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Nora Barlow - A Modern Cambridge Victorian And 'The Many Lives of Modern Woman'
Louis M. Smith

An Introduction: Integrating Divergent Items

The audience and thesis of a book carry multiple implications for what will follow in the discussion. In reading *The many lives of modern woman* (Gruenberg and Krech, 1952), I found the authors speaking to a number of issues about which I was concerned. In particular they seemed to offer a kind of subtext to the last chapter of the biography I am writing, *Nora Barlow and the Darwin legacy* (Smith, In process). If that works out, it is a major discovery or accomplishment. Further, when colleagues Sharon Lee and Kelly McKerrow sent a call for papers on women, leadership, and social justice, I thought the Gruenberg and Krech book spoke not only to the Barlow life but also to the Lee and McKerrow request. My intension and task is the integration of a review of a classic book, and a view and commentary of the life of Nora Barlow, a privileged 19th Century woman. She was well to do and part of the intellectual aristocracy of England. A part of her life concerned the issues of community leadership and for her, at a very personal level, attempts at the resolution of the problems of equality and social justice. Finally in this essay review I present, and try to integrate, a series of more autobiographical comments of the interrelationships between the book and my, and my wife's, personal lives. My hope would be that in accomplishing this complex task I would have a better grasp of several important issues in social science and more personally, how I want to end the biography of Nora Barlow.

First, to begin the discussion, I present several quotes from the foreword to *Many lives*.

We have been especially concerned with the women who have some choice about the way they can spend their lives and some scope in which to create new designs for living. This is not as small and special a group as it might seem, Millions of women, ranging in age from twenty to seventy or more do have some choice. .While we may at times have spoken more directly to the potential 'pace-makers,' we have throughout been speaking to all women who wonder about the lives they are living and about their role as modern women.

. Most of all, we hope you will share our enthusiasm for the opportunities you, as a modern woman have to enjoy lives -- the different stages that follow in time one after the other, and the different aspects as wife, mother, and individual that are lived at the same time. With new

insight and understanding it should be possible to build a life today that is rich, varied, and truly satisfying (Gruenberg & Krech, 1952, p 10-11).

Fifty some years ago, when I first read Gruenberg and Krech's 'call to possibilities' I was a young, early twenties, recently married graduate student. For reasons I no longer can clearly recall or specify my wife Marilyn and I resonated at the time to their optimistic, full of hope view of the future. In thinking through how we wanted to live, we found ourselves dealing with many of the issues they raised in their book. 'Choices' and 'designs for living' were important for us, even though they seemed not a part of the Skinnerian learning theory and the test and measurement approaches that dominated the University of Minnesota psychology department curriculum. After four years at Oberlin College, if not before, a kind of egalitarianism existed in our thinking. A concern for the 'rich, varied, and truly satisfying' life-style for each of us individually and both of us collectively were front and center in our thought. Caveat emptor, for these are reminiscences of fifty plus years ago and they may be more sentimentalized than the reality of the time.

In more recent years, and the reason I returned to their book, is that the invitation to contribute an essay seemed to reflect much of the life of Nora Barlow (nee Darwin), born in the late 19th century, 1885, a woman whose biography I am trying to write. And now, even more recently, the possibility has arisen to carefully consider the book, *Many lives* in a retrospective review integrating the book with some of these personal interests and the broader context of the journal issue, 'Advancing social justice: Women's work.' All in all, this synthetic task I have set for myself is a bit of a stretch.

A word of Nora Barlow! First, she is a granddaughter of Charles Darwin and that immediately put her into the category that Annan (1955) called the 'intellectual aristocracy.' But what first caught my eye is that she edited four books on the Darwin materials, the first as she turned fifty, the second in her sixties, the third in her seventies, and the fourth in her eighties. Remarkable late in life achievement, I thought. Later I found that as a young woman studying at Cambridge University she had done genetics research with William Bateson and published two papers in the *Journal of Genetics* in 1913 and 1923. And she had presented papers with the Cambridge University experimental plant physiologist W.W. Blackman at the annual British Association meetings in 1910 and 1911. Later, she had a complex role in beginning what has come to be called 'the Darwin industry,' the large amount of research on Charles Darwin. These are some of the highlights that I am trying to make sense of in the biography. 'Choices,' 'a design for living,' and a life that is 'rich, varied, and truly satisfying' seem built into Nora Barlow's life, long before Gruenberg and Krech wrote about 'modern woman' in 1952. A fit seems possible.

