**Sentinel**

**The Unlikely Origins of the Statue of Liberty**

**By Francesca Lidia Viano**

**Harvard University Press, $35**

**Review by Erica Wagner**

She seemed a dismembered monstrosity as she grew, piece by piece, in a Parisian atelier. Here was an enormous right ankle, “a calf thick like a cedar, never seeming to end”; “a few meters further up, there’s the thigh, as thick as an Armstrong Gun”. [432] So wrote the journal *Le bien public* in 1876 as Frédérick Auguste Bartholdi’s vision for his monumental statue, *La Liberté éclairant le monde* began, finally, to be realized. These snippets of contemporary journalism, quoted by Francesca Lidia Viano in her exhaustive account of “the unlikely origins of the Statue of Liberty” take the reader back to a time – almost impossible to imagine now – when the great green lady did not preside over New York harbour. **She has done so since 1886, and l**ike so many extraordinary constructions, from the pyramids of Egypt to the Brooklyn Bridge or the Eiffel Tower, what was once miraculous has come to be taken entirely for granted. Viano’s book is an attempt to pick apart the undoubtedly complex and sometimes strange history of this colossal gift to the United States from the government and people of France.

Viano is a Fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University; her field is the economic and political exchanges in the Atlantic world. The gift of liberty from one republic to another was certainly an economic and political exchange; but, the author argues, it was much more than that too, something deeper and more mysterious. “The Statue of Liberty remains a deeply occult symbol, not merely in terms of the largely ignored esoteric traditions that informed its genesis, but also with regard to the many mysteries that still surround its history,” [2] she writes in a prologue which compares the statue to the Trojan horse; the opening paragraphs of the book are devoted to recalling Virgil’s description of the Greeks’ perfidious offering.

It’s a peculiar comparison. The French gift did not result in the downfall of the United States of America. Her point is to draw attention to the statue’s “hidden payload” [2] but an argument can be made that any diplomatic gift carries such freight. It’s an early indication that *Sentinel* could have done with some energetic editing, and not only because the book does not earn its 500-page length. A sharper focus would have better served the stories she wishes to uncover in digging into the motives of the men who made Liberty stand tall at the southern tip of Manhattan island.

Bartholdi’s name is well-known for his association with the statue; it is said that Liberty’s face is modelled after his strong-willed mother, Charlotte. Viano notes that there is no truly reliable source for this idea [148] but makes the case that at least two other unconventional women, one of them Bartholdi’s wife Jeanne, a divorcee, might have played a role in his vision of the statue’s powerful visage. [443] She traces Bartholdi’s travels in Egypt and rightly draws attention to his earlier plan for a gargantuan statue in that country: *Egypt Enlightening the Orient*. [260] In 1871 he journeyed through the United States; in California he saw giant sequoias, “the old patriarchs of the American forests,” as he wrote to his mother [353], comparable in their way to the relics of the pharaohs. He was always a man to think big.

The precise role of Bartholdi’s collaborator, the politician and intellectual Édouard de Laboulaye, is harder to discern exactly, as his letters remain in private hands. [249] And alas, Viano is too much given using phrases such as “it is plausible to assume”, [138] “one can only speculate” [425] or “must have been”. [175] The book would have been stronger without these imaginative gambits which only invite the reader to doubt the author’s vision. Perhaps it is inevitable, however, that the iconic lady who lifts her lamp beside the golden door retains her mystery, at the last.