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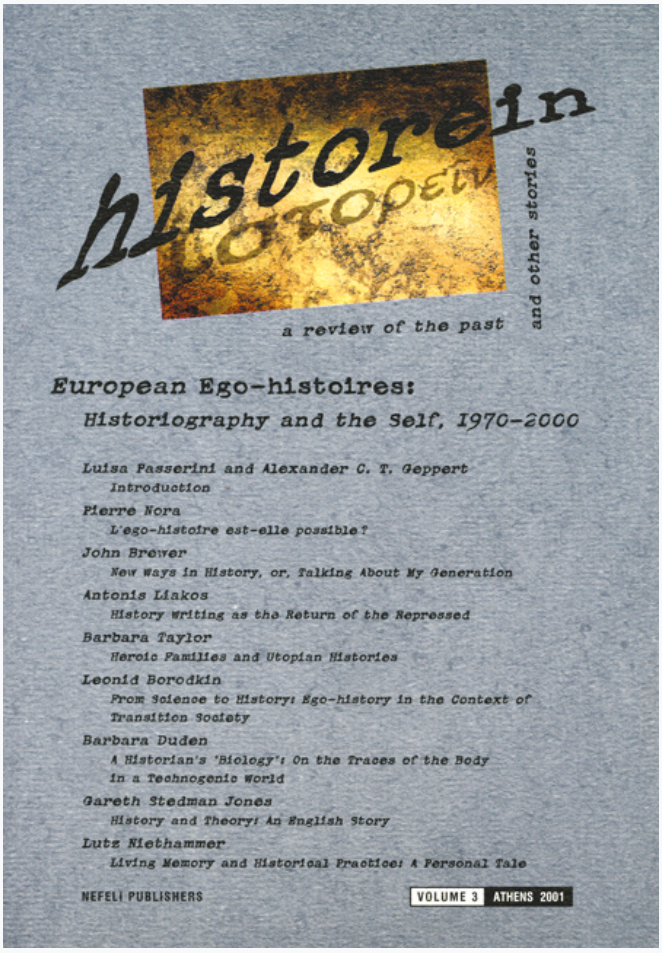
EKT NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Historein

Vol 3 (2001)

European Ego-histoires: Historiography and the Self, 1970-2000



Heroic Families and Utopian Histories

Barbara Taylor

doi: 10.12681/historein.100

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To cite this article:

Taylor, B. (2002). Heroic Families and Utopian Histories. *Historein*, *3*, 59–74. https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.100

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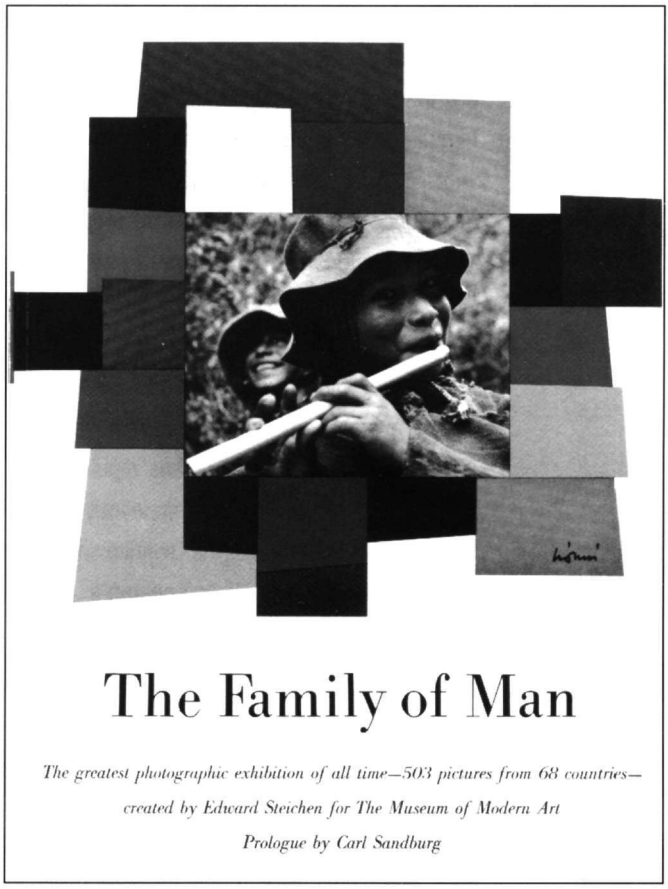
Heroic Families and Utopian Histories

