



Isabel Paterson (1886–1961)

By Rachel Davison Humphries

Isabel Paterson lived an extraordinary life. She was vivacious and independent. She was witty, insightful, and stylish. She was a woman of unwavering principle and was sometimes acerbic and curmudgeonly. She had a compendious memory, a towering intellect, and was extremely well read. She was a force of reason against misguided collectivist ideas and a vocal public advocate for the individual and for capitalism through her books, articles, columns, informal literary salons, and letter exchanges. You would be hard pressed to find a more influential thinker in the modern individualist movement.

Born Isabel Mary Bowler (or Mary Isabel Bowler, the record is unclear) (Cox, 2004: 8) in 1886, Paterson was an unequivocal individualist. One of nine children, she grew up poor on the frontiers of Canada and the United States

in the 1880s. With only two years of formal schooling, she was almost entirely informally educated, teaching herself to read, which she then did voraciously. She was the consummate autodidact, an expert handyperson with an appetite for new experiences.

After leaving home in her teens she worked her way back and forth across the border around the Pacific Northwest taking on a variety of jobs until she landed in the publishing business. Like many women of the day, she began her work in publishing as a secretary, but her talents as a critic enabled her to become a columnist and short story writer (Cox, 2004: 23-40). In April of 1910 she married Kenneth Birrell Paterson. They quickly separated and it is unknown whether she ever saw her husband again. She kept his name, however, going by “Pat” for much of her life.

She witnessed forms of voluntary social association on the frontier that were largely free from external intervention but worked well to solve problems and generate peaceful, civil interaction.

Paterson was drawn eastwards and in 1912 left the frontier for New York City to experience its energy and to devote herself to literature. Shortly after arriving, she volunteered to be a passenger on an exhibition flight demonstrating a new technology—the airplane—over Staten Island. One of the few photographs she kept of herself shows Paterson smiling expectantly next to the pilot before the flight. When they reached 5000 feet, Isabel Paterson had a perspective no other woman had ever seen; she was the first woman to fly that high (Cox, 2004: 1-3). It was an exhilarating start to life in New York.

Paterson worked as a novelist, journalist, and editorial writer at a variety of publications until she landed at the *New York Tribune*, later the *Herald Tribune*, in which she wrote her famous column *Turns with a Bookworm*. The column would be published weekly for 25 years. It gave Paterson the outlet that would make her a household name—and an influence that would encourage a generation of individualists.

Turns was ostensibly a column for literary news and book reviews, but it became an outlet through which Paterson would explore every subject that interested her. She read constantly and conveyed all that knowledge and more in her weekly column for the paper’s *Books* section. She also used her work on the section to bring together copy-editors who met at informal salons on

Monday nights. These weekly gatherings took the form of all good salons, marshalling a wide array of minds to laugh, argue, and sharpen each other's thoughts and arguments into the wee hours of the night.

Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Great Depression all greatly affected Paterson. Highly skeptical of the "Best Minds" (as she would sarcastically call them in her columns) making decisions for Americans, Paterson went so far as to advocate for no intervention at all in the economy in the wake of the Great Depression in the 1930s. According to Paterson scholar and biographer Stephen Cox, Paterson saw a major difference between the depression she lived through in the 1890s and that of the 1930s: the loss of resilience among Americans to suffer the hardship necessary to get back to a sound economy without government intervention (Cox, 2004: 132). Americans had become complacent and comfortable in their wealth and believed the politicians when they said they would be able to fix the economic problems that would eventually lead to the Great Depression without difficulty.

After years of exploring her ideas on politics in her columns, essays, reviews, and novels, in 1943 Paterson published her most enduring and important work, *The God of the Machine*. The dust jacket of the first edition reads, "Only free men, in a free economy, can create or maintain the long circuit of energy that makes civilization work. This book tells how and why."

Paterson's problem in *The God of the Machine* was to explain the rise of Western civilization, especially the unprecedented prosperity and power of America. She found her solution in the analogy of the use of energy in mechanical systems and how social systems can unleash, coordinate, and magnify human energy or restrict, defuse, and dissipate it.

What the past shows, by overwhelming evidence, is that the imponderables outweigh every material article in the scales of human endeavor. Nations are not powerful because they possess wide lands, safe ports, large navies, huge armies, fortifications, stores, money, and credit. They acquire those advantages because they are powerful, having devised on correct principles the political structure which allows the flow of energy to take its proper course. (Paterson, 1943/1993: 13)

For Paterson, the source of energy in society is the creative and active individual. While the laws of physics tell us that energy cannot be created or destroyed, Paterson calls the point at which energy enters into a particular system or circuit “the dynamo, generator, converter, or motor” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 82). She writes, “In the social organization, man is the dynamo, in his productive capacity” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 82). Private life under proper institutional arrangements tends to be inherently productive. Political activity expressed through police power, on the other hand, is essentially restrictive—“*it is an instrument of negation, and nothing more*” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 78). “[S]ince [delegated] authority can only be prohibitive, the problem is to keep this repressive agency subordinate to the creative faculty” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 94). If the goal is to maximize the use and flow of creative energies, the purpose of the political system must be to prohibit those activities, and only those activities, that impede the exercise of individual creative energies. Legal restraint that goes beyond these bounds becomes more of an impediment than an aid to human well-being. Systems of control—forms of serfdom, slavery, and totalitarian dictatorship—limit which human energies are exercised, artificially constraining the work of those humans to a smaller circuit of energy than would otherwise be possible.

Paterson illustrates these principles by discussing how Western society evolved from societies of status in the Ancient and Medieval world, in which legal control rested on classes and categories of status, to modern societies of contract, in which individuals are free to exchange and coordinate on mutually agreeable terms—drawing her distinction from Henry Sumner Maine.

