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Review of "Jean Paton and the Struggle to Reform American Adoption"

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Rev. of *Jean Paton and the Struggle to Reform American Adoption* E. WAYNE CARP. U of Michigan P, 2014 312 pp. \$65.00 (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-0472119103

By Malinda Seymore

Wayne Carp is rightly celebrated as the official historian of American adoption reform. He continues his important work, begun with *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* in 1998 and continued with *Adoption Politics: Bastard Nation and Ballot Initiative 58* in 2004, with a look at the life and times of Jean Paton, a reformer of the 1950s. Carp credits her with a litany of "firsts": the first to recognize and study adult adoptees; the first to critique the "chosen child" concept; the first to create an organization devoted to adult adoptees; the first to create a mutual adoption registry to connect adoptees and birth parents; the first among adoption reform advocates to defend birthmothers against societal stigma. In his account it is easy to see why Paton was referred to by some as "the mother of the adoption reform movement" (2). And although Jean Paton takes top billing in the book's title, it is less a biography of her than it is a biography of a social movement.

Carp relies on an extraordinary treasure trove of materials directly from Jean Paton, who "had made an onion-skin carbon copy of every letter she ever wrote over a period of fifty years" (xii) and saved every scrap she ever wrote or was written about her—"drafts of memos, essays and articles she never published, reviews of her books and media notices of her travels, account books, typewritten notes of books she read, a detailed diary she kept between 1950 and 1953, memos of every phone call she received related to adoption reform, and even sixty-year-old college papers," (xii) resulting in fifty boxes of materials carefully filed away. From these

materials, as well as personal interviews with Paton, Carp crafts a careful narrative of Paton's life as an adoptee and reformer. He frankly addresses her personal struggles with adoptee identity, disagreements with the social work profession (which she joined then disavowed), internecine struggles with others in the movement, and shifting attitudes toward adoption itself.

Paton's notable early achievements include the creation in 1953 of the Life History Study Center, "the first organization devoted to adult adoptees," (35) and the 1954 publication of a book focusing on adult adoptees. The organization's name reflected Paton's view that adoption "is a process which influences an individual life for many years beyond its initiation" (35). While the concept is familiar today in discussions of whether a person "is" adopted or "was" adopted, Carp notes how novel Paton's idea was in the 1950s. The purpose of the Center was to study the "special problems" of adult adoptees, taking the concept of adoption beyond infancy and childhood. Her first step with the Center was to survey adult adoptees so as to learn from them about their experiences with and attitudes toward adoption. The survey project became Paton's path-breaking book, *The Adopted Break Silence*, self-published in 1954 after Paton could find no publisher willing to take on the project. The book featured adult adoptees "speaking in their own voices" (44) and analyzed from Paton's perspective as an adoptee. The book's first sentence sets the tone: "Everyone except the adopted has been talking about adoption" (45).

In addition to focusing on the concerns of adult adoptees, Paton concerned herself with the stigma against unwed mothers and the problem of illegitimacy. By 1961 the Life History Study Center had shifted programming to "fighting the stigma of illegitimacy and helping unmarried mothers" (87). The book reveals a fascinating correspondence between Paton and Madalyn Murray O'Hair, founder of the American Atheists group and once dubbed "The Most Hated Woman in America" (89). O'Hair was an unmarried mother, a fact not explored in previous biographies of her. Carp says that "the correspondence between Murray and Paton reveals for the first time Murray's feelings of persecution as an unmarried mother long before she became persecuted for her atheistic views" (89). And, notes Carp, "Paton was unique among adoption reform activists in the 1950s and 1960s to defend natal mothers against the stigmatization of society" (179). Her support was informed at least in part by her own reunion with her birthmother.

In the 1960s, Paton again turned her attention to adoptees, whom she termed "social orphans," by beginning a support program called Orphan Voyage: "The reason I use the term Orphan Voyage is that adopted people lose their parents, although not by death, but by a social decision that they had no part of. We are a different kind of orphan" (114). Carp gives a fuller description of the program than is available elsewhere and notes that it was both less than and more than "'an adoptee search and support group,' as it is often (anachronistically) described" (121). Carp also explains that Paton's view of searching for birth parents and the

need of adoptees to heal the trauma of separation was grounded in her Christian philosophy of forgiveness; in order for adoptees to heal, they must give up the resentment toward their birth parents for abandoning them and forgive them (122).

Paton's compassion for birth parents, connected to her concerns about the social stigma of illegitimacy, made her open to participation of birth parents in adoption reform. As the movement to open adoption records took off in the 1970s, Paton opposed those who argued that only adopted persons should have access and felt that "everyone named on the records should have access to them, not only at their maturity, but at all times" (qtd. in Carp 180). Paton was a strong supporter of the nascent birth parent group, Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), which was created in 1976.

But Paton actually came late to the issue of sealed adoption records. She was adopted and studied adoptees who were adopted at a time before adoption records were closed. She had not faced closed records, so her reform issues were rooted in stigma and secrecy: "shame, fantasy, resentment, passivity" (200). Reunion was the cure, not open records. She feuded with a rival organization, Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA), at least in part because of her "growing animosity" toward Florence Fischer, its founder, who she saw as a rival for the leadership of the adoption reform movement (204). She disagreed with the approach of Bastard Nation, the advocacy group that argued for open records as a civil rights issue; Paton was aghast that the argument wasn't grounded in "connections with other people, including our birthmothers and fathers" (qtd. in Carp 299). What was the point of opening records if it wasn't to connect with family and heal the trauma of separation?

Her attitude toward open records changed over time, and by the 1980s she was a strong advocate of open records. Paton saw early promise in private reunion files, allowing birth parents and adoptees to submit and be matched, proposing one as early as 1949. Although she was initially in favor of a national register and worked with Congress to create one, by 1988 she had rejected the idea of such registries as "a secret burial place for hopes" (qtd. in Carp 227). She saw the adoption registries as little more than an excuse not to open adoption records.

She was not opposed to the idea of nationalizing adoption reform, however, wanting a national organization to unify Orphan Voyage, CUB, ALMA and all the other fragmented organizations working to reform adoption. The efforts culminated in the creation of the American Adoption Congress in 1981, but it was not a smooth process. Carp describes Paton's fractious role, noting her "sharp differences about the name, structure, and purpose of the new organization" (235) and infighting about whether and how to recognize Paton's role. By 1984, she declared, "I despise the ACC" (246). Nonetheless, she continued her involvement in the organization into the 1990s. Carp reports that Paton's attitudes toward adoption changed in the 1990s, with Paton "becoming more radical with her advancing age" (275). Paton advocated for an end to adoption altogether in favor of guardianship,

where a child retained his ancestry and knowledge of his family and his original name, “for indeed it is his” (qtd. in Carp 274).

Paton died at age 93 in 2002. In this book, Carp has centered her in the narrative of the adoption reform movement. Yet the book reveals little about Paton’s personal life—perhaps she had little personal life left beyond her adoption activism. The enormous detail reveals her personality to be sensitive, fractious, determined, difficult, visionary. Carp persuasively argues that Jean Paton deserves the sobriquet “mother of the movement.”