Barbara Taylor

For the quarter century that I have been researching and writing history, my chief interest has been in the history of feminist radicalism. My first book, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, examined the feminist dimension of British Owenite socialism between 1820 and 1845.[1] My second, to be published in 2002, is a study of the intellectual career of Mary Wollstonecraft.[2] What these books have in common, apart from the chronological proximity of their subjects and shared focus on feminist ideas and practices, is an engagement with that mode of radicalism generally described – often derogated – as utopianism. This is obviously true of *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, which takes a fresh look at Robert Owen and his followers, and their struggles to create a socialist New Moral World. But it is also true of my new book on Wollstonecraft in which I argue that, despite her sometime reputation for middle-class reformism, Wollstonecraft was in fact a utopian thinker. Like the Owenite socialists who succeeded her, Wollstonecraft's project was not the partial amelioration of sex or class grievances but wholesale socio-political reformation. "A spirit is abroad," she wrote at the beginning of 1792, at a high-point of European revolutionary optimism, "to break the chains that have hitherto eaten into the human soul, which bids fair to mould the body politic in a more proportional form... than has yet been seen on earth," and it was with anticipations of this order that she urged the demand for female equality onto the Western political agenda.[3]

Why my preoccupation with utopian radicalisms? Mulling the question in preparation for this seminar, I realised I had never asked it

before. Friends to whom I said this expressed some surprise at my lack of self-reflectiveness – as well they might. Yet, in my defence, I should say that I became a historian at a moment when history itself seemed to make the question redundant. When I began working on *Eve*, in the mid-1970s, I was a full-time socialist-feminist activist, and the political air I breathed was so saturated with utopian hopes that it never occurred to me, or to anyone else, to ask why I was investigating their history. Like most left-wing feminists, I didn't belong to any political organisation. But my leanings were toward the libertarian Left – a natural home for many feminists – and my social world was fervently experimentalist. I lived always in communes, spent most of my evenings in political meetings, and had nothing but contempt for conventional middle-class ambitions and lifestyles (what the Owenites would have called the Old Immoral World). Women's liberation was not just a political ambition but my life agenda; and in resurrecting the feminist aims of the Owenites I was giving myself back my own radical ancestry. In 1983, at the time of the book's publication, I was interviewed by my friend and fellow socialist-feminist, Lynne Segal, for a left-wing London magazine. The interview was taken up with demonstrating that the history of Owenism was, in Lynne's words, "truly *our* history – the history of socialist feminism." The introduction to *Eve* ends on this uncompromising note:



Jacket cover of *The Family of Man*, by Edward Steichen. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1955.

> ... forgotten connections may be recalled and restored; visions revitalised. Today the movement of women is once again a crucial component in radical politics, particularly socialist politics... We, and those who ally themselves with us, are the

> Utopians of today; and in the end the case for our cause – for feminist socialism – must become the case for Utopianism itself, for a style of socialist endeavour which aims to transform the whole order of social life and in doing so transforms relations between the sexes. This was the Owenites' endeavour in which, hampered by their own difficulties and those of their times, they failed. We must not.[4]

When I wrote this paragraph, I offered my publishers – the feminist press, Virago – a choice between "we must not" or "we will not" as its final flourish, so provoking an argument among the press's workers over the future of feminism which concluded with their opting for exhortation over prognostication. Either way, the confident words ring rather sadly today. Almost two decades later, the utopianism that bred *Eve* is nearly as dead as the Owenites themselves. Yet looking over my new book, I can see that while there has been a shift of tone – from the militant, here-and-now optimism of *Eve* to something much more elegiac – the preoccupation with the utopian imagination remains, still bearing a stamp of authorial political endorsement. This surprises me slightly. In the rest of this paper I'll attempt to explain why I think this is the case.

Drafting this paper, I soon realised that I was bringing to it the same investigative methods and explanatory criteria employed in my other historical writings. So now I want to present a crucial piece of evidence:

In 1955 a major photographic exhibition, "The Family of Man," was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Some readers will probably recall it from the article entitled "The Great Family of Man" in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. The catalogue for this exhibition was acquired by my parents shortly after publication, and remained on their bookshelves until I surreptitiously stole it and brought it to London sometime in the 1970s.

The catalogue, like the exhibition, is a visual hymn for world unity. The opening essay, by the poet Carl Sandburg, celebrates the diversity of world cultures while simultaneously invoking the essential oneness of mankind. Taking the individual life-cycle as its narrative thread, the book tracks the mid-twentieth century human condition from conception to death, through 503 images from sixty-eight nations. The photographs are interspersed with quotations, mostly ancient proverbs or Old Testament verses, lending the work an air of timeless spiritual profundity which is enhanced rather than diminished by the touching intimacy of many of the photographs. Peering at these images of African-American lovers, Indian babies with their mothers, Nigerian children at play, New Zealand dads working, Russian mothers baking, we seem to witness a humanity so welded together by common experience, so "inexorably alike" in Sandburg's words, that no one can possibly feel a stranger to it. The message is crystal-clear: we are all – whatever our nationality, colour, gender, status, or familial circumstances – children of God, equal members of His great family.

