

review

# Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life

FOR ME, THE PROBLEM WITH 'GREAT WOMAN' BIOGRAPHIES COMES down to one theme: so what. Why *another* book about *another* great woman? My problem with great woman biographies is that they end up speaking as the experience for *all* women of that particular persuasion or period.

Heroinization has a tendency to hand people a way to live their lives, in full admiration of their heroines, without ever having to think or sort a position out for themselves. Instead of developing one's own ideas, one amalgamates the admirable qualities of a hero(ines) life style(s) and adapts it to their particular situation. So, after the heyday of Greenham Common, the women's and peace movements were deluged with Greenham Commonites. How many mini-Che's surfaced in the late 60's and 70's?

Emma Goldman's life has been exhibited, described, outlined and, in my thinking, exploited to the hilt. Now, in the last ten years, she has become a darling not only of a new generation of anarchists, but also of the mainstream feminist movement. Having been ignored for years, she has now become editorial fodder for the literary and academic magazines alike. A cover girl for an American liberal news magazine. A full spread, with cover photo, in the Village Voice Literary Supplement. How trend-oid. A big article several years ago in Ms. Magazine, that bastion of mainstream feminism. And Emma on the big screen, at last, in Reds. (Myself, I would have preferred Lily Tomlin in that role). Emma is bakeable, is saleable and, in that, is being rendered historically harmless.

This book arrived. *Emma Goldman: an Intimate Life*. AaHaa, I plotted (but as I was alone at the time it was obviously *not* a plot of that dreaded I.A.T.C - the International Anarchist Terrorist Conspiracy) - AaHaa, I plotted, this is one of those hot-bath-and-a-case-of-beer books, where the steaminess of the pages is matched only by that of the hot water in the tub. Anticipating a scandal rag approach (ANARCHIST BABY BORN, BREEDS CHAOS, TERRIFIES WHITE HOUSE!!!), I settled into that hot tub, cracked open a bottle of union brewed, sealed and delivered ale, and got ready for a good, sleazy read.

Emma Goldman's life could certainly lend itself to that category of good sleazy novels. Anarchist, feminist, advocate of free speech, birth control, sexual freedom, organizer and antagonist, Emma Goldman was for many the embodiment of American anarchism. She was different from her American anarchist counterparts in her feminism, leading her to often write for and about women. As a result, she has become for many "the" voice of 20th century anarchism, a place well preserved by copious essays, biographies, buttons and T-shirts.

Ask any number of anarchy-feminists about women and anarchy and the first (often *only*) name they will come up with is Emma. Go into most progressive/left/alternative book-

stores and the only books on women and anarchism are by or about Goldman. In better stocked establishments you may find books by or about Louise Michel, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Voltarine de Cleyre, Mollie Steiner and Lucy Parsons. Even those are the luminaries of the anarchy-feminist roll call. Not a lot has been written either about women other than those named above, or about the relationships between those luminaries and the women they worked with and encountered daily. How did Emma relate to the women in the shops and stores she did business in? Books about these women often are more interested in their contributions to history than to their working and social relationships with other women. Or to their sexuality.

There are a few exceptions. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, an Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) organizer and orator, who later joined the American Communist party, wrote a moving account of her experiences with co-habitants at Alderson Federal Penitentiary during the 1950's. Louise Michel's memoirs, recently published in a new account (dreadfully titled *The Red Virgin*) have given me some of the most intimate and thought encouraging anarchy-feminist reading in some time. (Not to mention my favorite line for this year. In a long passage she writes of the effects of her arrest on her ailing mother. "Can the mothers of revolutionaries ever be happy?" she asks.) And three years ago the first of a series of books about Emma Goldman's *intimate* life appeared, revealing a sexual, emotional and insecure nature. *Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman* by Candace Falk, did much to unearth the mature Emma's emotional smolderings, and to re-establish her not just as anarchism's prime spokeswoman, but also as a woman in love, in pain, a woman who meshed the personal and political long before it became a shiny button to wear. As a woman who shares many of Emma's political and personal ideas, I found the book a comfort - and a prime candidate for a bathtub and beer book of the month. Unable to afford the outrageous cover price, (at least now it's in soft cover), I had to resort to reading excerpts in various magazines, and standing in bookstores for hours on end. Which raises a particular question: why are books about anarchists so expensive??

*Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman* has become a scandal in many ways. Finally, someone looked at a feminist heroine and included all her personal trauma - her jealousy, her intensity, her desire for, and pleasure in, sex. Imagine those readers who like their political heroes dry and theoretical, opening Falk's book to find Emma



Emma at rest with Alexander Berkman

writing to her lover that he had "...opened up the prison gates of my womanhood" releasing "...all the passion that was unfettered and unsatisfied in me for so many years... You fill me, fill every nerve and atom, you intoxicate me, you are the great passion of my life." Whew.

In that passion, though, lay jealousy, insecurity and depression. Her moods seemed dependant on lover Ben Reitman's actions and letters. Lucy Parsons recalled that Emma "was always agonizing about something or other, one could hardly make out just what it was all about."

Falk's book, to those of us outside that immediate community, was scalding stuff. I suddenly felt much better in my own agonizing over such weighty anarchist debates as "Is jealousy politically correct?" To know that one of the anarchist icons had her share of emotional zits and warts was very comforting. People would call up, breathing hard and gasping "Did you read page 202?" Heady stuff.

Now, two years later, comes Alice Wexler's book *Emma Goldman: an Intimate Life*. It too is rich in personal detail. It's a pretty good bathtub and beer book, too. But it reeks of "thesis", which may be why it took some time before I could actually get into it. Wexler follows Goldman's life, from childhood, through development of her anarchist philosophy and ideology, to her heyday as "America's most feared woman". Her account ends with Goldman's deportation to Russia on December 21, 1919.



Wexler approaches Goldman from a *woman's* as opposed to an *anarchist* point of view. In that sense she has approached the biography from a "great woman, flawed as she was" perspective, typical of most women's history. It's as if Wexler fell in love

with Goldman as she worked with her papers and diaries. She's not the first and it is very hard not to fall in love with a subject so exciting, as you re-read and re-live their lives.

Goldman's life is described either in reference to state controlled events (i.e., history) or in terms of her relationships with men. It places her as the ideological head of the American anarchist movement. It's a little different than most biographies of the famous, be they Elizabeth I, Laura Secord or Louise Michel. As a radical herstory, I find books like this tedious, because I'm tired of "great woman" biographies. I really don't care anymore about how women collided/colluded/confused/connived or con whatever'd with the state to achieve some ends. I don't want to read anymore about how women affected history, because I recognise neither the traditional definition of history nor many of the organizations, sell-outs and personal martyrdoms that women joined, developed and endured to allow them to buy in to a state structure, or, for that matter, a traditional male-defined political structure, no matter how left it appeared. The kinds of history and biography I read and write have nothing to do with greatness, leadership, organization or state succour, as much of current women's history does. I'm interested in reading about how women and men worked together, fought together (and, often, against each other), lived and loved. I want to know what kinds of relationships women built, how they worked together. I need to know what those women thought and how that affected their lives and their work. I want to read about women like me, like my mother, like the women I know and work with.

I need to know WHO ELSE was out there, organising. Who was doing the leg work for women like Emma. Who worked in the offices of *Mother Earth*? Who worked with women in birth control centres? I need to know the experiences of the women in that all-encompassing but often faceless crowd of anarchist women. I need to know how they reacted to a woman like Emma. Was she atypical? Did they work with her? Or for her?

I am also concerned about how records of our lives are treated. For most of us, the lives of our foresters and brothers are locked away, filed and deoderized in some archive, to be doled out to us through someone else's analysis. I understand the need to physically preserve documents, to ensure their survival so that future anarchists can read and enjoy them. What I do not accept is how documents, and therefore lives, are perceived to be the "property" of particular people or institutions, with restrictions on access and use. I support and am working towards the growth of community based archives and libraries, open and accessible and free from the pallor of academia.

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