The Content of 'Many lives.'

In eleven chapters, that seem to group this way, with the first two chapters on 'what's new about being a woman' and 'great expectations,' the authors set the stage for their analysis and perspective. Then the authors assume that most women will marry and have children. They devote four chapters to 'the young wife charts her course,' 'can you be more than a mother?,' 'what about husbands?,' and 'the empty nest.' This becomes a kind of a 'seasons of a woman's life' to paraphrase the later Levinson et al (1978) volume about men. Then the authors leave the chronological strand and present three analytical chapters: 'guideposts for the lost women,' 'how some succeeded.' and 'the talented woman.' The last two chapters, 'education for uncertainty' and 'new vistas' are more in the way of guidelines for the future than narrow prescriptions. These chapters raise images of the last chapters of another book, 'our educational problems in the light of Samoan contrasts' and 'education for choice' of Margaret Mead's (1928) *Coming of age in Samoa*. Gruenberg and Krech do not cite this work of Mead's. In one long sentence Mead suggests the difficulties faced by young women in our society.

'The principal causes of our adolescents' difficulty are the presence of conflicting standards and the belief that every individual should make his or her own choices, coupled with the feeling

that choice is an important matter.' (1928, p. 234-235).

Gruenberg and Krech do spend time with another important book of that era, Virginia Woolf's (1929) *A room of one's own*. The imaginary account of 'Shakespeare's sister' is a priceless metaphor. Gruenberg and Krech agree with Woolf that choices are important, but Woolf with slight tongue in cheek reports on being asked to give a lecture on 'women and fiction.' She then launches in on 'choices.'

But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion.(1929, p.3).

So choices can be considered at several levels, from different communities, and across generations and oceans, with an astounding level of sophistication. Modernism as a concept has a longer, more varied, and interesting history than Gruenberg and Krech imply.

Although Gruenberg and Krech's essay is stated in the rhetoric of the early 1950s, and has an almost quaint traditional ring to it, the ideas remain more generally important. Similar strands were appearing in cross-cultural studies such as Mead's and in the initial statements of feminist writing in England such as Woolf's. Both were published in the late 1920s.

The long middle section of *Many lives* takes on 'the seasons of a woman's life.' Although marriage and family are the modal pattern within these arrangements, less clarity exists than in a young woman's grandmother's life. Continued schooling or a job are viable options. Yet for many women the choice is a false one.

Yet this is not what she wants either. She is discontented and frustrated, seeing no way out, seeing nothing else ahead. Both the choices before her are bitter choices. She therefore makes no clear-cut choice but vacillates between the two. She would like to chart her course, but, unable to do so, she drifts along aimlessly (Gruenberg and Krech, 1952, p.78).

This kind of anomie, so argue Gruenberg and Krech, can extend further as they next ask, 'Can you be more than a wife and mother?' At its worst, the young woman sacrifices much of her own life for her children. They cite an anonymous but exhausted writer who states the extreme position on child-centeredness.

Now that my children have reached college age I have reached what might be called the period of exhaustion. I am exhausted with too much parenting, exhausted not just for myself but for all my generation. .

People had come to believe in the paramount importance of the child. I wonder if ever in the history of the world there were -- or will be -- such devoted, self-obliterating parents as we were! When I recall the perfect orgies of anxious service we rendered I try to temper the severity of my judgment against the results -- against the poor, over-cherished, over-parented, offspring against whom I now raise my unsympathetic voice.

Gruenberg and Krech now pick up their own observations and judgments.

We have wondered particularly about the daughter. Her mother sacrificed so much that she held dear in order that the daughter might, in her time, sacrifice much of what she held dear for the

sake of her own children. And so goes the endless chain (1952, p. 104-105).

Into problems of this sort, Gruenberg and Krech raise a chapter about husbands and their role in the family. The luck of the draw in choices of a spouse and the long day to day discussions and negotiations about working or not working, staying home totally or part-time, having some household help, all are issues for the young married woman. But as couples come from different traditions, ethnic backgrounds, and religions these are not simple issues. Some couples are lucky, some work hard at these different perspectives, and some find both luck and successful negotiations.