The exhibition went from New York to Paris, which is where Barthes saw it and then penned a scorching indictment of the a-historic myth of human unity purveyed there. "Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back... from penetrating into... [the] zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call injustices."[5] Dissolving material and social diversities into the experiential oneness of the eternal life-wheel obliterates the reality of historic oppressions: "let us ask the North African workers of the Goutte D'Or district in Paris what they think of the Great Family of Man."[6] In particular, Barthes wrote, the celebration of childbirth – a dominant theme of the exhibition – prevents the right historical questions being asked: was this particular baby threatened by famine or disease, was it one of an oppressed minority, what kind of future was open to it? "...[T]his is what your Exhibition should be telling people, instead of an eternal lyricism of birth."[7] The contemptuous rejection of the romantic humanism of an older left-wing ethos implicit in this critique, is very familiar to those of us who came of political age in the 1970s. Yet when I first read Barthes's impassioned call for a warts-and-all history of human conflict and diversity, sometime in my twenties, I was deeply offended. Why?

In the year the "Family of Man" exhibition was shown, I was a five-year-old living in the small city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in the heart of the Canadian wheat belt. I was what is sometimes known as a "red-diaper baby," that is, both my parents had been members of the Communist Party. My father, the son of a left-wing Welsh mining family, had fought in the Spanish Civil War. My mother, eight years younger than my father and a daughter of the Canadian-Jewish professional middle class, had joined the Party under my father's influence, and left it, when he did, in 1948. My father was gentile, and his romance with my mother, which began when she was sixteen, deeply upset her family. They married under a cloud of disapproval. Within a few years however my father had converted to Judaism, trained for the law and joined my maternal grandfather's successful law firm. My mother then also did a legal training. In 1956 I watched her graduate; in 1960 she became Saskatchewan's first woman magistrate, later a judge.

George Taylor (back left, leaning against wall) and fellow soldiers from the Mackenzie - Papineau Brigade, Spain 1938.

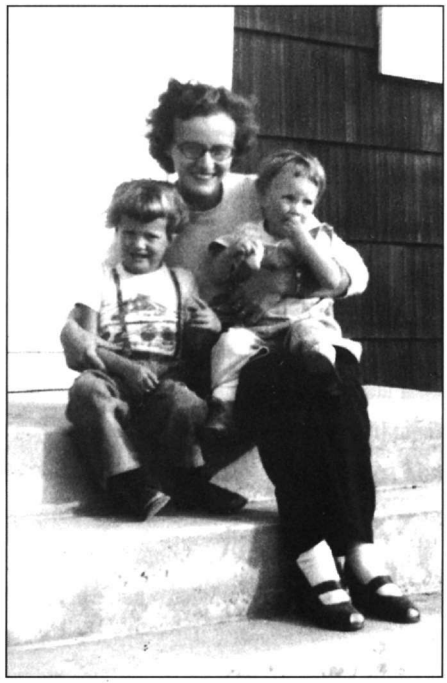
My parents left the Communist Party before I was born – over Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform, as it happened – but remained on the Left. My father became a labour lawyer and an activist in Canada's social-democratic New Democratic Party. He ran for parliament twice, unsuccessfully; tried to become leader of the provincial party, also unsuccessfully; and then settled into the councils of city hall, where he battled with local Babbits and became an immensely popular spokesman for the city's working-class population.

My mother's position on the bench prevented her taking any direct part in politics. But her views too remained very left-wing. As the glow surrounding Soviet communism faded, my mum turned toward China. Copies of *China Reconstructs*, a glossy magazine crammed with beaming peasants and warm-faced party functionaries, littered our house. The increase in her professional prestige was turned to political advantage, as she became a leading prison reformer and passionate supporter of the civil rights movement. In 1972, when she was fifty, she was made chairwoman of the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, the first in Canada, and went on to mount a series of increasingly controversial campaigns for women's rights, especially the right to abortion, as well as indigenous rights. At the end of the 1970s she published a report by a commission enquiry accusing a provincial government department of racist corruption. She was isolated, pilloried, and eventually forced to resign.

I recount these histories with some pride. That old saw, that the passionate radicalisms of youth invariably shrivel into conservatism under the chilling winds of adult experience, never applied to my parents. In my father's case, such apostasy would have been literally taboo, a violation of everything he had been taught to hold sacred. His own father, a union activist in the South Wales coal fields, had been a militant of the fiercest stripe, savage in his loathing of the bosses and bitter in his denunciations of class traitors like the union officials and Communist Party leaders who had sold out British workers during the 1926 general strike. Migration to Canada in 1929 in no way dampened granddad's fires, nor my grandmother's, another communist activist who soon after arriving in Canada immersed herself in the unemployed workers' movement, and remained an intransigent radical until wiped out by senile dementia in the 1960s. A formidable couple, my grandparents regarded themselves as no mere camp followers of Moscow but as freethinking warriors in the proletarian cause, nor did they expect any less from my father, whose own principled departure from the party two decades later was thus in a sense pre-scripted. Dad had no time for Trotskyists ("If I thought you really were a Trotskyist," he told one university friend of mine, a member of the Fourth International, "and not just a naïve kid, I'd never let you through my door"), but his own views remained sufficiently uncompromising to prevent him from achieving any real success in mainstream party politics. Part of his heart remained always in Spain, and his eyes would get moistly bright at any mention of the *brigadistas* – as too would my mother's, for whom the heroism of the Spanish republican cause was inextricably bound up with memories of her heroic brigadier-lover. The romanticism of 1930s communist internationalism kept

both my parents in its thrall, long after the sorry story of Stalin's manipulation of the Third International was widely known. A dream of universal socialism that, by the time I was born, had lost much of its credibility, lived on in my family almost unaltered from its courageous pre-war incarnations. Utopianism indeed.

