

REMEMBRANCE OF TIMES PAST

BY TONY BECKWITH



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*Oh what I'd give for a moment or two
Under the bridges of Paris with you¹*

It was mid-morning and we had stopped at the Café de Flore on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Sitting at a sidewalk table on red and green chairs, facing the street, savoring the thrill of being in Paris. *Deux croissants et deux cafés au lait, s'il vous plaît.* French phrases resurfacing after hibernating in memory for years, gliding tentatively over the tongue, stirring memories of days gone by. Dunking croissants in our milky coffee. *Merci!*

Lillian and I had flown in late the previous afternoon and, after sleeping off the jet lag, had risen and struck out from our hotel in Le Marais district on a crisp, sunny morning. With guide book in hand and only a vague plan in mind, we wandered down to the river, where we paused to get our bearings. Then we strolled along the right bank, past the Hôtel de Ville, crossed over the Pont Neuf and turned right on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. On perusing a map, we saw that we could

continue in a westerly direction, veer left on the rue Saint-Dominique, and eventually come to the Eiffel Tower. It would be a long walk, but the idea was appealing, so off we went.



Place des Vosges in Le Marais, Paris,
the city's oldest planned square (built in 1605-1612)

We had read about the massive public works program undertaken by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann in the mid-nineteenth century, and learned that part of that project involved demolishing the narrow, cobble-stoned rue du Jardinnet to make way for the Boulevard Saint-Germain. On June 22, 1853, Napoléon III appointed Haussmann to the office of Prefect of the Seine; a week later the Emperor instructed him to *aérer, unifier, et embellir* Paris: to create open spaces designed to circulate fresh air throughout the city, connect and unify the different neighborhoods, and make it all more beautiful. The project, which dragged on for decades into the 1920s, involved tearing down crowded, unhealthy, medieval neighborhoods, building broad avenues, parks, and squares, annexing surrounding suburbs, and putting in new sewers, fountains, and aqueducts. Unsurprisingly, Haussmann's work prompted fierce opposition—he was eventually dismissed by Napoléon in 1870—but the layout and distinctive look of central Paris today is largely the result of his vision.



Camille Pissarro, *Avenue de l'Opéra, soleil, matinée d'hiver* (1898)

The sun was out but there was a cool breeze, which reminded me of the Emperor's instructions to air out the city. Hats off to the Baron, I thought, as I donned my beret, which I carried in my shoulder bag for precisely this sort of climatic condition. It was a chilly day, it's true, but wearing berets isn't always about the weather. They are a traditional item of apparel in some places: many rural Mediterraneans, for example, would no more leave the house without their beret than without their pants. For some, too, they are part of a uniform. Berets were worn by the French Army's mountain infantry as early as the 1880s, and elite military units the world over have used them ever since, the Green Berets to name just one. Guerrillas and revolutionaries have also worn them, from Che Guevara to the Black Panthers to Patty Hearst after she was kidnapped by the SLA.

In the English-speaking world, generally speaking, berets are seen as a French fashion accessory. To some extent, this might be because we call them by their French name, but France has certainly contributed a great deal to their image and appeal. Berets were at their most popular

in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, when the poets and writers of the Beat Generation took to wearing them in San Francisco and other places where cool was king. They were simply following the lead set by Picasso and other Left Bank artists, and Camus and Sartre and the Existentialists, not to mention the heroes of the French Resistance during World War II.

The beret's French connections notwithstanding, its origins can actually be traced back to the Basques, those mysterious people living in the borderlands between southwestern France and northern Spain. For centuries, the *Vascos* have inhabited their mountainous corner of Europe, where they raised sheep and spun the wool they needed to knit the soft, flat, one-piece *txapela*, their trademark hat. During the Carlist Wars of the early 1800s, its popularity spread to Spain, where it was called the *boina vasca* in honor of its ancestry—or *boina* for short. The Basques were intrepid sailors and fishermen, whose sturdy ships sailed up and down the western coast of Europe and, according to some, probably made land in the Americas long before the arrival of Columbus. It is interesting to note that the Scots, far to the north, also had a version of the traditional Basque headgear: a woolen bonnet known in Scotland as the tam o' shanter. Is the tam a first cousin to the beret and the *boina*? It's certainly possible, but we shall probably never know.

"Fine," said Lillian, "but if we're going to talk about iconic symbols of French culture, how about the baguette?" Good point. At certain times of the day this particular version of our daily bread can be seen everywhere. As we walked (and walked, and walked) we saw dozens of people carrying the distinctive long, thin loaf in their hands, under their arms, and strapped onto the handlebars of their bicycles, presumably on their way home for lunch. There is nothing quite like a baguette, especially when it is still warm, just out of the oven. Its crisp crust and soft, doughy interior is delicious all by itself, and when slathered with melting butter it is out of this world. The loaf as we know it today has probably been around for a long time, but it has only been known as a baguette since about 1920. The word in this context is apparently derived from the Italian word *bacchetta* (a small rod), which is a diminutive of

bacchio (rod), which in turn comes from the Latin *baculum* (a stick). Lillian reminded me—raising her eyebrows as she does when she wants me to read between the lines—that the same etymology and sense apply to the elegant, long cut diamond, though that specific meaning did not surface until a few years later.

