

Transcript of Interview with Dr Marcus Collins on *Counterpoint*, ABC Radio National, 7 May 2007

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Modern love

Can idealism and reason tame the human heart? Can we be taught how to love and can intellectuals make us better people? Historian and author Marcus Collins charts the way love and relationships have changed over the last one hundred years in Britain.

Paul Comrie-Thomson (PC-T) Our first guest is historian Marcus Collins. In his book *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in 20th Century Britain*, he argues that an obscure utopian, Edward Carpenter, set the agenda for theories about human sexuality and change in 20th century Britain. In our interview recorded earlier I began by asking him who was Edward Carpenter.

Marcus Collins (MC) Edward Carpenter was your classic 19th century utopian socialist. He had a beard, he wore sandals, he was a great opponent of modern industrial civilisation, and he lived a pretty unconventional private life. In fact he was one of the first openly gay people in Britain. If he's remembered at all today it's as a champion of homosexuality, but he also had interesting things to say about heterosexuality. He spoke of love's 'coming of age' and that's what I am particularly concerned with.

PC-T In your book you make the point that Carpenter foresaw 'a threefold reformation of personal relationships'. How did he see relationships between men and women changing?

MC His threefold recipe for changing personal relationships was really an attack on the Victorian notion of separate spheres, this idea that men should be in a public role and that women should be confined to the private realm. And so what he thought was that first of all boys and girls should mix more, they should go to co-educational schools and they should become friends and get to know one another when young. He then thought that they should progress into companionate marriages; marriages of true equals, and that these marriages would be sealed through the third aspect of this, through shared sexual pleasure. So this was his formula for mutuality.

PC-T You judge that in fact Carpenter with his idea of mutuality set the agenda for the remaking of personal relationships in the 20th century, and you say you see it as the missing link between Victorian models of love and our own. So what he was proposing, you see as historically very important.

MC Yes, I do. It's a missing link insofar as although it rejected Victorian separate spheres, it also kept some notion that men and women were constitutionally different and that

they should occupy complementary roles, so that the notion that we have that men and women are capable of doing pretty much anything the other one is capable of doing is not one to which he ascribed. So it's a sort of halfway house, a notion that you can be equal but you should be different at the same time.

PC-T You have a very precise definition; you say, 'Mutuality proposed that intimacy was impossible without some sort of equality.' This is what he was arguing for.

MC Yes, this was the really revolutionary aspect of the notion of mutuality in that Victorians rhapsodised about love a great deal but they (in the point of view of advocates of mutuality) did not practise what they preached. Instead they had marriages which were based upon the husband being the ultimate decision maker, and because the husband was detached from the home so much, it didn't seem as though any true closeness could be formed. So advocates of mutuality said that you needed to have equality instituted which in turn would bring about a form of intimacy.

PC-T From 1918 to 1945, attitudes changed radically and mutuality won the battle of ideas, but for the non-elite were those principles being put into practice?

MC Not to a great extent, I think. The problem essentially was that separate spheres was a bourgeois ideal, and therefore a reaction against separate spheres primarily concerned the bourgeoisie. Working class people, although I think that they were exposed to these ideas through things like women's magazines and the church, they probably thought that they were less than relevant to their own lives.

PC-T You also look at...and this is a fascinating part of your book...in investigating marriage you examined the records of the Family Welfare Association. Can you tell us what that association was and what you found in their records?

MC The Family Welfare Association was essentially a social work organisation of a non-state kind. What they did was that poor people came to them, they assessed their needs and then passed them on to appropriate organisations. The great thing for historians about these records is that they got to know the families pretty well over the course of a number of years or even decades. What they found was that, amongst the very poor, patriarchal marriage was alive and well. Men exercised all sorts of power over their wives; they exercised financial power as the main breadwinners, they exercised physical power ? domestic violence was depressingly common ? they exercised sexual power in having their way with often reluctant wives. And if the wives didn't want to put up with any of this, then the ultimate power that husbands exercised was the power to up sticks and leave, and this of course would leave the wife and the children destitute.

PC-T Yes, you say, 'The companionate ideal had not penetrated the consciousness of the typical couple coming to the FWA. The elites had one idea but it did not penetrate down.'

I'd like to move on. The anthropologist Edmund Leach suggested there were other problems with trying to rationally discuss with people their emotional problems because he suggested that encouraging intimacy in fact could lead to problems in married relationships.

