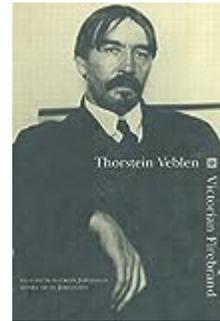




Elizabeth Watkins Jorgensen, Henry Irvin Jorgensen. *Thorstein Veblen, Victorian Firebrand.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999. 304 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0258-9.



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The Life and Loves of Thorstein Veblen

In their biography of Thorstein Veblen, Elizabeth Watkins Jorgensen and Henry Irvin Jorgensen, two fervent Veblenites, attempt to rehabilitate Veblen's reputation as a husband and a man. The authors take this unusual approach because they believe that "for a century, America has been in denial about Veblen's ideas," a denial made possible by the dismissal of Veblen as a "wacky eccentric, a womanizer, and a lecher" (p. 3). Instead of defending Veblen's relevance to our world through a scholarly analysis of the origins and implications of his work, therefore, the authors decided to respond to these *ad hominem* attacks by defending the *hominem*. The result is a scattered narrative of Veblen's life and loves that for the most part avoids discussion of the ideas that made him such an important figure in early twentieth-century American intellectual life.

The story the Jorgensens tell of Veblen's life runs as follows. Veblen's first wife, the former Ellen Rolfe, was a vindictive, malformed woman who could not give her husband a normal sexual life. When he fell in love with the unattainable Sarah Hardy (soon to be Sarah Gre-

gory), an admiring graduate student at the University of Chicago, Veblen asked Ellen for a divorce. Ellen, however, would not grant it. Instead, "with a vengeance worthy of Moriarty's pursuit of Holmes, she tried to destroy Veblen's academic career" (p. 183). (Never mind that Holmes pursued Moriarty, not the other way around.) Ellen told tales of his mistreatment of her to university presidents who were all too ready to listen, costing him jobs at the University of Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell. Eventually, Ellen's prolonged absences—some lasting months and even years—gave Veblen sufficient cause to seek divorce on grounds of desertion in 1911. Ellen attempted to defend herself, seeking the court's sympathy by taking the stand in her wedding dress, but she was forced to accede to the divorce. In 1912, Veblen then married Anne Bradley (Babe) Bevans, with whom he finally knew happiness—until she went mad (1918-1919) and died (1920), leaving the aging Veblen in the care of his daughter-by-marriage, Becky.

The overall picture of Veblen presented here, then, is that of a man who married the wrong woman and could

not get free of her. Far from being a sexual predator, he is portrayed as having been loyal in his deeds, if not his desires. His romances with Sarah Hardy and Laura McAdoo Triggs, for example, are described as affairs more of the heart and mind than of the body. Ellen Veblen is the true villain of the piece, as are those who were foolish enough to listen to her, such as Veblen's biographer, Joseph Dorfman.[1] The captions to Ellen's photograph and to that of Sarah Hardy (found on the same page) make the moral of the story all too clear: "Ellen Rolfe Veblen. From the age of fourteen she had suffered from an ugly goiter, which she had concealed beneath high-collared Victorian dresses." "Graduate Student Sarah Hardy. 'A vision of light and divine grace'" (photos follow p. 144). Veblen himself is cast as the doomed hero of a Norse saga.

Perhaps because of these one-dimensional characterizations, this is a melodrama curiously devoid of passion. The authors care deeply about their hero, but the motivations of the actors in this tale are so unclear that their movements appear random rather than driven by deep emotion. At one point, for example, Ellen and Thorstein Veblen are sharing a home (if not a bed) in Chicago. Suddenly, Ellen is carving out a homestead on the slopes of Mount Hood, alone. What happened in between? We do not know. Similarly, Veblen himself is oddly absent from his biography. Godot-like, he is much discussed, but little seen or heard.

In part, this lack of depth and detail is inevitable in any biography of Veblen, for he asked that his papers be destroyed upon his death. As John Patrick Diggins wrote twenty-one years ago, "Thorstein Veblen's relations with women are one of the most discussed and least documented affairs in American cultural history. Any person's love life is a challenge to serious scholarship; Veblen's is a frustrating cul-de-sac." [2] In hopes of escaping this cul-de-sac, the Jorgensens make use of some recently recovered letters formerly in Sarah Hardy's possession. Even these letters, however, tell us little. They do reveal that Ellen Veblen took the initiative in bringing her husband's indiscretions to the attention of William Rainey Harper at Chicago and David Starr Jordan at Stanford,

and they do make it clear that Ellen Veblen was calculating as well as eccentric, but they give little insight into the wounded souls beneath the words.

The chief value of this book lies in the indirect evidence it provides for those seeking to draw connections between Veblen's private life and his work. Previous commentaries on the similarities between Veblen's women have usually noted only their illnesses and their tragic ends. Here, Ellen Veblen, Sarah Hardy, Laura McAdoo Triggs, and Anne Bevans are all revealed to be strikingly resourceful, self-reliant women. They were all somewhat unstable, but they were all intelligent and independent nonetheless. When one adds Veblen's "staggeringly competent" (p. 11) mother, Kari Veblen, to the list, then it is not hard to see where his idea of women as the diligent primal producers came from.

These characterizations lead this reader to draw the inference that a great part of Veblen's mysterious appeal to such women was simply that he liked them, respected them, and took them seriously. Similarly, though the authors do not marshal the evidence they provide into a sustained argument on this point, it does seem that to Veblen, the "woman question" and the "social question" were inseparable—and that the former was no mere appendage of the latter. If this book serves to inspire future scholars to take another look at the ways in which Veblen's relations with women were connected to his critiques of Gilded Age society, then it will have served a purpose greater than its intent.

Notes

[1]. Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America*. (NY: Viking, 1934).

[2]. John Patrick Diggins, *The Bard of Savagery: Thorstein Veblen and Modern Social Theory*. (NY: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 161.

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