The sight and thought of all those baguettes stimulated our appetites and, having taken a slight detour to see Rodin's *Thinker* and the Place des Invalides, we came across a street vendor selling crepes, hot off a flat grill. One filled with spinach and cheese, one with chocolate, consumed on a park bench with sincere compliments to the chef, and we were off again, now getting very close to our destination. And, sure enough, after just a few more blocks, there it was in all its iconic beauty.

This wrought iron lattice tower is named for the engineer Gustave Eiffel, whose company designed and built it in 1887–89. It was intended as the grand entrance to the 1889 *Exposition Universelle*, which was organized to celebrate the centennial of the French Revolution. The original plan envisioned the structure being taken down after 20 years, in 1909, but it proved so useful for experimental and communication purposes that it was allowed to remain aloft after the permit expired.

The graceful *Tour* rises up from a square base that measures 410 feet on each side. It is 1,063 feet tall, or roughly the same height as an 81-storey building. On completion it was the tallest man-made structure in the world, a title it held until it was overtaken by the Chrysler Building in New York in 1930. The Eiffel Tower has three floors—the top level's upper platform is 906 feet above the ground, where tourists can gaze out at breathtaking views in all directions—with stairs and elevators to all of them. As a historical note, when German armed forces occupied Paris in 1940, during World War II, members of the French Resistance cut the elevator cables. The tower was closed to the public during the occupation, and the cables were not repaired until after the war. In August 1944, when the Allies were poised to retake the city, Hitler ordered General Dietrich von Choltitz, the military governor of Paris, to destroy the Eiffel Tower along with the rest of the city. To his enduring credit, and our profound relief, von Choltitz chose to disobey the Führer. About 25,000

people visit the tower every day, which means there can sometimes be long queues, but we were lucky and didn't have to wait very long before we stood on the second level, with Paris spread out beneath us in the late afternoon.

We had walked many miles that day, and climbed many stairs, so when we got back down to the Champ de Mars we set about trying to find a cab. We were in luck again, and were able to flag down a small Citroën piloted by a rather intense woman of uncertain age who chain-smoked all the way back to the hotel. A small, nondescript dog was settled comfortably on the seat beside her, utterly oblivious to us, so I asked her what would happen if three or more passengers needed a ride, and one of them wanted to sit in front. "Ah, no," she replied, "only the back seat is available for customers." When I asked what she called the dog, she peered at me sternly in the rear-view mirror, removed the Gauloise from between her lips, and said "Her name is *Cigarette*."

After a short rest in our room, we ventured back out for dinner. We walked past a tiny restaurant just off the rue Saint-Antoine, and when we opened the door for closer inspection an extraordinarily sophisticated Airedale Terrier came to greet us, wagging his tail. When traveling far from home we believe in trying to read the signs we might encounter along the way. Meeting a second highly domesticated dog struck us as being a positive sign, so we took a seat in one of the four booths along the left-hand wall of the miniscule dining room. The only other patrons at the time were sitting in one of the four booths on the right-hand wall. These two elderly men from New York told us that our instincts were sound because this was their favorite restaurant in Paris, and they made a point of having dinner there every time they were in town. The house special that night was duck confit, which we had heard of but never tried. The chef-owner, a fussy man with disheveled white hair wearing a white apron, explained that this was a classic dish that required time and patience to prepare. He told us, very seriously, that his version was sublime and assured us that we would not be disappointed. He was right. I have ordered duck confit a few times since then, in various restaurants around the world, and have never had a better one.

After dinner we strolled back to the hotel. It was a chilly night that definitely called for a beret and a scarf. It was quite late and the streets were quiet. In retrospect, all these years later, that day seems to be from a different era entirely, almost a different world. Long before Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan Theater, Bastille Day in Nice, and other dark events that have changed something precious about France and the world we knew. It was a simpler time when, to me, any mention of the City of Light seemed to summon up memories of Eartha Kitt and her irresistible promise: “Under the bridges of Paris with you, I’ll make your dreams come true.”



Le Pont Neuf (built 1578-1607), oldest standing bridge in Paris despite its name

NOTES

1 *Sous les ponts de Paris* [Under the Bridges of Paris] (1913), a popular song, music by Vincent Scotto, original French lyrics by Jean Rodor. English lyrics by Dorcas Cochran were added in 1952. The bilingual version by Eartha Kitt, with Henri René and his orchestra and chorus, was recorded in New York City on October 25, 1953. Listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs3J--izU8>