

1913: *The Year Before the Storm*

By Florian Illies



August Macke (1887-1914) 'The Esplanade' 1913. Wikimedia /Public Domain

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

1913: The Year Before the Storm. Translated from the 2012 German edition by Shaun Whitside and Jamie Lee Searle. London, The Clerkenwell Press, 2013. 272 pages.

Review

Illies Florian uses the calendar structure of the year 1913 for his framework to depict the events of that year, so he starts with Louis Armstrong in New Orleans, where he fired a pistol in the first seconds of the New Year. Armstrong was detained in a boys' home for doing that. Florian concludes with the German writer Arthur Schnitzler reading *The Great War in Germany* and toasting in 1914 as New Year's Eve fades. In between those two dates the days pass with sometimes important, sometimes inconsequential events being described – actually mentioned is a better description, for Illies does not elaborate much on their importance, rarely uses adjectives or predictions and usually avoids analysis. Frequently it remains up to the reader to know how the mentioned 1913 events will shape the future. This makes his book a work for those who have a better than basic knowledge of twentieth century European history and culture.

Nothing should be wrong with that if that base is understood, and nothing is wrong with many of the other limitations if they are also flagged, realised or sensed. One such obvious limitation is that this work is generally restricted to dealing with parts of continental Europe. North America, Africa, Oceania and Asia gets very few mentions. These non-European references usually gain inclusion because they involve European personalities being far from home. Even amongst the European locales, Iberia, Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Great Britain, the Balkan states and the Russian and Ottoman empires get little attention. This amazes as Ireland, China and Russia were in states of revolutionary turmoil in 1913. Mexico and most of the Balkans were in states of outright war. Only the latter gets a brief mention.

The next limitation must be that the massive changes in politics, technology and science also rarely get more than a mention and some do not get even that. Cinemas are referred to with a passage showing naïve attempts at censorship and even more naïve beliefs about the corrupting effects of cinema. Nothing is written about the way Italian film directors were breaking out of two reel shorts into the world of feature films. The first practical use of the assembly line is mentioned, but not what this meant for employment, profits, living standards or consumerism. Trade unionism and the development of the welfare state both flourished in this year, but readers would not know it from this book. Flight, exploration, the spreading use of radio, the changes to shipping safety after 1912's *Titanic* disaster, the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson as president of the USA, the death of America's leading magnate J.P. Morgan and the successes of republican movements in Portugal, China and Ireland all go unmentioned.

1913: The Year Before the Storm definitely does not work as a people's history. Hardly any references are made to those outside the world of the intellectuals and Europe's rulers.

What is developed is how various European cultural figures lived, worked, loved and suffered during the year 1913. Psychologists Freud and Jung, the educationist Rudolf Steiner, Hitler, Stalin, the scandalous spy Colonel Redl, architect Adolph Loos, the writers Brecht, Kafka, Emil Node, the Mann brothers, Virginia Woolf, Rilke, Proust, Georg Grosz, Robert Musil, Yeats and James Joyce were all breaking through into creating modernism. Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp, Kokoschka, Kirchner, Max Ernest, Klee, Braque, Leger and Picasso were creating a cultural revolution. In musical performance Diaghlev, Nijinsky and Stravinsky did the same. Gertrude Stein and her brother played a succouring role for the new culture while women who played similar leading roles in the culture of this year included Alma Mahler and Else Lasker-Schüler. Two of the most outstanding talents in 1913, Franz Marc and Auguste Macke would both die as German soldiers in the world war, their talents not having reached their potential zenith. Some royal personages appear as harbingers of the crisis to come; Kaiser Wilhelm I, Franz Joseph, his heir Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. All of these individuals have some aspects of their lives mentioned, but in a book of this size by referring to so many figures, detail or depth can only be in small amounts.

Where *1913: The Year Before the Storm* is strong is in presenting striking, often little known events which say much about the year and the people mentioned. Illies has a gift for finding such things. With one flick of the switch Woodrow Wilson turned on the new light system that illuminated New York City and nearby lighthouses. The latter could now be detected a hundred miles out to sea. Emil Node travelled to New Guinea, expecting to find the noble savage in an unspoiled paradise. Instead locals were learning English to earn good wages in their tourist trade and the aspects of civilization he disliked (to the extent of fleeing Europe) flourished there. What was big news in 1913 but is almost forgotten now was Da Vinci's stolen Mona Lisa, missing from the Louvre for two years. At year's end it turned up in Florence. Ironically nations that would be at war with each other in less than a year combined to build the massive monument to the battle of the nations at Leipzig. This was a centennial celebration of Napoleon's defeat and therefore the beginning of the end of war ravaging Europe, it seemed. Illies does not make too much of that irony.

Even allowing for problems with space, the book has too many omissions. Russia's tricentenary celebrations of Romanov rule, America's fiftieth anniversary commemorations of Gettysburg, the suffragette campaigns, Ireland's turmoil as it prepared for Civil War, the planning of Canberra and Miami as major cities and the establishment of Greece's borders and government are passed over. What applies to events also applies to people.

Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's rival in evolutionary theory, died that year. Somerset Maugham, Edith Wharton, Henry James, H.G. Wells, Kipling, Shaw, Gustav Klimt, Edward Elgar, Isadora Duncan, Maxim Gorki, Toscani, Caroso, Melba, Richard Strauss, Trotsky, the Irish radicals Jim Larkin and James Connolly, reformers Lloyd George and Karl Renner, the early environmentalist John Muir, Zapata, Pancho Villa, Winston Churchill, Gandhi and Sun Yet Sen were all active and prominent in 1913, yet most fail to get even an in passing reference.

Also missing are footnotes and an index. This becomes annoying when Illies writes of Stalin meeting Hitler in a Viennese park. This unusual and important information should have checkable sources, but does not. Informing readers of what these two thought of each other would have been good, but it does not happen. This is typical of so many aspects of this book. Despite its virtues *1913: The Year Before the Storm* omits too much.



A middle class European family in 1913. Note the maid in the background. They usually were.