

# Raymond Poincaré

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## Introduction

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Raymond Poincaré is the only political figure to have exercised as decisive an influence on the first half of the Third Republic as the second. In a political career which ran from 1887 to 1929 he held most of the major offices of state both before and after the First World War. He played crucial roles in France's entry into the war, the organisation of the war effort, the peace settlement, the reparations question, the occupation of the Ruhr and the reorganisation of French finances in the 1920s. Yet as the novelist and essayist Emmanuel Berl wrote in his obituary in October 1934, 'France never experienced for Poincaré either the flights of love it felt for Gambetta, for Jaurès, or the flights of admiration it felt for Clemenceau'.<sup>1</sup> To this day he remains a controversial figure. As 'Poincaré-la-guerre' and 'Poincaré-le-franc' he has provoked opprobrium and praise. His role in the outbreak of the First World War and the sealing of 'union sacrée' has cast him alternately as warmonger and saviour; his management of the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 has been depicted as either a courageous effort to ensure German execution of the Versailles Treaty or as evidence of visceral Germanophobia; his role in bringing order to French finances in the 1920s has led him to be portrayed as an austere deflationist or as one of France's twentieth-century financial wizards. His identification with a certain number of values which posterity has tended to view as unfashionable – order, dignity, politeness, honesty, thrift – and his association with the middle class, which claimed to incarnate those values and which historiography has not found exciting or treated kindly, has left Raymond Poincaré if not one of the unsung heroes of French history, then one whose political stature has not received the recognition it deserves.

This lack of recognition is reflected in the small number of modern studies on Poincaré either in English or French. This is partly to do with the decline of political history in France from the 1930s until the 1970s and the academic profession's desire to eschew the study of politically unfashionable subjects, especially those associated with the Right, in

order to concentrate on worthier issues such as social history, the Left or the labour movement. It is also partly to do with the domination of the *Annales* school of history since the 1930s and of its perception of biography as an unscientific historical form for the emphasis it puts on the action of the individual as opposed to more profound historical forces.<sup>2</sup>

There is no full-length biography of Poincaré in English and only two in French, the first published by Jacques Chastenet in 1948, and the second by Pierre Miquel in 1961.<sup>3</sup> Despite their merits, neither provides the full apparatus of scholarship, nor did their authors have access to Poincaré's private papers which since the 1970s have come into the public domain. Indeed, Miquel began his preface with the unfortunate statement that Poincaré destroyed all his private papers used to write his memoirs and that most other papers would be closed to the public until 1990. More surprising still, following the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the premierships of Raymond Barre, when there had been public interest in the antecedents of their liberal economic policies (and hence in Poincaré), Miquel's biography was reprinted in 1984 with the same erroneous statements about Poincaré's private papers.<sup>4</sup> The value of those papers in reassessing Poincaré's place in French history is of particular importance.

In its obituary of Poincaré in 1934, the Viennese *Reichspost* remarked that to retrace his political career with its consequences, its honours, its triumphs, was to write the history of France over the previous forty years and that of Europe over the previous twenty.<sup>5</sup> Any biography must attempt to silhouette the man against the background of his times. Failure to do so condemns one to become what the eminent French historians Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora referred to unforgivingly as 'those low-level vulgarisers, those anecdote hacks'.<sup>6</sup> Setting Poincaré's life in its times could involve charting his position in relation to all but six years of the Third Republic's existence – a monumental task. By way of economy, this study will look at the whole of Poincaré's life, but through the prism of the myths associated with his name from 'Poincaré-la-guerre' to 'Poincaré-le-franc'. Not surprisingly, such an account cannot help raising the question of how a particular perception of a politician develops. Poincaré, in particular, seems to have been at the receiving end of both a Whiggish interpretation of his destiny to greatness and an a posteriori rewriting of his earlier actions in the light of later ones motivated by political considerations. In attempting to demystify him, like John Buchan's preface to his biography of Oliver Cromwell, 'I hope I may claim that at any rate I have not attempted to constrain a great man in a formula'.<sup>7</sup>