Late in their book, almost in response to the above illustration and commentary, Gruenberg and Krech raise three major sources of problems of the modern woman. These are: isolation; the mechanisms/logistics of living; and the submergence of interests, talents, and ambitions from their earlier years. In contrast to earlier generations, many modern women are isolated from extended family and the social life and help that that brings to daily living. The isolation is compounded with the variety of modern appliances and 'labor saving' devices that suggest that the modern woman can do things quicker by herself, without needing help from friends and relations. Perhaps most significant is the combination of these two aspects with the submergence of talent and interests and hopes that often never recover in the life of the 'modern woman.' Gruenberg and Krech's are quite clear that these interests and talents need not be earth shaking nor at some national or international level of competence. Rather they are the items that bring personal satisfaction and often companionship with other young women. Nora Barlow's solutions to these problems, a half-century before, become a significant part of her story and this essay review.

Episodes from Nora Barlow's Life

The selection problem is critical in every story of a life or in using episodes from a life to make other points (Smith, in press). Here I will relate three major, vivid, and sometimes poignant, but not atypical episodes from Nora's life. They speak to the theme of this issue of the electronic journal, leadership and social justice; and they illustrate important aspects of the Gruenberg and Krech's book, a modern even though Victorian woman.

The Sidney Argent Relationship

In the late 1940s, a Workers Educational Association (WEA) tutor, Sidney Argent, and his wife, Muriel, came into Nora's life. He was a philosopher based in the 'Delegacy for extra-mural studies' at Oxford University. On Tuesdays in the 1950s they had weekly course meetings. In the course, they had been reading John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. For one of these meetings Nora wrote a several page essay 'Is equality an acceptable principle for social organization?' The instructor Sidney Argent commented:

I feel that in this essay you have felt the obstructions of actual social conditions to clear philosophical thought more than you usually do. I have the impression of a writer who not merely glances over her shoulder at facts awkwardly placed in the way of straight theorizing, but turns right round in her path because she thinks she hears some of the facts rising behind her like lions to devour her (Feb, 1951, Barlow Archives, CUL)

Two weeks later Nora responded with a two page 'Dear Dr. Argent' letter:

I certainly do want to discuss your general comments, now I have digested them, though I am not sure I have understood rightly.

I suppose I value stubborn and awkward facts more than I do deductive theories. So that if Christian's lions [from *Pilgrims Progress*] represent such facts, I feel he did wrong to go forward at the word of the porter watchful when he heard they were chained and mere trials of

faith. He went past them, afraid: is that facing difficulties? The only advances one ever makes oneself is by going round and round between the outward certainties (the stubborn facts) and the inward convictions (faiths); perhaps by reconciling the latter to the former, but not by passing them by.

But I may have your meaning all wrong. The straight path of theorizing may be the attempt to evaluate & preserve the immeasurables of art, literature, science and morality; the lions in this case are the despairing cry for justice & equality from the underprivileged. **These lions devour me constantly, & they are hardly chained. It is no easier to pass them by, in the name of eternal values, than it is to pass by the lions of eternal values in the faith of justice and equality.** (Emphasis added) (Barlow archives, CUL)

That seems a powerful statement to write an instructor after a comment of his. The language of 'devoured,' 'chained,' and 'eternal values' seems not offered simply or naively.

Much later, in another letter, after a hospital stay for hemorrhoid surgery in 1957, Sidney Argent wrote Nora a long, 12 page, letter. He reminded her that he had called her attention to Annan's (1955) article on the 'intellectual aristocracy' that 'dominated English culture.' He commented then:

One of these families was of course the Darwins. Charles was not hostile to religion but doubtful about it: like his granddaughter I should say. At any rate, to jump to the point, I know in the best of all ways, experience, that your scientific enthusiasm is so far from being incompatible with Christian charity. That true kindness is a major principle of your life. But my experience is of more than this; it is your friendship for me and M. I have felt it above all now, in this brief period of tribulation. Thank you, thank you, my dear. A spiritually starved childhood taught me to distrust the world. **You are among the one or two people who are at last teaching me to interpret it more generously.** (Letter, 12/16/57, Barlow Archives, CUL)

That concluding sentence from a sensitive poignant paragraph seems a telling commentary about Nora.

Then, more than a decade later, in 1970, and in retirement Argent continued the conversation with a couple of paragraphs in another letter.

The garden is only part of my Dartmouth life. Mornings are taken with a thousand house jobs. The dark evenings alone are for reading and here I make no new advances. Lately I have been reading a Penquin history of the reformation, but I remain unmoved. How much I would have liked to have been one of the well known men I hear about, who are well known because they have been devoted to their subject ever since childhood. I on the other hand have been so busy shaking off my working-class past, that I have faced the future with nothing positive about it. Indeed, now that I have got into that future, I find myself admiring men who have retained skill with their hands: like my father for instance, a joiner, who use to plan and make things on our kitchen table, while I played a child's game on the floor.

