

**Clare Virginia Eby.** *Until Choice Do Us Part: Marriage Reform in the Progressive Era.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 264 pp. \$27.50, e-book, ISBN 978-0-226-08597-5.

**Reviewed by** Brent Ruswick

**Published on** H-SHGAPE (July, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

In the epilogue of *Until Choice Do Us Part*, Clare Virginia Eby suggests that “the best way to understand love is by considering it as a story” and “that people negotiate their way in love through stories learned, repeated, and changed” (p. 172). This thoughtful, complex work examines couples Eby identifies as progressive marriage reformers, spouses who “believed intimate individual decisions could usher in broad social change” and sought to educate the public about marriage reform through the stories they penned and lived (p. 3). Readers with an interest in the Progressive Era, family studies, and American literature are sure to find value in Eby’s deft analysis of reformers whose provocative and messy writings about marriage were only exceeded by their actual marriages.

An introductory chapter on the history of marriage in Europe and America from about 1500 to 1900 situates the marriage reformers in the context of nineteenth-century white middle-class Victorians who saw marriage as “an evolving social institution,” and turned the consternation of contemporaries over the divorce rate on its head: the increase in divorce was a sign that Americans expected more from their nuptials, not less (p. 30). Throughout *Until Choice Do Us Part*, Eby traces five principles shared by the progressive marital

reformers: spouses should be “class equals,” as Charlotte Perkins Gilman described it, because a wife’s dependence on her husband’s wage “corrupted” marriage; law and religion could not validate marriage, only the couple could do that; monogamy ought to be voluntary, not compulsory; the only valid marriages were those that could be terminated by either spouse, and “mutually satisfying sex cemented and indeed validated marriage” (p. 37). While most scholars emphasize how progressives sought to effect change through collective action and institutions, Eby further muddies Progressive Era historiography by observing that where marriage was concerned, reformers generally wanted to loosen or end the government’s involvement in marriage, and saw private reform of marriage as a necessary first step for broader social transformation. Reviewing Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898), George Elliott Howard’s *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (1904), and works by Elsie Clews Parsons, Ellen Key, Havelock Ellis, and many others, Eby describes several fault lines indicative of the reformers’ disagreements over biological differences between sexes, the naturalness of marriage, and the limits of state interest in marriage.

*Until Choice Do Us Part*’s distinctive strength is in Eby’s subtle reading of the intertwined private

and professional lives of three sets of spouses, thereby illustrating the fault lines among marriage reformers, the underappreciated significance of reading in how progressives shaped their views on marriage, and the murky boundaries between fiction and autobiography in how the spouses wrote about and lived marriage. Of the three couples—Upton and Meta Fuller Sinclair, Theodore and Sara Osborne White, and Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood—the Sinclairs arguably are the most fascinating and fully rendered. In *Love's Pilgrimage* (1911), Upton hoped to offer “a marital lesson plan for readers” that incorporated Meta’s perspective into his book, producing a “companionate novel.” Meta evidently did not see her perspective represented in *Love's Pilgrimage*, and in the unpublished manuscript “Corydon and Thrysis,” she offered a parallel story with “strategic shifts of emphasis” that exposes differences in their understanding of progressivism, in their perspectives on how a progressive marriage reforms the partners and society, and in their efforts to one-up each other in pursuit of the status as the more progressive spouse. Meta and Upton’s experimental marriage and subsequent separation in the same year as the release of *Love's Pilgrimage* created a media frenzy that Eby claims “ended up achieving such cultural resonance as to generate further support for marriage reform” (pp. 68-69).

Managing two authors’ perspectives on their marriage and the “deliberate conflation of literature and [married] life” in their writing, there is much to untangle. Each story tells of a progressive reformer intent on leading American progressives by first being a leader in a righteously progressive marriage of voluntary, platonic monogamy, only to see each hope unravel due to animalistic sexual desires. Eby documents Upton’s conflation of abstinence and spiritual purity and its expression in *Love's Pilgrimage*, where the husband, Thrysis, is morally polluted and thus loses status as a progressive reformer by consummating the marriage

in a rape that is cast by Upton as the result of the sexual urges of the victim, Corydon. Meta’s rendering of Corydon and Thrysis also accepts the “natural law” of male, animalistic sexual force over women, but Meta casts Corydon, the wife, as the “idealist who hopes to reform the world first by setting an example and then by turning it into a text.” Unlike Upton’s portrayal of Thrysis as a “reclusive, Messianic genius,” Meta’s protagonist is “a representative figure who embodies a sea change for an entire generation of women,” dissatisfied and emotionally detached with her clumsy lover, thwarted in her professional ambitions by his indifference and her financial dependence (p. 86). Eby’s best work is her analysis of the significance that Meta and Upton each gave to the acts of reading and writing in the development of their characters’ progressive ideals and more generally to the progressive marriage reform campaign, themes that she explores for each of the progressive marriage reform couples. Meta has Thrysis tell Corydon of his love for another woman by rushing into a room “while brandishing [Edward] Carpenter’s *Love's Coming of Age* [1896] and urging her to read it (p. 80). Upton’s *Love's Pilgrimage* has the couple “document the ideas inspiring this marital experiment, often naming specific authors” (p. 70). In both accounts of the marriage’s collapse, Thrysis sabotages Corydon’s writing (p. 84).

The Sinclair chapter also best illuminates another theme of *Until Choice Do Us Part*: Eby’s attempts to evaluate and judge the personal merits of the reformers and the amount of congruency between the progressive marriage reform debates and twenty-first century ones about marriage equality. Eby is understandably tougher on Upton than on her other subjects for his seeming sexual hang-ups and greater fault in his marriage’s dissolution, and for being a less sympathetic and effective proponent of marriage reform than Meta. But judging the personal and political inconsistencies of century-old views on love and sex is tricky

business, and Eby's phrasing tends to alternate between blunt assigning of credit or blame, and rhetorical sleights of hand to put distance between herself and her judgment. There is similar inconsistency in efforts to link Progressive Era debates on marriage and sex with our own. In general the more circumspect claims work better than, for instance, the efforts to draw parallels between noted sexual health columnist Dan Savage's advice and those of progressive marriage reformers.

Such observations do not detract from my appreciation for Eby's project, which successfully bridges the history of the family, marriage, and sexuality with the history of progressivism through skilled literary analysis of often experimental, messy books and their authors. She demonstrates how marriage, traditionally viewed as a bulwark of conservative stability, might also be reimagined in diverse ways as a vessel for social transformation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

**Citation:** Brent Ruswick. Review of Eby, Clare Virginia. *Until Choice Do Us Part: Marriage Reform in the Progressive Era*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41273>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.