

Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*. (Toronto: Random House, 2002). Pp. 570, photos and maps b&w, hardcover. Original published as *Peacemakers*, (London: J. Murray, 2001).

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Less than one century ago, great men representing powerful nations congregated in Paris for six months to make right what the Great War had destroyed, and to create a new world order. These best laid plans instead marked the start of another chapter of violence and human rights violations, from interwar chaos to Total War, Cold War, genocides and civil wars, some of which directly originated from decisions made in Paris in 1919.

Hardly an area untouched by historical study, the University of Toronto's Margaret MacMillan infuses her *Paris 1919* with colour and details that breathe new life into an oft-revisited moment in time. MacMillan plumbs her sources to bring together a series of human interest stories, personalizing the conference and drawing her reader into familiarity with both the key figures and smaller players. This alone makes *Paris 1919* worthy of the awards it has garnered, for it is easy to get swept up in the drama and forget that one is reading an academically rigorous study.

The conference's key issues—self-determination, nationalism, the League of Nations, and reparations—are explained with great attention, making this work suitable for any novice historian. Academics might note that MacMillan's sources rely heavily on secondary works, perhaps too much on English language materials, but her skill in story-telling still make this worth reading. *Paris 1919* is organized in a cellular fashion, with chronology taking a back seat to a thematic and region-by-region focus. As a result, there is overlap in characters and content spread out over hundreds of pages, which can be confusing.

As well, sometimes lesser characters are paid an abundance of attention only to be forgotten once their region's issues have been examined, making the work seem too broad at times. It is true that many of the minor players MacMillan includes are rarely, if ever, found in other studies of the peace conference, but it occasionally seems that this happens at the expense of other more principal actors. Key examples of this would include Woodrow Wilson, whose health has been reexamined repeatedly in histories written over the last decade or so, August Heckscher's biography *Woodrow Wilson* (1991) being one such book. Increasingly it is thought that the great and final decline in Wilson's health began on his return to Paris for the second phase of the conference in February 1919. Certainly, as MacMillan's conclusion suggests, Wilson's health prevented him from effectively ratifying the treaty later that year, but she fails to discuss in depth the ramifications of his diminishing capacity while negotiating it. Similarly, the assassination attempt on French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau is mentioned as the point where his mental vigour decreased, but without a deeper analysis. These are minor criticisms, however, for ultimately MacMillan's tale is a riveting and human-oriented story that emphasizes interpersonal politics as much as interstate politics—making it clear the peacemakers had to struggle to keep order amongst themselves as much as to reestablish order in Europe.

*Paris 1919's* biggest flaw is in one of its key controversies and conclusions. MacMillan states that since the ink dried on the Treaty of Versailles, all the blame for what occurred during the 1920s and 30s has been perhaps unreasonably placed on the peacemakers' shoulders. "Pointing the finger and

shrugging helplessly are effective ways of avoiding responsibility” she specifies (493). However, too little attention is paid to this theme and no sufficient explanation is given for where the responsibility actually lies. This argument appears as an afterthought inserted neatly in the introduction and conclusion but ignored through the 483 pages in between. In fact, MacMillan’s emphasis on the at times arbitrary and wanton carving up of states would easily lead one to conclude instead that the peacemakers did not truly grasp the enormity of the decisions they were making, and that this contributed significantly to not only the Second World War, but several of the post-Cold War conflicts in more recent times. Even MacMillan touches on this in her introduction, pointing out how very similar the nineteen nineties and nineteen twenties really were. It is an intriguing theory, but requires further explanation to become a tenable position.

*Paris 1919* is enjoyable and illuminating, and its attention to the personalities and realities of the day-to-day “trivialities” behind the scenes during those “six months that changed the world” gives this work great value. Ultimately, what MacMillan most skillfully does is illustrate clearly that, as she quotes French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, “It is much easier to make war than peace” (xxx).