A key element – perhaps *the* key element – in this credo was its humanism. All people, whatever their origin, colour, or sex, were fundamentally the same, I remember my mother explaining to me, aged about six. Circumstances and education were the only differentiating factors. The idea was as old as socialism itself (in fact older, with roots in the Enlightenment), but as products of sharply divergent backgrounds my parents had a personal investment in it. The marriage of a poor communist goy to a well-to-do but conservatively-raised Jew, resulting in both becoming maverick but nonetheless prestigious members of a Wasp-dominated professional middle class, served as irrefutable evidence of universal human potential (that exceptional personal ability might have played any part in this was generally denied, although my mother sometimes confided to me that she was sure my father was a genius). My parents, particularly my mother, strongly idealised their union, but only as a manifestation of possibilities inherent in all individuals. It was as if they – and, by extension, their children: myself and my sister, Lise – demonstrated what splendid things could be done with common human capabilities, given determination and opportunity: achievements that would benefit not just ourselves but the wider community. Our little family unit, with its socialist principles and unimpeachable record of public activity (at six I was marching against the Bomb; my school years were spent campaigning against bowdlerised textbooks, school dress restrictions, the American presence in Vietnam), exemplified radical civic virtue.



Barbara and Lise Taylor, with Tillie Taylor, 1953

In terms of my own development, what probably mattered most about this family ideology was the fervency of my parents' commitment to it, a self-belief of near-religious intensity. Both my parents (despite my father's adopted Jewishness) were atheists, but imbued with a sense of higher purpose whose similarity to the missionary zeal of local evangelical Christians struck me quite early on (probably because we employed some of these zealots – Mennonite farm-girls, mostly – in our kitchen). As a very young child, I heard thunder roll when my father denounced

capitalists and fascists, and although I learned to curl my lip when friends from more conventional homes talked about God and Jesus, I long regarded my paternal granddad, so deeply revered by both my parents, as a family deity.

I was not trained as a historian – in fact after leaving school I never took another history class. My university education was in political theory, first at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada and then at the London School of Economics. I went to the LSE in 1971 with the happy expectation that I was plunging into a hotbed of student radicalism. No one had told me – possibly no one knew, out in the Canadian sticks – that LSE radicalism, the force behind many student battles, had been badly broken by a vengeful administration. I arrived into an atmosphere of fear and recrimination. Surviving socialists on the faculty, like Ralph Miliband, kept their heads down. Bewildered, I wandered between the followers of the neo-Hegelian conservative Michael Oakeshott and the even more right-wing disciples of the philosopher of science, Imre Lakatos. Eventually I hitched myself to a truly dreadful political theorist, who shall go unnamed, and began a doctoral dissertation on John Dewey and the epistemological foundations of liberal political conscience.

A year buried in Deweyite pragmatism left me discouraged. In the beginning of my second year of research, I went to a conference at the LSE on women's history – the second to be held in Britain. I listened avidly, and stared at the women on the platform, desperately wishing to be among them. I had had years of feminist activism in Canada, but it had never occurred to me that my politics and my academic life could be synchronised. Now I saw the possibility: but how? Knowing so little history myself, I put the question to a friend. Weren't the utopian socialists interested in women's position? he responded, dimly recalling some mention of this in Marx or Engels. I had no idea, but I had just bought Sheila Rowbotham's *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (she was one of the speakers at the LSE conference), and now read it.[8] A chapter titled "Utopian Proposals" gave me enough to be getting on with. I told my supervisor, who didn't give a damn, that I was changing my dissertation topic. Another year on and I had abandoned him for a historian of Owenite socialism, Eileen Yeo at Sussex University, and my thesis finally got under way.

I acquired my historical training from Eileen, who is a superb interpreter of social movements; from my friends, especially Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones; and from my reading. The first book I read after Sheila's pioneering work was E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, and if I hadn't wanted to be a historian before I read it, afterwards there was no question. Anyone who has read *Eve and the New Jerusalem* can see Thompson's influence written all over it. I met him only once, and wasn't sure I liked him much (perhaps because he paid no particular attention to me). But I liked much in his politics, particularly his endorsement, in the postscript to his biography of William Morris, of socialist utopianism. The introduction

to *Eve* criticises post-Owenite socialism, particular Marxism, for lacking a vision of political change sufficiently capacious to encompass issues such as women's status, sexuality, and the dynamics of personal life, and then quotes in support of this Thompson's defence of what he describes as a politics of utopian desire. To educate and liberate personal desire, Thompson writes, was William Morris's aim – one that Marxists from Morris's day on have sought to repress:

> So that what may be involved in the 'case of Morris' is the whole problem of the subordination of the imaginative utopian faculties within the later Marxist tradition: its lack of a moral self-consciousness or even a vocabulary of desire, its inability to project any images of the future, or even its tendency to fall back in lieu of these upon the utilitarian's earthly paradise – the maximisation of economic growth.[9]

Against this, Thompson insists on the need to "set [Utopianism] free to walk the world once more," a message implicitly reiterated in his final book on William Blake. The call was just what I needed to vindicate my own approach. Thompson, I think, was not much of a feminist. He admired Mary Wollstonecraft, but living feminists seem to have charmed him less. I have no idea whether he read my book (his wife Dorothy Thompson did, and reviewed it with critical approval). But I like to think that he did, and that he recognised a disciple, even if one not wholly to his taste.

