

Modern Love: an Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain

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Adrian Bingham

The historical study of love, sexuality and the 'private sphere' in modern Britain is now well established. A substantial amount of research has been undertaken on sexual identities, erotic behaviour and representations of romance, and has been ably synthesised by historians such as Lesley Hall, Angus McLaren and the late Michael Mason. In recent years, moreover, a string of television documentaries, displaying various degrees of intellectual rigour, have examined these themes for a broader audience. Yet there remain those who continue to believe that this work is not 'proper' history. Marcus Collins quotes one doubter, John Vincent (who has declared that 'history is hopeless on love'), in the prologue of his ambitious new survey of personal relationships in twentieth-century Britain. While acknowledging that intimate actions and private emotions rarely leave direct documentary traces of the type favoured by historians, Collins observes that the quality of the existing literature on these subjects suggests that the difficulties can be overcome. A thoroughly researched and consistently thought-provoking volume, *Modern Love* can be added to the growing list of books that prove Vincent wrong. Written in a clear and engaging style, and explicitly aimed at both an academic and a lay audience, it is not surprising that this work has attracted the attention of newspaper reviewers. Although some sections might prove rather dry for the general reader drawn by the tantalising title, it is a significant and original contribution to the historiography and another illustration of the rewards of studying private life.

The purpose of the book is to chart the rise and fall of what Collins terms 'mutuality' – namely the notion that 'an intimate equality should be established between men and women through mixing, companionate marriage and shared sexual pleasure' (p. 4), in contrast to the system of 'separate spheres' and patriarchy

that typified Victorian society. He begins with the formulation of this ideal in Edward Carpenter's influential treatise, *Love's Coming Of Age* (Manchester: Labour Press, 1896), and examines its progress over the following century.

The first two chapters discuss the battle of ideas in the period up to the Second World War, as mutualists of various stripes, from Carpenter's associates in the 'Fellowship of the New Life' Havelock and Edith Ellis, to the Christian marriage reformers Edward Griffiths and Herbert Gray, battled for intellectual supremacy against a motley array of feminists, anti-feminists and eccentrics. If the vision of harmonious cooperation between the sexes was drowned out by the fury of the debates over women's enfranchisement before 1914, Collins convincingly argues that after the First World War the mutualist cause achieved ascendancy amongst opinion-formers. Although there were conspicuous differences between sexual libertarians on the one hand and Christian mutualists with roots in the purity movement on the other, there was nevertheless a widespread agreement by the 1930s that the artificial segregation of men and women was unhealthy, and that patriarchal marriages and sexual ignorance had no place in a 'modern' society. Much of this is familiar territory, but its revisiting is justified both by the impressively broad range of examples and by the sensitive reading of authorial intention and context. Collins persuasively challenges the contentious suggestion, made by Margaret Jackson, Sheila Jeffreys and Susan Kingsley Kent, that mutualist works were actually 'reactionary' and 'anti-feminist', and he clearly demonstrates the difficulties in portraying this period as a time of gender 'backlash'. In contrast to most other European nations, he notes, 'inter-war Britain was remarkable for escaping the worst of anti-feminism'.(p. 238)

In the chronology established by Collins, mutuality reached its zenith in the quarter century following the Second World War, with the rise of co-education, mixed leisure and marriage guidance counselling. As the second and perhaps most original section of the book demonstrates, however, reforming entrenched attitudes and customs was easier in theory than in practice. An examination of the post-1945 youth club movement – which hitherto has not received the same kind of historical attention as either uniformed organisations like the scouts, or commercial youth culture, despite the fact that by the end of the 1960s, some 70% of young Britons were members or former members of a youth club – shows how mixed clubs triumphed at the expense of single sex ones. Yet the mutualist aspirations of the leaders of the mixed clubs had a limited impact on their adolescent charges. Collins makes clear that in reality boys dominated, forming a majority of the membership and monopolizing the best facilities. Traditional gender stereotypes were rarely challenged, and indeed were often encouraged by the continued provision of 'appropriate' single-sex activities, leaving boys 'too macho to be true mutualists' and girls 'generally too unassertive to challenge them'.(p. 89)