I often wonder how you are getting on, both with your garden and your scientific art. **Who writes to you now with their problems, or who comes to you? And do you send them away satisfied?** (Emphasis added. Letter, 10/28/70, Barlow Archives CUL)

At the time Nora was 84, a widow, and living now in Sellenger, her home in Cambridge. Argent, after the several decades, was now living in retirement with his wife in Devonshire. In vivid form, her relationship with Sidney Argent and his wife Muriel illustrate one item in Nora Barlow's attempt to resolve longstanding worries about the issues of privilege and her position in the intellectual aristocracy of England.

The Buckinghamshire Natural History Society

For many years Nora lived at Boswells, her husband Alan's family home, a large house on a large estate, in Wendover, Buckinghamshire. Nora founded the county natural history group and was one of its leaders for many years. A mimeographed copy of one program indicates Nora's influence on the group.

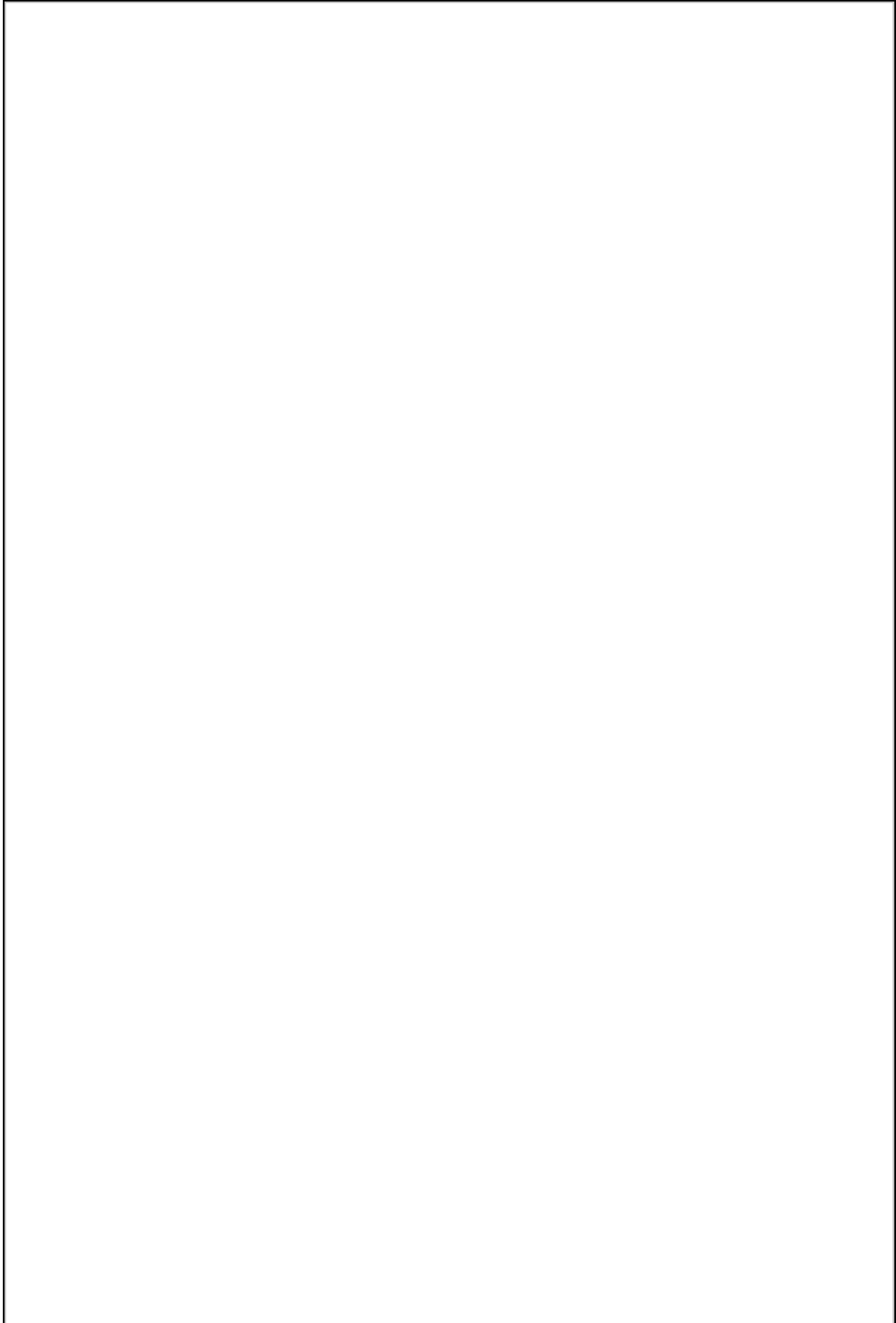


Figure 1. Buckinghamshire Education Committee, Missenden Abbey, Botany Weekend
[\[download a PDF version of Figure 1\]](#)

Even a casual view of the program suggests Nora Barlow's contributions. She gave the 'introduction to the course' on Friday evening. Then, immediately afterward, she gave the introductory presentation, with slides, 'Darwin as Botanist.' That talk had been presented earlier in Poland as part of a celebration of the work of Charles Darwin and later published formally. On Saturday morning, the group went by coach to her home Boswells, in Wendover, to see 'the chalk downland and beechwoods.' The evening address was presented by Sir Edward Salisbury, an old friend who was past director of Kew, the Royal Botanical Gardens. It is not difficult imagining her overall organizing role in this particular meeting of the group that she was chair for several decades. It was a leadership role to which she brought considerable social and intellectual resources.

But beyond that tilt toward leadership in this interpretation, more significant is her passion for gardening that began with her mother's, Ida Darwin, long term interests and talents and her garden at The Orchard, her home in Cambridge. Nora's natural history interests began with study and research with Blackman, a plant physiologist at Cambridge University and Bateson, and a geneticist at Cambridge University. Among her first writings were short biographical pieces on Darwin and Sir Francis Galton. Her editing began with the well-received *Charles Darwin's Diary of the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle* (1933) that Darwin kept of the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle. This was the first major Darwin manuscript published since her Uncle Frank had published the early outlines of what was to become *The origin of species* (1859). Later, in 1958, Nora published the 'de-edited' version of Darwin's *Autobiography*, now the standard version of the autobiography. These activities remained a core of her personal and professional life for decades as interests and talents merged, both as sources of satisfaction and as contributions to the world of Darwin scholarship. One more illustration of Nora Barlow's 'modernist' thinking appears in her introduction to her de-editing of Darwin's *Autobiography*. She comments:

He [Charles Darwin] still stands as the leading figure of that revolution in scientific thought which followed the publication of the *Origin of Species* in the middle of the 19th century, a revolution soon involving all realms of knowledge. But posterity must continually reassess the past, and accurate contemporary sources are specially needed to provide insight into those stormy seasons when the wind of accepted belief changes. The great figures must be seen in their own setting and their own words must be heard, cleared of the posthumous growth of later dogma (1958, p.11).

With this in mind, Nora restored some 6000 words from the original text that had been omitted in the earlier edition published in *Life and letters of Charles Darwin* (1887). These omissions related mostly to Darwin's religious beliefs and some not so gentle comments he made about some of his contemporaries. She had a vision of, and commitment to, truth and accuracy!

The Rise of Neo-modernism

Neo-modernism goes by many labels and many definitions. For me, the key issue is the confrontation of traditional values of the modern era with an array of value conflicts, dilemmas, and differences of opinion and thought in most Western societies. Further, the politicization of these personal beliefs, values, and the conflicts among them came to the forefront.

Since about 1950 when Gruenberg and Krech were writing, huge changes have occurred in the world. Many, if not most, of the changes were driven by technological developments, with others being driven by a reassessment of the core values of the culture. Rather than enter a long discussion here I will list a number of items that vary in specificity and complexity, but at heart convey large social issues.

- Atomic weapons
- Viet Nam war and dissent
- Birth control pill

Population explosion
Religious extremism - the right and left
Evolution, creation science, intelligent design
Civil rights
Affirmative action
Access to professional schools by women and minorities
Abortion
Gay and lesbian rights
Marriage contracts and civil unions
Working conditions: part time, flex time, job sharing
Global economy

This list can be organized and expanded in many ways. My point is simple for this essay. The modern period reflected in Gruenberg and Krech's book opened many choices for women. Technological and social change has complicated all of these choices and decisions. At one level it is a nightmare, at another level it reflects expanded opportunities for thought and action for women - and men.