Yet *Eve* is not an uncritical celebration of utopian socialism. At the same time as I was urging modern socialists to give due recognition to this creative phase of their history – particularly to its feminism – I was also probing the contradictions in Owenite thinking, and exposing some of the weaknesses of their programme. Owenite feminism deserved attention and even applause; yet it was also, I found, a small flare-up of aspiration that sputtered out in the mid-1840s, leaving few traces. Nonetheless, I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Owenite women, whom I found courageous and moving. In fact it was for them, rather than for present-day feminists – I told Lynne Segal – that I had actually written the book:

> LS: 'What does the book mean to you personally?'
>
> BT: 'I had a lot of political and historical questions that I wanted to address, questions I knew I shared with other feminists. But what really kept me going was my deepening respect for the courage, iconoclasm, and personal strength of the women who fought for the Owenite ideals. Forgotten women. I came to feel I owed a debt to them, to tell their story.'

Now, that may sound glibly sentimental; I'm sure some of the readers of the interview found it so. But in fact it was 100% true. I had had many reasons to write *Eve* – political, intellectual, professional – but the real *pressure* behind the book came from the passion I had conceived for the women described in it, in particular for a truculent propagandist named Emma Martin. Emma was a real warrior. Born in 1812 into a Bristol Baptist family, in her twenties she married a nasty

fellow Baptist who mistreated her. During the early 1830s she was an evangelical tract-distributor and church militant, but toward the end of the decade she began lecturing on women's wrongs. In 1839 she abruptly converted to socialism, left her husband and church for the Owenites, and launched herself on an extraordinary career as an atheist tub-thumper and socialist-feminist tractarian. Her public lectures in the 1840s attracted audiences of thousands. She formed a free union with a man who took *her* name, and eventually became a midwife and probably a distributor of birth-control information and devices. She died, aged thirty-nine, of tuberculosis contracted while nursing a fellow radical. I wrote *Eve* on a little typewriter given to me when I was ten years old, and since I'm a big re-drafter (always using up at least a ream of paper to write a single article or chapter), I had to retype the story of Emma's death dozens of times, weeping bitterly on every occasion. I *knew* Emma Martin, she was my Welsh communist grandmother or maybe even my mother. At any rate, she was my ancestor, and I claimed and mourned her, and wrote my book for her.

I began writing my book on Wollstonecraft almost as soon as I finished *Eve*, and gradually came to love Wollstonecraft too – but differently. Like Emma Martin, Wollstonecraft's utopian radicalism was rooted in her religious faith. Bringing heaven down to earth was how Emma saw her socialism; and this was pretty much Wollstonecraft's political vision too. Unlike Emma, however, Wollstonecraft never abandoned a theistic world-view, instead translating it into a vision of socio-ethical perfection based on universal rights and unexceptioned equality. Her feminism was integral to this vision, since "this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one-half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride."[10] However, "[l]et women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated..."[11]

It took me from 1982 until 2001 to complete my book on Wollstonecraft (with an eight-year interruption). Over that time not only the political scene changed a great deal, but also ways of writing history, particularly women's history. Some of these changes are reflected in my work. In the 1970s I belonged to the Lacan study group – an informal feminist group whose key figures are now all either psychotherapists or leading feminist theorists, or both. This was only one of a host of study groups that I attended, but it left the strongest legacy. By the early 1980s I had become a Freudian (not a Lacanian – by then I had developed a strong aversion to Lacanian *parole*), and was attempting to apply psychoanalytic concepts to my work on Wollstonecraft. I worked hard at this for many years, with some results, although not with the large interpretive pay-off I had hoped for. Wollstonecraft, I slowly discovered, was not the woman I had thought her to be. Like most present-day readers, I had vaguely registered her piety without giving much thought to it. My first copy of the *Rights of Woman* soon acquired scribbled marginalia saying things like "on God," "more on God," "God again" and – very fed up by now – "Oh god, more God!" I tried to ignore these for a long time. When I began to pay attention to them, my book

sprang to life. I began to see how, far from detracting from her politics, it was religion that drove Wollstonecraft's radicalism, particularly her feminism. "In treating... of the manners of women," the *Rights of Woman* instructs, "let us... trace what we should endeavour to make them in order to co-operate... with the Supreme Being":

> ... for... if they be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God.[12]