A thorough survey of the case-notes of the Family Welfare Association, Family Discussion Bureau and National Marriage Guidance Council also underlines that the happy and balanced 'companionate marriage' of the advice literature was far from universal in mid-century Britain. This evidence provides graphic illustrations that patriarchal attitudes were still entrenched among the 'unreconstructed working class', with domestic violence commonplace and sex something endured rather than enjoyed by many wives. Although much of the recent historiography of the family has usefully questioned the stereotype of the 'downtrodden housewife', Collins is surely right to suggest that the 'figure of the working-class patriarch cannot altogether be laid to rest'. Many middle-class couples, by contrast, understood the concept of mutuality very well, but still found it difficult to achieve the required equality and intimacy in their relationships. Despite the rise in married women's part-time work, the burden of domestic work remained primarily on wives, and men continued to enjoy considerable financial superiority. In the bedroom, moreover, deep-seated inhibitions and performance anxieties frustrated the achievement of shared sexual satisfaction. With marital problems showing no sign of diminishing by the end of the 1960s, some counsellors were beginning to wonder whether mutuality itself was flawed.

With these two case studies, Collins is able to provide revealing insights into the realities of people's lives and to illustrate the practical obstacles faced by well-meaning reformers. The third chapter in the 'mutuality tested' section, examining the new glossy pornographic magazines such as *King*, *Penthouse* and *Mayfair* that appeared from 1964, is rather less successful on this front. These magazines are relevant, the author insists, because they provided 'modern' pornography which, initially at least, was in some senses mutualist.

Whereas pre-permissive pornography had been unable to imagine a normal and healthy female desire, this 'new pornography' celebrated women's sexuality. No longer furtive and hidden behind hypocritical 'alibis', these magazines were audacious and unapologetic, interacting with the vibrant cultural scene of 1960s London. Unsurprisingly, however, we are shown that women's emancipation was supported by the pornographers largely because of their hope that women would become more sexually available. Behind the progressive rhetoric there remained a determination to protect male authority. These tensions were exposed by the emergence of the women's liberation movement, which drew a fierce response from the pornographers, and the flirtation with mutuality was dropped in favour of a traditional chauvinism.

Although providing a wealth of interesting examples from the magazines themselves, Collins is unable to offer much evidence of the thinking of the pornographers beyond their own self-serving public pronouncements; as a result, their early progressivism is perhaps accepted rather too readily, and the contrasts with older forms of pornography are overdrawn. Did the inclusion of lengthy profiles of the models really ensure that they were not treated as 'depersonalised sex objects'? And was not the rhetoric of female desire merely another 'alibi' to justify the explicit photographs? Equally, while it might be unrealistic to expect details about how this 'mutualist pornography' was received by readers, the absence of such material weakens the chapter in comparison with the previous two.

The final section of the book considers the feminist challenge more fully. Collins argues that it 'took the women's liberation movement to expose the full flaws of the mutualist ideal' (p. 207). In particular, a series of campaigners confronted the biological essentialism that buttressed much of the thinking about companionship. Rather than possessing different natures but identical interests, as the mutualists had insisted, feminists argued that men and women had very similar capacities, but divergent interests. Radicals advocated women's autonomy as the only solution in a patriarchal society. If the extremes of lesbian separatism provoked a reaction from influential figures within the movement, such as Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal, Collins argues that the effectiveness of the feminist attack was such that mutualism would never be the same again, and would have to become more nuanced and pluralistic to survive.

In an epilogue examining the situation in the final decade of the century, media talk of a renewal of the 'war of the sexes' is sensibly dismissed in favour of evidence that men and women are continuing to converge in their attitudes and activities. Yet this convergence, Collins argues, was more the result of a common individualism than the final triumph of mutualism as envisaged in earlier decades. If companionship remained a deeply felt aspiration, it now had to be reconciled with the demands of self-interest.

