

H-France Review Vol. 18 (May 2018), No. 99

Françoise Thébaud, *Une traversée du siècle: Marguerite Thibert, femme engagée et fonctionnaire internationale*. Paris: Belin, 2017. 704 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. €26.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2-410-00549-3.

Review by Charles Sowerwine, La Trobe University.

Never heard of Marguerite Thibert? Neither had I. Françoise Thébaud herself first saw a photo of Thibert in a special issue of *Citoyennes à part entière*, a product of Yvette Roudy's legendary Women's Rights Ministry. Thibert's photo was one of a number exhibited on the walls of the Gare Saint-Lazare for the first state-sponsored celebration of International Women's Day, 8 March 1982. Thébaud had been planning to "expérimenter l'écriture biographique," "écrire une vie, mais laquelle?" (p. 12). She chose Thibert.

Marguerite Thibert (1886-1982) strode through four-fifths of the twentieth century and during that time was an exemplar of women's entry into militant and professional life. She was never an actor at the center of the stage, but a participant in the background, a position she seems to have preferred, leaving little documentation of her life. This poses a challenge to the biographer, but also an opportunity, implicit in the book's title, *Une traversée du siècle*. Thibert has much more to work with than Alain Corbin in his tour de force biography of a complete unknown,<sup>[1]</sup> but like Corbin she is extraordinarily adept at mobilizing context to enrich our understanding of her subject's life. Her method is to plunge into the archives to establish the context, which she gives us very richly. This is therefore an historian's history, a dense work which charts the many seas Thibert navigated while keeping us informed of the issues the biographer has faced.

Thébaud uses thick description to put us into the world of women who, emboldened by the progress of first-wave feminists, sought to complete the *baccalauréat* before and during the Great War and to obtain higher degrees in the war's aftermath. Women faced challenges, to be sure, but they also found more opportunities than we have sometimes assumed. Thébaud devotes eight pages to a study of the *bac* and the role of gender in its preparation and success: 481 women succeeded in 1914 (p. 51); Thibert succeeded in 1916. She went on to obtain her doctorate on "Le féminisme dans le socialisme français de 1830 à 1850" in 1926. She was attacked by the vile anti-feminist Théodore Joran,<sup>[2]</sup> but was supported by the Sorbonne establishment and especially by the radiant figure of Jules-Louis Puech, still known as the first modern biographer of Flora Tristan. Her jury gave her the highest *mention (très honorable)* and a fulsomely laudatory report. Thébaud compares her report with those of other *doctorantes*, who, despite the inflection of terminology by gender, fared surprisingly well.

As Thébaud also shows in similar depth, women did not fare so well in academic employment. Indeed, the patronage system kept them out of the Sorbonne. In Thibert's case, however, her patrons found her a temporary job at the International Labour Office (ILO) in Geneva. She began work there in 1926, before her thesis examination, and went on to forge a career as head of its Women's and Children's Work Department. After her retirement in 1947, she continued to work as an *envoyée en mission* for the ILO and remained active in social legislation and feminism until her death in 1982.

The ILO was the defining focus of her life and of her activism. The International Labour Office was and is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization (confusingly, in English both are the ILO; in French the Bureau International du Travail--BIT--and the Organisation internationale du Travail--OIT). The ILO originated in the Treaty of Versailles. It was shaped by its first Director, Albert Thomas, becoming the social arm of the League of Nations. Thomas was a reformist socialist who showed remarkable administrative abilities as Minister for Munitions (later Armaments) during the Great War. Thibert respected him deeply and kept a portrait of him hanging in her apartment until her death.

Headquartered in Geneva, the ILO became a key node of the *mouvance réformatrice* which Thomas incarnated. Its relative success in the period of Thibert's lifetime owed much to what Thomas Piketty calls "the shocks that buffeted the economy[:]... World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Great Depression, World War II, and the consequent advent of new regulatory and tax policies along with controls on capital," which reduced capital's share of income and power.[3] Thibert's career coincided with this phase of history. She arrived at the ILO as western states had begun to make concessions to workers in the hope of fending off Communism and she died in 1982, a few months before François Mitterrand gave up his efforts to implement a major social and structural rupture under pressure from a resurgent capitalism.

