



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Book Review:
Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America
by Wendy McElroy

Some readers of Stephen Cox's recently published biography, *Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America: The Woman and the Dynamo*, may succumb to the same temptation I did. I immediately scanned the index for references to Ayn Rand and then I turned directly to those pages. This reflected my main purpose in reading Paterson's biography: to see what light it shed on that other and (to me) more important figure with whom Paterson had associated. After a few minutes, I shut the book and began reading from the acknowledgements page onward.

The reason: if the entire book was as well written as the pages I'd just read and Paterson as consistently captivating, then both the book and the woman deserved undivided attention. And I deserved the pleasure of meeting the amazing person of whom Cox states, "No one in the 1930s defended individualism more vigorously and consistently than Paterson."

What a woman!

Self-educated and self-made. Raised in the Wild West at the turn of the 19th century, she was so enchanted by the age of machinery that she took to the sky and set an American aeronautic record for altitude with a female passenger on board. Paterson was that passenger. The relatively passive role belies her life; the courage typifies it.

Cox's masterful portrayal of Paterson builds from the statement with which he concludes the introductory chapter 1, "Who she was and what she did has something important to say about the risks and possibilities of life in America." This understatement is corrected by the book's subtitle (and subsequent text), which accurately identifies Paterson as an embodiment of the very idea, the very spirit of America, the ideal America of freedom, individualism, and realized human potential.

For me, this was a discovery. Like most libertarians, I knew of Paterson primarily through her classic book, *The God of the Machine* (1943), in which she explores the societal principles that make productivity possible. Paterson eloquently argues that productivity, as well as freedom,

sprang from the Western world's embrace of a "society of contract" as opposed to the "society of status" which had defined feudalism.

The visceral power of Paterson's presentation in *The God of the Machine* — and elsewhere — resides largely in her vivid imagery and exquisite turn of phrase. For example, the book's most frequently quoted chapter is entitled "[The Humanitarian with the Guillotine.](#)" Paterson unpacks the logic leading to this remarkable image:

Most of the harm in the world is done by good people.... It is the result of their deliberate actions, long persevered in, which they hold to be motivated by high ideals toward virtuous ends.... Something is terribly wrong in the procedure, somewhere. What is it?

She answers: "The means is the power of the collective; and the premise is that 'good' is collective." Thus, "The humanitarian in theory is the terrorist in action."

The God of the Machine assures Paterson a slot in libertarian anthologies and history. But those who settle for that one book instead of the incredible Paterson package are cheating themselves.

The Woman and the Dynamo presents that package by developing both Paterson and the progress of the American ideal in tandem, so that America's intellectual history becomes an integral part of understanding the woman herself.

More than this, the book develops literary history in order to frame a context for Paterson, who was not only a novelist but one of the most skilled and feared literary critics America has known. "Turns with a Bookworm" — her influential column of literary review, theory, and gossip mixed with a generous dose of political commentary — was a staple of the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1924 to 1949. Publishing executives and authors trembled at her bon mots and reviews, which could literally make or break a book.

Paterson didn't play favorites with either praise or criticism but dished out her opinions with Dorothy Parkeresque "charm." For example, while her contemporaries heaped superlatives on Winston Churchill's famed "Blood, Sweat, and Tears" speech, Paterson dryly observed that the text was derived from Garibaldi and then commented, "All heads of great states are considered great writers while they are in office. It goes with the job. And we mean it goes with the job."

Paterson's critique of Churchill expressed a defining characteristic of the ideal American: a willingness to stand firm against the multitude when you know you're right. In short, the radical individualism that Paterson possessed in abundance.

She needed it. A passionate advocate of capitalism during the golden age of American socialism, an anti-war critic during World War I and World War II, Paterson expressed intellectual honesty and courage with the same ease most people butter toast every morning.

Or so it seems when she is viewed through the unblinking eyes of Cox, who is ideally suited to be her biographer. Paterson needed a researcher with an intimate knowledge not merely of radical individualism but also of literary theory and history. As a veteran libertarian and a professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego, Cox possesses knowledge of both. He is able to bring a context to Paterson's all-but-forgotten novels, as well as to her politics. Indeed, her novels and politics are intimately linked, the former abounding with unconventional heroines and views of marriage, with cynicism about politics, and with colorful capitalists who are admirable. His portrait of Paterson as a novelist, literary critic, and theorist is a real gift.

Through years of research and interviews, Cox did something else Paterson needed but which she may not have desired. He made the woman emerge, complete with the flaws that make flesh fascinating. For example, she was both a generous and cruel friend with a virtually nonexistent husband whose name she chose to bear. When asked about personal matters, she would cut off the questioner in a manner that ensured no further query would arise. How would she react to Cox's persistent efforts to reveal her?

And, yet, the alternative of having Paterson remain in shadow is unacceptable.

As I read *The Woman and the Dynamo*, I pondered a question that has haunted me for years. Why has Paterson been so neglected? Or, more broadly, why did and does the libertarian movement — or radical individualism in general — not celebrate and embrace its fiction writers in the same manner as the Left? Upton Sinclair, Lillian Hellman, Max Eastman, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis — these left-wing fiction writers were Paterson's contemporaries. Like her, they had a dramatic impact on the culture and politics of their day. Unlike Paterson, they have claimed important niches in history, largely because of the attention of left-wing biographers and historians.

Cox has an answer for Paterson's comparative obscurity. He believes that the "Old Right" — as libertarians of Paterson's time (circa the 1930s) are commonly called — has been defined by a handful of historians, especially by Murray Rothbard. These historians offer "an Old Right hypothesis" by which that movement is identified more by what it didn't like than by shared principles. For example, the Old Right rejected the New Deal. This categorization loses the unique contribution of distinctly libertarian voices.

It is over several such points of interpretation that I disagree with Cox. I do so happily because the disagreement is an interesting one and, in the final analysis, he may be proven correct. Until then, I continue to ascribe Paterson's obscurity far more to libertarianism's tendency to ignore its literary figures than to Rothbard's influence. It is a strange tendency, as so many people were inspired toward radical individualism by the novels of Ayn Rand. Yet nowhere are fiction writers — even successful ones such as Robert Heinlein — granted the same respect as university professors, economists, and those who are elected to office.

The mark of the success of Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America as a book of intellectual history is that it leaves the reader with such questions. I found myself repeatedly lowering the book to consider throwaway statements such as “Radical individualism is an influence without an institution.”

Buy this book. Not just because Paterson has waited decades for her place in history but because you deserve the pleasure of meeting her.

*Wendy McElroy is the author of **The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival** (Prometheus Books, 1998).*

This article was originally published in March 2005.