Modern Love is an accessible, wide-ranging and generally convincing survey of a difficult subject. Collins both draws fresh lessons from familiar texts and shows originality in making unusual connections and exploring less well-charted territory. The extensive footnotes at the end of the book testify to the author's truly impressive command of the available sources (and frequently offer interesting opinions on those detailed historiographical points considered unsuitable for main body of the text). Collins handles very different types of material sensitively, and indeed is at his best when he juxtaposes high-flown mutualist theory with everyday practice in marriages and clubs.

Inevitably in a study of such ambition, however, there are weaknesses and omissions. Perhaps the most serious is the relative lack of attention paid to the way in which mutualist ideas, and critiques of mutualist ideas, were actually transmitted to the wider public. Collins describes very well the articulation of the key concepts in what were usually relatively small circulation pamphlets, polemics and manuals, and then, in his case studies, compares the theory of mutuality with the reality of individual relationships. To understand the progress of mutualist thinking fully, however, it is surely necessary to assess the extent to which it influenced mainstream organs of opinion, and to examine how particular aspects were mediated and contested. It would have been very illuminating, for example, to see how similar the advice given by agony aunts and feature writers in popular newspapers and women's magazines was to that contained in the marriage guidance manuals; equally, it would have been useful to have more information about the changing ideals of personal relationships in films and best-selling fiction. Such an overview would entail laborious extra research, of course, and perhaps deserves a separate book, but there is enough published work on

women's magazines and films for broad generalizations of real value to have been made.

As it is, Collins refers to such a wide range of literature that it is sometimes difficult to judge which contributions he regards as being especially important and influential. While this strategy has the merit of avoiding over-familiar territory – writers such as Havelock Ellis and Marie Stopes have already been analysed in considerable detail – it does risk overrating the significance of relatively obscure authors. In the chapter on the women's liberation movement, in particular, the internal arguments of a relatively small number of activists are rehearsed with little analysis of how 'second-wave feminism' was received more broadly. How widespread was the sentiment that the movement had exposed the flaws of mutuality?

Collins observes early on that the 'utopian project' of the mutualists inevitably promised 'perpetual hope and disappointment'. The character of utopianism perhaps deserves further consideration on the frequent occasions when the disparity between rhetoric and reality is exposed. It is hardly surprising that it was not always possible to establish harmonious co-operation and happy, loving relationships, but that did not necessarily entail the tarnishing of mutualist ideals. In his epilogue, Collins argues that 'mutuality scarcely survived the twentieth century', its 'basic assumptions overturned' by the actuality of family breakdown and the critiques of second-wave feminism. Yet if some of the traditional ideas underpinning mutualist thinking were indeed overturned, such as the belief in the complementary natures of men and women, the basic aspirations of heterosocial mixing, companionate marriage and sexual union remained potent. Collins points to rise of individualism, and suggests that it 'supplanted' mutuality: 'The assertion of self-interest', he writes rather pessimistically, 'invited a self-absorption verging on selfishness'.(p. 218) Individualism is certainly a significant tendency (which perhaps deserves slightly more attention given the importance Collins ascribes to it) but whether it has actually triumphed over the ideals set out by Carpenter in 1896 is debatable. If a sense of 'obligation' was no longer such an obvious aspect of commitment at the end of the century, perhaps that was as much due to rising expectations of companionship as to individualism?

These are minor quibbles, however. This is an important work that should be read not just by historians of gender and sexuality but by all those interested in the social and cultural history of twentieth century Britain. The periodization and elements of the interpretation will doubtless prove controversial, but the book is always a joy to read and covers such a vast amount of ground that few will fail to something of value. Hopefully it will hasten the day when historians no longer have to defend their decision to study love.

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