword to each volume, the relationship between volume and series would have been clearer from the outset. It might also have prepared readers to expect less a "biography" – as it is so identified on the dust jacket – and more of a monograph with biographical overtones.

There is something else that warrants remark about this series, indeed demands it before one can fairly appraise any one of its volumes. Judging from the two volumes at hand, this is to be a very handsome collection of works prepared by authentic experts. Each volume is cloth-bound in a roughly 5” by 8” format, has a few photographs and illustrations, an occasional map, a multi-page chronology of key events, and sells for a remarkably low price. Its interior design is attractive and calculated for easy reading: lines well-spaced, frequent side-bars offering eye-catching quotations or thumbnail biographical sketches of those who inter-acted with the principal protagonist. But designed for whom? Intuition suggests that these authors have not been asked for something inherently novel – whether by method or interpretation – or for something directed at specialists in their field. Rather, so intuition suggests, the series has an eye mainly to classroom use and perhaps to those ‘general’ readers with an exceptional interest in world issues between 1919 and 1923. And that is fine. I respect biographical approaches, and applaud works by experts who can write for audiences more numerous than their scholarly peers. But the missing editor needs to say so, as part of each volume, needs not only to explain the concept behind the series but to identify the ‘market’ for which it is intended. Otherwise, reviewers are freer than they should be to impose unreal expectations on the works of their colleagues.

Now to David Watson’s new book on Georges Clemenceau. It is, of course, a very different work from the full-length biography that he published in 1974. The opening two compact chapters comprise some forty pages. The first sketches in for the reader the pre-1917 international background leading up to France’s entry into World War One and Clemenceau’s return to the premiership. The second provides the domestic political background for that resumption of power, as Watson neatly summarizes “The Tiger’s” political career from those early days in the 1860s through the Commune, the Panama Scandal, and the protracted Dreyfus Affair. The third chapter, in another twenty pages, rapidly advances the reader from early 1917 – with Clemenceau holding down both the premiership and the war ministry – through the allied offensive in the summer of 1918, to the Armistice of November and the opening of what turned out to be the actual Peace Conference in January 1919.

The following 100 pages are divided into six similarly compact chapters, all of them focused on developments in only one calendar year but on a global scale. Most of them, to be sure, are Europe-focused as the peace-makers were obliged to cope with, and sometimes facilitate, the disintegration of three continental empires: that of the Hapsburgs, the Romanovs, and the Hohenzollerns. Though the latter assuredly command the greater part of Watson’s attention, as we are lead through the protracted inter-allied debates about the fate of Germany – its frontiers, its disarmament, its reparations obligations – some provision is made for the respective treaties with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Indeed, the latter in its more modern form had emerged from the collapse of yet another empire, that of the Ottomans, and by so doing had swiftly reminded the world of pre-war Anglo-French antagonisms in the Middle East. So too the

putative allies quarreled over eastern Europe, notably over the borders between the redefined Germany and the reborn Poland, and over the most effective way to isolate the contagion represented by the new Soviet Russia.

To handle all of this, tersely but lucidly, is no mean achievement; and neophytes will have good reason to be grateful. That said, those less innocent may have a few complaints. Given the inferences made about the objectives of this series, perhaps one should not gripe about two features of this volume. First, no attempt is made at the outset to provide an historiographical context for either the Peace Conference or Clemenceau. Second, there is no claim to novelty. Clemenceau's importance to the Peace Conference is assumed from the start, indeed so much so that the "Tiger" is left in the wings until chapter two, while chapter one sets the stage for his grand entry. Thereafter, the governing goal seems to be to retell, rather than revise, the Clemenceau story. Given, once again, the inferences about the series and its intended audience, more also might have been done to associate text with maps superior to the two, bi-tonal, continent-scale examples that appear without notice within the volume. It is not easy, even for experts, to appreciate the sensitivities that surfaced over the Saar valley in the west or the region of Teschen in the east, on a map that stretches from the Atlantic to the Urals. And it is no easier to know whether this complaint would be better addressed to author or to publisher.

Lest this sound too much like Clemenceau's arch-rival, Raymond Poincaré, "old piss-vinegar," it is time to acknowledge some of the virtues of this book. Despite an occasional resort to rather unwieldy paragraphs, Watson is wonderfully succinct and lucid. He tells his story well, and has accented his text with some lively, side-bar quotations – whether from John Maynard Keynes, Harold Nicolson or Clemenceau himself – or side-bar biographical sketches of actors like Joseph Caillaux or André Tardieu. Other assets include succinct, boxed outlines of the French political and party systems, a reproduction of President Wilson's Fourteen Points, and a detailed chronology of events stretching from 1841, the year of Clemenceau's birth, through 1929, the year of his death, to 1939 and the outbreak of a war he had sought to avert. Worth special remark is the inclusion of cultural highlights in this chronology, a feature that allows readers to position George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* within the turbulence of 1919, or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* within that of 1922 and the Anglo-French crisis over the Turkish seaport of Chanak.

As for the textual content itself, Watson confirms a number of important points about Georges Clemenceau. Long before the outbreak of war in 1914 the "Tiger" believed that war with Germany was inevitable and that, as a consequence, alliance with Great Britain was essential. Indeed, he is described as the "most Anglophile statesman ever to have occupied a leading position in French politics." (p.25) Conversely, he became a principal impediment to the Conference's acceptance of a delegation from Bolshevik Russia, and "he took little interest" in the development of the League of Nations. (p.77) More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that he "took little part in negotiation of the reparations" issue, preferring to concentrate his attention on the complexities of frontier adjustments

or the thorny matters relating to a demilitarized Rhineland. (p.123) Once the treaty with Germany was ratified by the French parliament during the summer and autumn of 1919 he continued to insist on two, related principles: first, the treaty in itself could never preserve the peace indefinitely because the balance of force present at its signing was bound to alter; second, for that very reason, a secure Anglo-French alliance was the key to future stability – a conviction that explains his criticism of the Poincaré government’s occupation of the Ruhr valley in 1923.

Interpretively, but now on a broader scale, David Watson positions himself as someone sympathetic to the 1919 peace makers and especially to his subject, Georges Clemenceau. His Preface opens on the premise that the way issues were resolved in 1919 was the most probable outcome of a Conference summoned so quickly and beset by so many challenges. His conclusion confirms that premise, semi-concealed as it is in the closing pages of a final chapter entitled “The Legacy.” The treaty did not lead inevitably to the war we now call the Second. What undermined it was not text or provision but post-war allied disunity. In that sense, Watson judges Clemenceau’s apprehensions about future hazards to be correct, and defends him against those who criticized him for placing too much reliance on the Anglo-Saxons. In fact, the statesman’s “assessment was correct.” (p.179) On that Watson is clear, even if his concluding pages contain an element of ambiguity. While acknowledging Clemenceau’s anger over the Ruhr occupation – because of the strain it placed on relations with England – Watson himself calls that act the last “unilateral French action” and appears to fault subsequent French governments for entering into negotiations with other powers “[i]nstead of building on this victory.” (p.177) That turnaround, in his words, marked the beginning of a road toward reconciliation that “unfortunately continued until 1938.” If Clemenceau frowned on independent action, and Watson regrets its termination, there is at the end just a slight but intriguing hint of discord between statesman and historian.

**Robert J. Young** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg. His works include two biographies of prominent men of the Third French Republic: *Power and Pleasure. Louis Barthou and the Third French Republic* (1991) and *An American By Degrees. The Extraordinary Lives of French Ambassador Jules Jusserand* (2009).

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