At the ILO, Thibert's initial contract called for her to produce a major report on migration. Within two years, she brought together a report that surpassed expectations and was received as a landmark: *La réglementation des migrations* (3 vols; Geneva: ILO, 1928-9). Despite the consequent esteem of the ILO hierarchy, she remained on a succession of short-term contracts for years. Thébaud has made extensive use of Thibert's personnel file as well as of other sources in the history of the ILO and shows that Thibert was not afraid to make demands of her superiors. After two years, she wrote a table-thumping letter to her manager, demanding a permanent position (pp. 137-8). Thébaud, who studied the ILO's personnel files exhaustively, as she studied all the relevant archives, found nothing like it from any employee (pp. 137-8). Thibert's superior, fearing to lose such a valued collaborator, finally found a position for her on women's and children's work. In 1932 she became head of the department devoted to those issues. Although she regretted losing the issue of migration, then as now a huge and hugely contentious issue, she found herself doubly at home in the area of women's work.

Thibert participated in the feminist movement after World War I, beginning her feminist activism by campaigning for women candidates in the 1925 municipal elections, candidatures made possible by the Communist Party's decision to present a list of women's candidates: the prefect then ruled that all women could participate, put up posters, and have space in public discussions. In Geneva, she quickly entered into close contact with liberal feminist groups, in

particular the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations, whose views she enthusiastically shared, except in regard to the regulation of women's work.

From a comfortably bourgeois background and having inherited a reasonable sufficiency from her husband, an architect who died of tuberculosis in 1915, she enjoyed what Thébaud calls a bourgeois mode of life, having an attractive flat in Geneva as well as in Paris and of course a maid (p. 200). In 1928, Thibert bought a used Peugeot 5 CV; Thébaud points out that in 1924 only 3 per cent of driver licenses were issued to women, a figure that in 1932 had risen to 10 per cent (p. 145). Now, with a solid professional salary, Thibert traded up to a "plus luxueuse" Citroën Rosalie 10 CV (p. 202) and began to make regular international road trips. Always creative in her use of archival sources, Thébaud carefully studied removalists' quotes to establish the nature of Thibert's furnishings, which were typical of "sa classe sociale d'origine: nombreux meubles dont un salon empire en acajou," complemented by two pianos, two violins, and a viola, as well as an extensive library (pp. 418-19). On retirement, she bought a chalet and skied until past 80 (p. 413).

Thibert's class position fitted with her moderate reformism, a link that Thébaud could have made more clearly. The thorniest problem she faced was that of the regulation of women's work. Maternalists and many conservatives sought to "protect" women from work that risked damaging their reproductive capacity. In practice, this often meant preventing them from working at all. Some feminists, particularly Anglo feminists of Open Door International, fought for equal pay and for regulation of all workers without regard to sex. Thibert and her moderate feminist allies, like the male hierarchy of the ILO, believed in a class-based differential. While sharing the demand for equal pay, they wanted the right to work for professional women like themselves and protection for working-class women, at least those subjected to heavy physical labor. The Anglo women of Open Door, Thibert wrote to a confidante, were "folles," their proposals "stupides" (p. 162). The magisterial study she produced in 1938, *Le statut légal des travailleuses*, prepared the ground for the postwar evolution of women's rights. The ILO came down on Thibert's side. Protection for laboring women and progress toward equal pay remained its position until 1990 and even then, Open Door continued to dispute the ILO's support for compulsory maternity leave (p. 408).

Thibert's own case illustrates the difficulties and possibilities of professional women between the wars. The ILO adopted equal pay from its inception, at the insistence of Thomas and against the advice of senior British officials (p. 189). But in practice, as Thébaud shows in a detailed study of the ILO as a workplace, seniority, degrees, and other factors led to substantial differences in pay for men and women at the same level (p. 191). Nevertheless, these women were treated far better than was usual at the time; Thibert stood up for herself and generally obtained satisfaction. After the war, named Head of Section (the only woman of nine heads), she reached a salary surpassed only by that of the director and his deputy (p. 333).