Depending on God and obeying only Him was woman's proper destiny, Wollstonecraft insisted, and for this, liberation from male power was an absolute prerequisite. The theology from which this argument derived was an idiosyncratic combination of Rousseauist natural religion, radical Presbyterianism, and a romanticised Platonism drawn largely from Milton and, again, Rousseau. The implications of this belief-system for Wollstonecraft's feminism are too complex to go into here, but one of the key areas in which its influence was apparent was in her attitude toward female sexuality, which was dominated by a Christian-Platonist ideal of transcendent love. Erotic love between women and men, Wollstonecraft argued, is simultaneously vicious and virtuous: vicious if enjoyed for itself, virtuous when it serves as subjective preparation for a much higher love. "Earthly love," she writes, quoting Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "is the scale by which to heavenly we may ascend," and must be valued only for that sacred consummation.[13]

Probing this ideal, and its political consequences, I explored it as a feminist revision of eighteenth century moral radicalism; but also as a redemptive fantasy with unconscious roots in Wollstonecraft's personal history. The unhappy child of an abusive father and unloving mother, Wollstonecraft had more reason than most to seek divine affection, and less reason to trust its earthly equivalents. The identification with godly virtues on which, she claimed, her self-respect was founded, was a compelling alternative to identification with parental figures. Adoring God, and modelling oneself on Him, induced a sense of personal integrity that a woman, particularly an unloved, abused woman, might otherwise find hard to attain. But the unconscious fantasies propelling this ethical strategy – and the self-denials it entailed – could also make it very punitive. Being very good is never an effective solution to personal unhappiness. However, demanding certain entitlements as preconditions for the cultivation of personal virtue – political freedom, economic independence, moral self-governance – can sometimes lead to better things. Viewing oppression as the leading source of female vice, Wollstonecraft devoted herself to liberating women not for a life of unregulated license, but for one of godly virtue and righteous self-regard.

Whether a woman thus freed into a higher subjectivity would in fact remain a woman was, for Wollstonecraft, a moot point. It is the "desire of being always women" which is the "very consciousness which degrades the sex" she writes, while again: "Men are not always men in the company of women; nor would women always remember that they are women, if they were allowed to acquire more understanding." It is experiencing ourselves "rather as women than human creatures" that has "bubbled" female understanding, she claims.[14] These statements are generally read as implying no more than the desire to undermine prescribed feminine roles. But given Wollstonecraft's notion that it is only by modelling oneself on a masculine God that a woman may achieve true self-respect – and given also the extremely contemptuous tone in which she wrote about her fellow women, so disdainful that she has even been accused of misogyny – it seemed to me that more was going on in these statements than a simple repudiation of gender stereotypes. Mulling this, it was psychoanalysis, with its complex, conflict-ridden tale of how psychically sexless small girls are made into psychological women, that gave me clues. I considered that what Wollstonecraft was targeting was not merely conventional femininity but femaleness itself – a gender position she never comfortably inhabited – and it was this hypothesis that eventually framed parts of my book. "Only the concept of a subjectivity at odds with itself," Jacqueline Rose has written, "gives back to women the right to an impasse at the point of sexual identity,"[15] an impasse which in fact can be heard not only in Wollstonecraft's writings but throughout the feminist tradition.

The deployment of psychoanalytic concepts in historical writing has been fraught with difficulty, not least because of the rigidly formulaic way they are often applied. Divergent schools of psychoanalytic thought mechanically impose their favoured viewpoints on the past, ignoring historically specific texturing and ambiguities. Moreover, whether a body of theory devised for clinical purposes can yield insights into the minds of the dead at all, or only ever achieve interpretations which are either incredible or blindingly obvious, remains unproven.

I have not ignored these difficulties. In fact, in the end, they meant I made only very limited use of psychoanalysis in my book. Yet what is the alternative? Historians, even those inclined to deny the existence of unconscious mental life, regularly invoke unconscious motivations as causal factors. The fantasmatic element in all historical endeavour is implicitly acknowledged. If current psychoanalytic theorising does not help us – or at least not help us enough – to understand such psychological forces, is it perhaps time for historians themselves to begin to revamp the theory by bringing to it insights drawn from past behaviours and self-understandings? "What a long time it requires to know ourselves," Wollstonecraft wrote during a period of intense introspection, "and yet almost every one has more of this knowledge than he is willing to own, even to himself"[16] – an observation which should serve to remind us that hidden or disowned parts of the self are hardly a modern invention.

In the preface to her first novel Wollstonecraft declared that a good fiction was one that, rather than imitating earlier works, would display its author's true soul.[17] Trying to peer into Wollstonecraft's soul, my ostensible motive was to understand her ideas better, but the aim carried a deeper charge. Locked into the intimate connection inevitable between an intellectual biographer and her subject, I craved to recognise the real woman in order that I might love *her*, not an idealised feminist myth. The impossibility of achieving this did not deter me. "I wish you to see my heart and mind just as it appears to myself," Wollstonecraft wrote to her husband, William Godwin, in 1796[18] – an instruction I took very personally. I too wished to see her true, and to convey to my readers what I saw: not a radical icon but an ordinarily talented, troubled woman who, in exceptional times, had done and said some extraordinary things.

