

LA VIE JAMAIS RACONTÉE

ALICE MILLIAT

A French Heroine and Sporting Suffragette



NANCY GILLEN

Foreword by Sue Anstiss MBE

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Chapter One

A Pioneer Is Born

'We must continue to try to put the following expression into practice: the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism ... with the applause of women as a reward.'

PARIS WAS a city of paradox at the turn of the 20th century. The French capital had been transformed by the economic prosperity and technological advancements of *La Belle Époque*, directly translated as 'The Beautiful Era', and quickly became synonymous with creativity, artistic achievement and opulence. Cultural institutes such as the Moulin Rouge and Folies Bergère were established as the world's best artistic talent flocked to Paris, while iconic landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower and Sacré-Cœur Basilica were completed, linked by the brand-new Métropolitain transport system.

Paris was an excellent place to be for the wealthy, but the prosperity of *La Belle Époque* did not filter down to the city's significant economic underclass, who were often pushed out to the periphery of the French capital to live in pervasive poverty.

Although there was relative stability in France in contrast to the French Revolutionary Wars and Napoleonic Wars which had come before, the country was still highly divided by politics and there were regular disputes between the government and Catholic Church.

La Belle Époque had begun under the Third Republic, a parliamentary democracy which was adopted in September 1870. Despite persistent attempts to overthrow it, the Third Republic overcame its challenges until it was finally brought down by the Second World War. The end came in July 1940, when Germany invaded France and replaced the Third Republic with a puppet government. By this point, *La Belle Époque* was already a distant memory, having been cut short by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

The scars of both merciless global conflicts run deep throughout the 20th century, leaving memories of economic hardship, unimaginable loss and social upheaval. As with many countries across Europe, France was devastated by both World Wars, leaving it almost impossible to imagine life before such suffering. It is consequently easy to understand why the period before the First World War was retrospectively dubbed *La Belle Époque*, despite the poverty and the divisive politics. The era was often looked upon with rose-tinted glasses after the horrors of conflict.

It was in *La Belle Époque* that Alice Joséphine Marie Million was born on 5 May 1884. She was far from the bright lights of Paris, growing up in Nantes, a city 350km south-west of the capital. In those days, Nantes was a major industrial city which had reinvented itself into a hub for food processing and shipbuilding,

following the complete abolition of the slave trade in France in 1848. It might not have been the thriving cultural hub that Paris was, but it was certainly a prosperous city. Alice was born into a lower-middle-class family, the eldest of three sisters and one brother. Her grandparents were innkeepers and tailors, while her father and mother progressed from grocers to an office job and seamstress respectively. Despite her unassuming beginnings, she went on to become a figure of immense historical significance.

Alice's journey took her from industrial Nantes to bustling London, where she acquired a passion for rowing. She lived in Paris upon her return to France, enjoying a meteoric rise in the domain of women's sports administration as the world around her shifted from *La Belle Époque* to the gruesome reality and aftermath of the First World War. Alice became Federation of French Female Sports Societies (FSFSF) president, before inspiring the creation of an International Women's Sport Federation (FSFI) and heading up that organisation, too. Under her leadership, Alice cultivated the growth of sports such as football in France, organised four editions of the Women's World Games and lobbied the IOC for the inclusion of women's athletics at the Olympics. Unsurprisingly, this set her on a collision course with the most influential male figures in sport at the time, including the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Alice was fearless in her approach, and her persistence certainly ruffled a few feathers. Her tireless work advanced the cause of women's sport, bringing about change that would not have transpired until years later otherwise. But in some ways, Alice's crusade also caused several authoritative figures to batten down the hatches and protect male dominance

in sport, arguably contributing to the lack of women in sports administration today. Alice's story, and those of the female athletes she helped elevate, are still relatively unknown. But with the first ever gender-equal Olympic Games taking place in Paris in 2024, it seems an appropriate time to celebrate the astonishing achievements of Milliat and her peers.

In 1904, as she turned 20 years old, Alice made the brave decision to leave Nantes for London, at the time the largest and most influential city in the world. She found work as a private tutor, and, perhaps as a nod to her origins, married Joseph Milliat, who was four years her senior and also from Nantes. Joseph suffered a sudden and premature death in 1908, leaving Alice a childless widow by the age of 24. It was a tragic and difficult period for Milliat, who also had to process the deaths of her mother and father in 1907 and 1910 respectively. She moved back to France to care for her younger siblings, and settled in Paris where she held a variation of office jobs.