Her career prospered during the 1930s. The fall of France, however, put the ILO in a difficult position and, in August 1940, a much-reduced team fled to Montreal, the US having refused to allow it to come to Washington. Thibert, however, missed the boat, having stayed to support her daughter, whose pregnancy was expected to end with a Caesarean. By the time she was ready to go, the Vichy government had formally notified the ILO that it would break relations if any "fonctionnaire français" went to Canada, which was at war with France (p. 296). In a sign reminding us of the ambiguities of the epoch, the ILO accepted this ultimatum and forced

Thibert to accept “suspension” from her position. Fortunately, as the US moved closer to supporting the Allied side, President Roosevelt allowed the ILO to hold its annual conference in New York in October 1941. With the ILO now committed to the Allied side, Thibert could be “réintégrée” (pp. 304-6).

The ILO was in a weak position as the League of Nations crumbled. Of the two emerging great powers, the US remained cool and the USSR hostile to what it saw as “une organisation de collaboration de classe” (p. 316). The New York conference began its reconstitution as an arm of the UN, but the ILO was excluded from the organizations laying the basis for the post-war order until its 1944 Philadelphia conference, at which Frances Perkins, Roosevelt’s longtime Secretary of Labor, and the Free France delegate helped to bring the ILO in from the cold. Thibert played a key role behind the scenes.

The Philadelphia conference set out an ambitious program for women’s economic rights, based largely on working documents provided by Thibert. If it maintained the prohibition on industrial work at night, it called for women’s right to work and for advances toward equal pay. It set the agenda for defending women’s rights in the post-war era against the push to return women to “their natural disposition [maternity],” as Pope Pius XII put it (p. 345). But these challenges were faced not by Thibert, but by her successor, the American New Deal feminist Mildred Fairchild.

As the ILO’s statutes required, Thibert retired in 1947, just before her 61<sup>st</sup> birthday, but months before that she had been engaged for an ILO mission in Asia. Thus began a career as a kind of plenipotentiary for the ILO, a career which lasted twenty years. Her first tour of duty took her to India, Indochina (as the French then termed Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and China, to lay the ground for the first ILO conference in Asia. Her in-depth reports attacked the industrial slavery she encountered on plantations and in factories, as well as child labor and the inequality of women. In China and Indochina, she was obliged not to mention the areas under Communist control, but in a lengthy confidential report she insisted on the “solidity of Communist support” and the “great Chinese labor movement” (p. 372). In all this, she had struggled, generally successfully, to defend the ILO’s turf against other UN organizations, to fend off Cold War pressures, and to remain on good terms with a variety of regimes, many of which she decried in her private correspondence.

This mission and one to Greece took all of 1947. Similarly lengthy ILO missions across the world followed. In each case, she negotiated with local officials, toured work sites, discussed conditions with labor leaders and feminists, and produced lengthy reports which were used to build proposals for conventions. A first series of missions completed at the end of 1952, she finally left Geneva and settled back in Paris in 1956, becoming a militant active in a range of causes, not to mention another series of missions in the 1960s.

She played a significant role in organizing the 1960 Copenhagen conference on the 50th anniversary of the founding of International Women’s Day, set up in Copenhagen at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in 1910, and she brought together a high-powered French delegation, including both Communist and Christian women trade union leaders, feminists of all stripes, and writers from Elsa Triolet to Simone de Beauvoir (p. 456). In 1961, she was one of the founders of the Association d’amitié franco-vietnamienne, which campaigned for peace in Vietnam well into the 1970s.