This urge to demystify extended across most areas of Wollstonecraft's life and thought. Where it broke down (it seems to me now), however, was in my treatment of her utopianism. Wollstonecraft's faith in the "glorious prospects" opened up for Western society by the French Revolution remained unwavering from 1789 until her death, although the strategies she advocated for advancing these prospects altered under the pressure of political events. Probably the most uncompromisingly egalitarian of the 1790s radicals, her vision was of a world where all hierarchies and antagonisms would eventually give way to harmonious mutuality. Released from the chains of despotism, the human spirit would step from the darkness of ignorance and selfishness into the light of reason and universal fellowship prescribed by God. Living in France during the Terror, which she fiercely denounced, she nonetheless felt able to look beyond this "chaos of vice and follies" to the new age dawning:

> These evils are passing away; a new spirit has gone forth, to organise the body-politic... The image of God implanted in our nature is now more rapidly expanding; and, as it opens, liberty with maternal wing seems to be soaring to regions far above vulgar annoyance, promising to shelter all mankind.[19]

This dream of a well-mothered future, so central to Wollstonecraft's credo, was the one aspect of her thought I never interrogated. A concluding return to the *Family of Man* catalogue may show why.

I was a very little girl when this catalogue appeared in our house and, used to family photo albums of a different kind, for a time I truly believed that this was a family album. Here was my mother, with my sister and I; here my sister; here me, with the family cat (we didn't have a family cat). And even as I grew older, and understood the catalogue's provenance, the richly archetypal images and texts gripped me as somehow still representative of my family, of its claims to encompass all that was just and right. The innate goodness of humanity – a key article of faith for communists as it was for the catalogue's compilers – was just a larger version of my parents' moral superiority. But more than this: the book also became a sign for me, one of the most

important of my childhood, of what every true socialist must desire for the world, that it should be a place where alien otherness would not exist, where people of all kinds would recognise themselves in each other without any disturbing sense of unbridgeable cultural difference or personal alterity. It was as if the dream of a socialist society and the idealised images of my family became locked together in these poignant representations of a post-war world.

The irritated distress I experienced when I first read Barthes's criticism of the exhibition arose then, I believe, because his words seemed to mock not only the humanism of my parents' radical generation but also my own personal mythology. If the "family of man" was a reactionary fantasy, what about my heroic family? What kind of disillusionment was Barthes trying to force on me?

If one reads *The Family of Man* as a statement about mid-twentieth century social realities, then it is indeed open to the charges Barthes lays against it. However, I want to suggest an alternative interpretation, that this "camera testament"[20] is in fact a utopian work, purveying a dream of human communality whose unreality makes it no less potent. How distant this dream is from lived actuality is hinted at in the catalogue itself when, near the end, it reproduces images of the Warsaw ghetto and black South Africans, and reprints a chilling warning from Bertrand Russell about the likelihood of nuclear Armageddon. But as a fantasy of a humanity bound by identificatory ties – what Wollstonecraft described as the bonds of sympathy or "universal benevolence" – the exhibition conveys exactly the same sort of hopes that propelled earlier utopian visions, including Wollstonecraft's and those of the Owenite socialists. "The old state... corrupts our natural sympathies," an Owenite explained to an 1835 audience, "[but] the rational state will cherish and heathfully develop them... by extend[ing] the hand of brotherhood to the whole human family... [and so permit] the free expansion of all the diviner functions of our race."[21] Among the Owenites, this use of the familial metaphor was common. "At what number shall we stop in a family," another of the movement's propagandist wrote in 1838,

> Shall it be three, thirty, three hundred, or three thousand?... In the new circumstances contemplated by Social Reformers, the instinct of family would, for the first time in human history, become productive of individual felicity and public benefit.[22]

Wollstonecraft did not employ the language of family in quite this way, but for her too it was enlarged personal affection that was a leading catalyst of social regeneration. The present may be dark with egoism and strife, but love of others is a candle directing us to the light. "[I]n my eye all feelings are false and spurious," she wrote, "that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not concentred by universal love."[23]

It was these affective bonds that constituted the chief grounds of utopian optimism in the revolutionary 1790s and again in the quarter century of Owenite activism. The future would grow perfect because its emotional seeds had already been sown. The natural kinship of humankind

would inevitably overcome existing divisions – including the division between men and women. Nearly all late eighteenth and early nineteenth century feminists attributed the oppression of women to what twentieth-century Marxist feminists would dub "false consciousness." The natures and interests of women and men were fundamentally identical, and it was only false ideas and mystificatory circumstances that fomented sex-based rivalries and injustices. Scrutinising the contemporary state of her sex, Wollstonecraft tended to be much darker in her judgements than her Owenite successors: more interested in the deep investments held by both sexes in the perpetuation of gender hierarchies. But at bottom she too believed in the power of human communality to overcome all "artificial distinctions," including the sexual distinction. Released from the crippling weight of historically defunct inequalities and prejudices, men and women would rediscover their natural harmony. Equal children of God, they would turn to each other in that spirit of affectionate fellowship which to Wollstonecraft was the human expression of divine love, and re-make the world in their emancipated image.