Milliat's two years in London following her husband's death are not well documented, but she returned to her home country well travelled, fluent in English and with a penchant for rowing. It is suggested she had been working for an affluent family, potentially as a housekeeper, which may explain why she embarked on trips to the United States and Scandinavia while living in London. It is also likely that Milliat developed her passion for sport while residing in England. In early 20th-century Europe and the United States, the perception that women were too frail to participate in physical activity held dominance. The science of the 19th century instilled a belief that women had only limited energy and that sport was damaging for the reproductive

system. Childbearing was deemed to be the sole responsibility for women at that time, and so they were dissuaded from taking part in strenuous physical activity. Men and women of the early 20th century were also expected to stick to the strict gender stereotypes of the era, and it was felt that women participating in traditionally masculine activities such as running, jumping and displays of strength was widely inappropriate. Men likely felt threatened at the idea of women invading this particular societal sphere, and chose to disparage female athletes instead. As opportunities for men to participate in organised sport grew across Europe and the US at the turn of the 20th century, the women were left behind.

But, in some ways, the UK was advanced in terms of women's sport. The first recorded instance of women's football there came in 1881, followed by the formation of the British Ladies' Football Club in 1894. Women were also able to participate in sports such as swimming, rowing, hockey, cricket, badminton and basketball at the polytechnics which started to spring up around London towards the end of the 19th century. Rowing was particularly popular among women in London and they could often be spotted gliding down the Thames in pulling boats. These early iterations of organised women's sport in the UK had both a direct and indirect impact on the development of women's sport in the rest of Europe, as will be explained in future chapters. Milliat therefore returned to France not only with an interest in rowing, but also a newfound belief that women could, and should be able to, participate in sport.

She may well have been influenced by the burgeoning campaign for women's suffrage in the UK, too. It became a

national movement following the creation of the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1872, before turning militant in 1906 through the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union. The latter organisation had moved its headquarters from Manchester to London, so it was easier to apply pressure to the UK's leaders, and protests and demonstrations intensified across the capital city. These demonstrations often targeted male sporting events. The most well-known example of this is Emily Davison's fatal protest at the 1913 Epsom Derby, but the women also vandalised clubhouses, cricket pavilions, boathouses, bowls clubs and football stands. Milliat never turned to radical action herself, instead preferring to try and achieve her aims within the rules of sports administration. She never clearly self-identified as a feminist or suffragette either and, indeed, there were moments when her actions mirrored the misogynistic and orthodox attitudes of the time. But it was clear that Milliat was completely motivated by the fight for women's inclusion in sport, and this could be aided by the wider battle for more general women's rights.

At the height of her influence, Milliat often wrote opinion pieces for the French press. She would sometimes tailor her message depending on the outlet, but her feminist values come through clearly on many an occasion. In 1923, she wrote in *La Française*, a weekly feminist newspaper: 'The day French women manage to replace with social and political rights the chores [society] has always been keen to impress upon them, the situation will look very different.' From 1922 to 1924, she wrote in-depth articles for *L'Auto*, a French sports newspaper that was the predecessor for *L'Équipe*. *L'Auto*'s readers were told by Milliat

that France was a ‘prejudiced country’, and that ‘in the field of sport, as in all other fields, women have to struggle against the primitive spirit of male domination’. In an interview with women’s magazine *Independent Woman* in 1934, Milliat made another overt link between women’s sport and suffrage, saying: ‘Women’s sports of all kinds are handicapped in my country by the lack of playing space. As we have no vote, we cannot make our needs publicly felt, or bring pressure to bear in the right quarters. I always tell my girls that the vote is one of the things they will have to work for if France is to keep its place with other nations in the realm of women’s sport.’

Milliat’s words suggest she took learnings from the women’s suffrage movement during her time in the UK, particularly as she lived in London, the thriving centre of the campaign. But she also collaborated with the suffragette movement within her own country. The National Council of French Women (CNFF), the largest feminist movement in 1920s France, began sponsoring one of the football competitions organised by Milliat. The news was announced in the CNFF’s mouthpiece with the words: ‘Two major currents of feminist action are starting to come together: the movement to obtain civil and political rights for women, and women’s sport. In fact, they are merely different manifestations of the same cause, feminism, that is, the struggle for the social equality of the sexes.’ Every year, a senior figure from the CNFF would attend the final of the football tournament and see if they could convert any of the players to their cause. Milliat and the suffragette movement were therefore inextricably linked, even if Milliat preferred to enact change through the means of bureaucracy.