In the midst of this, Betty Friedan, writing a decade after Gruenberg and Krech, published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Her book captured the public in a way that Simone de Beauvoir's majestic tour de force, *The Second Sex* published in France in 1949 and translated into English and published by Knopf in 1953 did not. Gruenberg and Krech's call for modern women to have a life beyond marriage and children was a smaller subtext under the heading of personal development and not submerging of interests, talents, and ambitions. In Friedan, several things happened. First she wrote in a mixed style of autobiography, conceptual analysis, and call for political action. She also had a talent for 'catchy' chapter titles - 'the problem that has no name,' 'the happy housewife heroine,' 'the crisis in women's identity,' and the 'the passionate journey.' All in all that is a very powerful stance. Her opening paragraph of chapter one captures her thesis.

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside husband at night -she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question - **'Is this all?'** (Emphasis added) (Friedan, 1963, p.11)

In one illustration the problem was phrased as 'the problem is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife and never being myself.' (Friedan, 1963, p.23). Later in a discussion of women's identity she speaks of her own experience:

I had come at seventeen from a Midwestern town, an unsure girl; the wide horizons of the world and the life of the mind had been opened to me. I had begun to know who I was and what I wanted to do. I could not go back now. I could not go home again, to my mother and the women of our town, bound to home, bridge, shopping, children, husband, charity, clothes. But now that the time had come to make my own future to take the deciding step, I suddenly did not know what I wanted to be (Friedan, 1963, p.62).

In more general terms, for Friedan the issue became a rallying cry as 'the problem that has no name.'

In a strange way, to turn autobiographical once again, for my wife and I this post- modern discussion adds a dimension to our own discussions of personal identity. In our travels abroad to various conferences, seminars, and longer-term professional visits or fellowships, Marilyn is 'Lou's wife.' In Kirkwood, Missouri

where we live and where Marilyn started, directed, and taught in Grace Church Preschool for three and a half decades, and seems to know everyone, Lou is 'Marilyn's husband.' We've puzzled over, and reveled in, that shift in status and identity. Small illustration, big effects! These post modern world changes these days seem not so much in our thought about our selves, although living out one's retirement has its own complexities. Rather these world changes turn our thoughts to our grown children, their partners, and to our teenage grandchildren. But still choices, 'designs for living,' and a life that continues to be 'rich, varied, and truly satisfying' remain beliefs and values and a personal challenge. Gruenberg and Krech, Friedan, and ourselves - not to mention Nora Barlow - seem to merge.

Conclusions

The intent of this essay was a synthesis of a review of *Many Lives of Modern Woman*, a view of a Victorian 'modern' woman, who in her action exemplified not only modernity but also a particular view of leadership and social justice, topics of interest in this issue of the *Journal*. Autobiography crept in on a number of times and occasions

Several conclusions, almost in the form of conjectures or lessons learned, seem plausible from the more descriptive account. Perhaps it is the too easy concept of 'modern' that bothers me at this point. Nora Barlow, born in 1885, with the advantages well beyond Virginia Woolf's 'a room of one's own and L500, grew up as the kind of woman highlighted in Gruenberg and Krech's modern woman of 1950. Arguably she is a modern woman today, of the 21st Century. She married (a very successful civil servant), had six children (one of whom had major physical handicaps), ran a large household (with considerable servant help), and built a life that was 'rich, varied, and truly satisfying.' That latter dimension seems one of the most important contributions of Gruenberg and Krech's argument.

Within that life, I have presented a vivid illustration of her struggle with issues of social justice and one resolution lying in a long personal and intellectual relationship with a WEA tutor, Sidney Argent and his wife. Further, through another long illustration Nora exemplified a kind of leadership in beginning and supporting the Buckinghamshire Natural History Association. Membership in that group was based on and drawn from people interested in natural history. A kind of egalitarianism existed there. Finally her work with the Darwin manuscripts led her early on into the center of 'the Darwin industry.' She helped many of the major figures in their intellectual efforts.

Throughout this discussion I have argued, implicitly mostly, that the problems life presents are varied and each individual solves them in her own way - and this was Nora Barlow's way. It would seem from Gruenberg and Krech's position, Nora is a modern woman.

But, alas, modernity seems overwhelmed by post-modernism. Yet Gruenberg and Krech, and Nora Barlow as well, offer a significant starting point for considering these newer and broader societal claims and conflicts. Their ideas and her life are latently echoed in the thought of writers like Betty Friedan and become touchstones for further consideration. Models as it were! But all that belongs in another essay!

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