

BOOK REVIEW: *CULTURE AND LIBERTY: WRITINGS OF
ISABEL PATERSON*

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Isabel Paterson: *Culture and Liberty: Writings of Isabel Paterson*, edited by Stephen Cox. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2015. ISBN: 978-1412856003.

“NOBODY KNOWS THE FUTURE, but the past has generally belonged to those who went against the tide, to those who acted as if they had free will, who cared more for freedom than for belonging” (p. xxix). Stephen Cox writes thus of the complexities that guided this well-known columnist, literary critic, best-selling novelist, avid reader, and intellectual, Mary Isabel Bowler Patterson, better known as Isabel Paterson or “I.M.P.” (p. ix). This edited collection includes a well-chosen selection of her essays, reviews, and letters. Combining both formal and colloquial prose, Paterson’s writings incorporated quips about such people as Sinclair Lewis and Henry David Thoreau, as well as candid discussions of William F. Buckley, Jr., Buffalo Bill, and Cecil Rhodes. The more than one hundred names mentioned in the collection included such diverse figures as Virginia Woolf, John Pierpont Morgan, H.G. Wells, Henry Hazlitt, and Jasper Elliot Crane.

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Patterson began life on the Manitoulin Island, off the northern shore of Lake Huron on January 22, 1886, as a subject of Queen Victoria (p. ix). Even as a child, Isabel was a fanatical reader. She was a natural born intellectual and rational thinker who not only soaked up facts but also understood how they fit together. The knowledge she gained as an avid reader gave her the ability to converse, and she had a lot to say. Paterson's personal life was often a disappointment. She married Canadian Kenneth B. Paterson, but it was not a happy match and they parted in 1918. Now single, she began a newspaper job at the *Inland Herald* in Spokane, Washington. In 1928, Patterson became an American citizen. She took special pride in this fact all the more because it was chosen rather than a birthright (p. x).

Cox grabs the reader with the first sentence in the Introduction: "Today, Isabel Paterson is best known as an advocate of radical individualism, a prophet of the libertarian movement" (p. ix). It would be hard to find someone prior to Paterson who expounded so forcefully the love of individualism in the United States. As she wrote, her honesty and sometimes satire bleeds through the pages. She clearly explained her understanding of government, economy, and politics. "Is there free speech and freedom of the press in this country? Yes. There is, to an immeasurably greater extent than any other system" (p. 27).

Readers will appreciate Professor Cox's endnotes, which show careful research and provide a clear guidance. The notes reveal his talents as an editor as well as his ability to be both comprehensive and precise. An example is his commentary about a dinner conversation at T.S. Elliot's home in which Paterson used the term "chromos." Cox explains that it refers to chromolithographs, cheap color prints, very common in the late nineteenth century (p. 43). Paterson uses the term "the genre ennuyeux" which is of course "the boring type of writing." (p. 43). He also provides information that Paterson strategically omitted. She discussed Prohibition, prostitution, and opined about the laws concerning victimless crimes. One thing that holds the attention is the chapter headings, including "Monkey-gland Economics" and the inclusion of theories of Dr. Alvin H. Hansen and George Terborgh. Paterson was diverse in her interests and the collection reflects that diversity. It includes well-chosen samples on a wide range of topics such as children learning to read and intergovernmental politics between our capitalistic society and a communistic Russia. If Cox's main goal was to disclose the inner workings of a writer by presenting her compositions, or allowing a true libertarian to speak, or by arranging the collection in such a methodical way that he draws us into the conversations, he succeeds masterfully.

In the chapter “Freedom and Control,” Isabel Paterson uncovers the essence not only of how she lived her life but also expresses what she felt was best:

[N]o “system” can make people universally industrious, prudent and thrifty; with the reasonable corollary that those who do manifest such qualities are entitled to the benefit accruing.” (p. 57)

The selections come from each phase of her life and cover a myriad of topics. A key theme is the need to reduce the power of government. In the chapter “Has the World Grown Smaller?” Paterson summed up the philosophy which governed her life. With increases in government, you get

“government restrictions on the individual and on property use, increased taxes, decline in the speed and volume of transport and of communication for individuals... And the increase in government had not brought peace; rather it has made peace impossible.” (p.122)

This type of criticism may not be detailed enough, but it does provide a rich array of illustrations of powerful men in government like Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott Decision. Paterson offers insight into the persona of the man while explaining how that decision went down in history. She did not fit easily into the usual political categories. She was conservative in her call to cut government spending but socially liberal in her attitudes toward issues such as Prohibition and prostitution. It is evident with every page written that Paterson was well read. She brought to her work a plethora of knowledge. Although opinionated, she wrote with a high level of wit and humor. The book holds the attention and stimulates the thought processes. Cox shows in many ways the correct way to expose a writer. From babies as intellectual beings (p. 135) to the satire of politics (p.145), Paterson constantly stimulates and never bores. She was also ahead of her time in many ways, for example, by anticipating learning styles that became popular long after her death. Paterson discussed the idea that children learn differently while giving advice to parents. In her writings, she exposed her vulnerability, her humanity, and her tenacity. She was also persistent. Her greatest literary successes only came after many years of hard work and sweat. It is important to note that some of her personal letters provide remorseless insults.

Professionals of all genres can enjoy this book. It has something for the young in age as well as the young in heart. It captures that spirit of what it is to be truly American, to be free to succeed as well as free to fail. In disclosing her personal failures, Paterson’s work continues to show that those who succeed are unrelenting people with good ideas. From university faculty to the everyday bibliophile, Paterson has something for everyone.