Reflecting critically on this vision is difficult for me, regardless of its implausibility. But if I achieve some analytic distance from it, I begin to see how it reaffirms the ethical principles of my childhood while at the same time extending them in late twentieth century directions. The feminism that strode onto the Western political stage in the late 1960s was no part of my parents' creed. Women were certainly as smart as men, and should have careers if they wanted them; but campaigning for Women's Liberation was a different matter entirely. For my father, recalling dusty maxims from his communist past, organised feminism was nothing more than "bourgeois individualism." For my mother, matters were more confusing, and having initially supported my dad in his arguments with me, she later, as chairwoman of the provincial human rights commission, became a militant feminist campaigner. Both parents were proud of my historical writings on feminism, although what they made of *Eve and the New Jerusalem*'s assault on the implicit masculinism of Marxian communism was never conveyed to me.

Recently I returned to Saskatoon to sort through my parents' papers before depositing them in the Saskatchewan provincial archives. Surrounded by a sea of documents, the historian in me floundered, and I almost threw most of them away. Court reports; legal case files; human rights commission records; boxes of letters from my sister and me; endless bundles of smiling photos, mostly of the dead or almost-forgotten. The task felt overwhelming, and infinitely sad. Then my sister found a little bundle of my dad's papers from Spain – passport, identity documents, letters from a Barcelona girlfriend exiled in France in 1939. A wooden tray was uncovered, made in one of the internment camps where my grandfather, like many other Canadian communists, was imprisoned in the early years of the Second World War, inscribed with the names of all the men in the camp and a message to my parents: "Anti-Fascist Greetings... with fondest love from Dad." Typescripts of radio broadcasts made by my father on return from Spain, calling for "total

war"; poems by my teenaged mother deploring anti-Semitism and other manifestations of man's cruelty to man; an autographed programme from a 1948 Paul Robeson concert; campaigning materials from election campaigns; and a letter to my mother – aged eighteen – from her father: "You have persuaded yourself to believe that the world is all wrong, and that the way to cure it is by communism. You also believe that you are prepared to dedicate your life to the movement... All I can say in answer is that while I am terribly sorry that you should have developed such distorted views, I admire you for your willingness to sacrifice yourself for a cause in which you believe..."

What do we do when we save the past – when we box it up, photograph and catalogue it, preserve it from time's erasure? What do we do when we use such materials to revisit the past – to recreate extinct experiences, hopes, and conflicts? Like all creative engagements, historical writing is an impassioned act, implicating parts of the personality that themselves possess a hidden ancestry. As well as conscious motives – curiosity, puzzle-solving, professional advancement – our pens are driven by inherited purposes that are usually discernible only in their traces: in those currents of feeling that, running below the surfaces of our scholarly books, our carefully footnoted articles, pull them in this or that intellectual direction.

Becoming an adult in the twilight years of one kind of utopianism – late nineteenth-early twentieth century communism – I made my way, circuitously, toward another: and now, with the Wollstonecraft book behind me, propose to leave utopian visions behind. My parents are still alive, but age and illness have made both unavailable for any discussion of this change of direction, or indeed of the contents of this article. Closures are inevitable; but historians, who search incessantly for befores and afters, are not always the best-equipped to tolerate them. Like the loss of all myths, the end of my utopian family is a depletion of my personal history – a sorrow as well as a necessary liberation.

My thanks to Alex Geppert and Luisa Passerini for their invitation to address the *ego-histoire* seminar, and for extracting a publishable version of the seminar paper from me. My thanks also to Sally Alexander, Norma Clarke, Lee Henderson, Sarah Knott, Adam Phillips and Jacqueline Rose for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[1] *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the 19th Century*. London: Virago, 1983.

[2] *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[3] Mary Wollstonecraft, "Review of Anon., *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt, on the Subject of a Tax for Raising Six Millions Sterling...*", *Analytical Review*, May 1792.

[4] *Eve and New Jerusalem*, p. xviii.

[5] Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," *Mythologies*. St Albans: Granada, 1973, p. 101.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[8] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*. London: Allen Lane, 1972.

[9] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Merlin Press, 1977, p. 792.

[10] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Works*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989, vol. 5, p. 211.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 266.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[13] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction, Works*, vol. 1, p. 46.

[14] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 73.

[15] Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso Books, 1986, p. 15.

[16] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), *Works*, vol. 6, p. 289.

[17] Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 5.

[18] Mary Wollstonecraft to William Godwin, 4 September 1796, in Ralph Wardle (ed.), *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 345.

[19] Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 22.

[20] Carl Sandburg, *Prologue*, *The Family of Man*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955, p. 3.

[21] Quoted in Taylor, *Eve*, p. 49.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[23] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 34.