Thibert had returned to Paris just in time for the Algerian Crisis and de Gaulle's return to power. Opposing the overthrow of the Republic, she became involved in the "mouvance mitterrandienne" and then in the Mouvement démocratique et féminin, a bridge between first- and second-wave feminism founded by Marie-Thérèse Eyquem and by Eyquem's disciple Yvette Roudy, translator of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. For the 1967 legislative elections, Mitterrand set up a shadow government to which he named Eyquem as Minister for the Promotion of Women. He committed his government to equal pay and thanked Thibert for her research and for "le rôle très important que vous jouez au sein du Conseil de la promotion de la femme, où vos connaissances, votre autorité, votre dévouement sont particulièrement appréciés" (p. 508). She attended the famous ongoing assembly at the Sorbonne during May '68 and on several occasions spoke to the mostly male students on the need to open the doors to women, a feat at 82 (p. 512). She was active in the formation of Mitterrand's new Parti Socialiste (1968-72) and gave a major public presentation on women's rights in 1972, at the first of a series of Open Days promoting the Programme commun de la gauche which the PS negotiated with the Communists (p. 541).

Françoise Thébaud has done a great service with this magisterial biography. Uncovering the lives of those who work behind the scenes, like Thibert, helps us understand the machinations of power, the personal networks, and the constraints of reform. Thébaud has performed prodigious research to reconstruct the life of this key actor. This was doubly difficult because Thibert not only worked behind the scenes, but also minimized, if she did not hide, her personal life and even her militant activities. She had the notions of privacy and self-restraint characteristic of the *bourgeoise provinciale*, as Thébaud calls her, without specifying how much of that restraint is characteristic of a woman *bourgeoise* as opposed to a man. Thibert defies even such a courageous biographer. Despite all the research, the book leaves the reader unsatisfied about Thibert as a person. She had loving relationships and an enormous network of warm friendships in Geneva, Paris and around the world, but we don't have a sense of what she was like. What made possible the many friendships she developed at conferences? How did such friendships begin?

Overall, however, the book succeeds admirably in exploring the many contexts of the rich fabric of Thibert's militant and professional life (which were virtually merged through her happy if fortuitous encounter with the ILO). Thibert leads us into each archive, explaining carefully as an historian to historians the problems and limitations as well as the strengths of each, and then exploring the whole context in depth. Sometimes this can daunt the reader and, more importantly, prevent the reader from making the links and connections important to Thibert's life. How extensive and continuous, for example, were Thibert's links with American New Deal feminists like Frances Perkins, who played such a role in saving the ILO, or Mildred Fairchild, who succeeded her at the ILO, or Frieda Miller, who played an important role in the adoption of the 1951 convention on equal pay? Thébaud's method of exhaustive contextual detail somewhat obscures continuities such as this kind of networking and its impact on the ILO's success.

This is no doubt a quibble. Reading such a magisterial work, which illuminates so many aspects of twentieth-century history, one can only respond with admiration for an historian who has researched to the fullest and presented knowledgeable the issues, activities, and encounters of a player who accomplished so much while resolutely striving to remain in the shadows.

## NOTES

[1] Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), originally published as *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798-1876* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).

[2] Thébaud acknowledges the aid of Helen Chenut, the only historian to have looked at this little-known figure: Helen Chenut, "L'esprit antiféministe et la campagne pour le suffrage en France, 1880-1914," *Recherches féministes* 25, n° 1 (2012): 37-53; "Attitudes Toward French Women's Suffrage on the Eve of World War I," *French Historical Studies*, forthcoming in October 2018.

[3] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 41.

Charles Sowerwine  
La Trobe University  
c.sowerwine@latrobe.edu.au

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form without prior permission in writing from the Editor. Unless by prior arrangement, articles and photographs will not normally be returned. Royal Air Force.Â Editorial Board: Gp Capt P W Gray D Def S (RAF) (Chairman) B Finch, Editor, RAF Information Media Training and Technical Publications\* Gp Capt J H S Thomas, MOD; Gp Capt H Randall, JSCSC Watchfield; Wg Cdr P J Greville, SO1 Def S (RAF); Mr S Cox, Head of AHB (RAF); Mr C Hobson, Head Librarian JSCSC; Dr C J. M Goulter, JSCSC Watchfield; Sqn Ldr A W Riches, Secretary.