MC Yes, and I think the great illustration of this is John Osborne's famous play *Look Back in Anger* in which his male protagonist views any attempt at intimacy by his wife as being a sort of invasion of his space. The nuclear family could be a very claustrophobic place to live in in the 1950s and 1960s.

PC-T And as you describe this you say, 'Intimacy encouraged introspection which led to an intensification of emotional strains,' and also that companionate marriage really had no rules and guides so it was a stress-filled area of some sort of emotional anarchy. But you write also (and I'd like you to comment on this), 'Mutuality was an Enlightenment project.' Can you explain what you mean by that?

MC The Enlightenment was all about the triumph of reason over tradition, and as far as advocates of mutuality had it, the patriarchal system was the most barbaric and old-fashioned way of proceeding and that reason had to be substituted in its place. It's interesting that one of the first British feminists, the anarchist Mary Wollstonecraft, she said in the 1790s many of the same things that people like Edward Carpenter had said in the 1890s. But whereas she was made a pariah for her views, people like Edward Carpenter (and through him people like his admirer Marie Stopes) moved into the mainstream of thought in the early 20th century.

PC-T So the idea was that reason was the remedy for ignorance and spent customs, and so you make the point that marriage counsellors believe that teaching 'a rational way to conduct relationships would solve problems'. But then you make the point that psychotherapists had a much more troubling outlook on human nature in terms of whether reason could rule.

MC Yes, marriage counsellors did believe this but they came across evidence to the contrary in many of their counselling sessions. They found that this idea of companionship, although it was presented as a solution to marriage problems, often created problems unto itself. A good example of this would be in terms of sexual satisfaction; there were great demands placed upon men and women in the 1950s and 1960s to live up to these heightened sexual expectations, and those who fell short of the mark often felt guilty. Now, this wouldn't have been a surprise to psychoanalysts who had a darker view of human desire and did not regard love as being a rational thing at all. So they had a slightly more jaundiced attitude to the possibility of reforming love.

PC-T You write that with second-wave feminism, that women's revolt against mutuality was driven by, in many cases, their experiences of the counterculture. Could you explain that to us?

MC Yes, the counterculture was remarkably similar to these 19th century utopian movements in which mutuality had come into being ? in that it suggested that society should be based around and reformed around the notion of love. And again, the expectations did not match the reality, and a lot of the inequalities in wider society percolated into or were even accentuated by the counterculture, so that men were very keen on making the revolution while expecting women to make the coffee. And the sexual revolution, which was such a vital part of the counterculture, although it had its obvious pleasures and benefits, often left women literally holding the baby.

PC-T And you make the point that second-wave feminism thus didn't stress mutuality, it stressed autonomy.

MC Yes, and this was its great break from mutuality. Again you can draw parallels with the early 20th century and the suffragette movement in the notion that so long as men and women remained unequal, it was often a better idea to steer clear of men altogether. So the women's liberation movement championed sisterhood, a sisterhood that was achieved through such things as women-only consciousness raising movements and, for a minority of the movement, through political lesbianism, the notion that only women could give equal and intimate relationships to other women.

PC-T Your epilogue is entitled /Alone Together 1900 to 2000/, and you state that mutuality as an ideal had experienced during the previous decades an awkward shift from pure principle to messy practice. Would you assess then, looking back, that mutuality was in fact an ideology that just was not rooted in social reality?

MC Mutuality was an ideal, and like all ideals it was ultimately unattainable. At the same time, I think that it was a reasonably worthwhile ideal, although a flawed one, in that it did believe that equality should be the basis of all personal relationships. And now that I think we understand its flaws better, its failure to address the sexual division of labour and the endemic and structural inequalities between men and women, I think that we can set about trying to create our own ideals for the 21st century, and hopefully we'll make a better job of it than they did.

PC-T You conclude that the word that best describes the sexual philosophy of young British couples today is 'individualism'. Does that leave anything out?

MC Yes, I think it leaves out the notion of companionship. I think that if there's the notion that an individual can do everything for themselves ? that they can earn their own wage, that they can bring up children on their own ? then the question is begged; why do they actually need a partner? And so there is this tension within these

relationships of the natural love bond being put into conflict with the notion of individual self-fulfilment, and once a relationship fails to produce this notion of self-fulfilment then the relationship is seen as redundant. This helps to explain the high rate of marital breakdown today.

PC-T I'd like to end our discussion by quoting from the historian John Vincent, who stated that 'history is hopeless on love', but you've written a fascinating history, and thank you very much for talking to us.

MC A great pleasure.