In a society of contract, the rights of individuals to act as they wish is limited only by the equal rights of others (Paterson, 1943/1993: 42). This evolution from status to contract thus has implications for the use and flow of energy. Under serfdom and forms of totalitarian organization, law acts as a preventative, keeping people from working in ways not expressly permitted in advance. In a society based on contract law, i.e., a commercial or capitalist society, law is only a secondary corrective for when human energies come into conflict. Paterson likens contract law to a safety valve that eases pressure in a mechanism about to get out of hand, but which otherwise remains disengaged:

Contract law is the same type of mechanism in the political organization. The legal restriction does not occur until after individuals have made a voluntary contract and one of the parties fails to carry out its terms. Contract law has no primary authority, no jurisdiction unless invoked by the individual; and then it can take cognizance only of the point at issue, which is determined by the previous agreement of individuals. (Paterson, 1943/1993: 103)

Contract law, therefore, is not primary and preventative, it is secondary and involves the presumption of liberty. People are afforded the maximum freedom to act and interact in ways that are mutually compatible. “It is the only method of organization which leaves the creative faculty and corollary productive processes their inherent and necessary freedom” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 103). Moreover, she writes that this “type of organization predicates a permanent base”: individual private property (Paterson, 1943/1993: 103-104).

For Paterson, enabling this maximal flourishing of human energies is not the product of accident. It would be a fallacy to think that it would exist under anarchy. Essential to the maximal unleashing of human energies is the problem of structuring political organizations in such a manner as to enable a society of contract. Positive institutions are needed and human intelligence and experience are required to generate these institutions (Paterson, 1943/1993: 28). Paterson praises the political structure of the United States for providing just such a context. While devoting an entire chapter to “Slavery, the Fault in the Structure” of the US Constitution, Paterson elsewhere concludes that,

For its realization of these moral relations and the structural embodiment of them, the Constitution of the United States has been justly described as the greatest political document ever struck off at one time by the mind of man. (Paterson, 1943/1993: 134)

Paterson praises the Bill of Rights and the treason clause of the US Constitution, for instance, because when taken together they “establish the individual as the dynamic factor. The Bill of Rights withdraws entirely from political control both the faculties and the instruments of initiative and enterprise”

(Paterson, 1943/1993: 126). The First Amendment, for example, meant “No law might be passed against freedom of the mind, whether in religion, in speech, or in print” (Paterson, 1943/1993: 126). Paterson highlights that the treason clause includes the provision that, “No attainder of treason shall work corruption of blood”; in other words, punishment for treason is directed only at the individual perpetrator and does not extend to forfeiture of honours or property for his or her family, for instance. Here Paterson points to the idea that the Constitution affirms individualist moral principles: that accountability and property belong to a responsible individual, not to a collective group. When respected, these principles liberate those individuals to act and experience the consequences of their actions.

All these provisions in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are of the utmost importance in relation to the flow of energy; the fact which they express accounts for the unparalleled expansion of the United States in territorial extent in the given time, by accounting for the even more extraordinary extension of the field of physical science and mechanical invention. In a hundred and fifty years, men suddenly enlarged and corrected their knowledge of scientific principles... and devised means of application which made possible a concurrent increase of population and a rise in the standard of well-being beyond even the dreams of humanity in the past. Nothing of the sort had ever occurred in the world before; history reveals nothing comparable to the United States as a nation... What happened was that the dynamo of the energy used in human association was located. It is in the individual. And it was withdrawn from political interference by a formal reservation... The dynamo is the mind, the creative intelligence... The material means on which intelligence projects by initiative is private property. Nothing else will serve. (Paterson, 1943/1993: 130)

It would take us too far afield to convey Paterson’s analysis of the structural checks and balances the US Constitution places on unlimited democracy, but

she thought highly of its means of checking the power of majorities to deprive minorities of liberty.

It should also be mentioned that Paterson's commitment to individual liberty is not founded on materialism or utilitarianism. For her, "the American axiom asserted political equality as a corollary of the inalienable right of every man to liberty" (Paterson, 1943/1993: 120). Moreover, she wrote, "materialism will not admit human equality" (Paterson, 1943/1993: 119). Human beings are not materially equal to one another in any way. Rather, the basis of the justice of individual rights for Paterson arises from man's nature as a creature of mind, will, and reason.

Human life is of an order transcending the deterministic necessity of physics; man exists by rational volition, free will. Hence the rational and natural terms of human association are those of voluntary agreement, not command.

Therefore the proper organization of society must be that of free individuals. And their equality is posited on the plain fact that the qualities and attributes of a human being are ultimately not subject to measure at all; a man equals a spiritual entity. (Paterson, 1943/1993: 121)

Paterson thus sees a dignity in human beings that is expressed in the active energy of each individual, which implies a moral need to respect each person's sphere of liberty.

Finally, this dignity is threatened when humanitarians seek to make themselves politically superior to others in order to help them. The threat of entrusting "the humanitarian with a guillotine" (the title of her most famous chapter), is threefold: first, it creates a power to take from those who are productive to give to those who are not in a way that is not susceptible to any logical principle of limitation. The power to plunder upends the normal order in which charity is only a secondary activity after production has taken place, threatening the general prosperity. This power is also a power of the humanitarian to help himself so long as he can find others to "help." Second, this kind of subjugation of individual energy to the tyranny of such political humanitarians can

extend in principle, and has extended in practice, to instances in which killing and starving millions is seen as acceptable for a greater good. Finally, it creates perverse incentives for both the political humanitarian and those they seek to help in a way that threatens to trap individuals in a dependency that robs them of their dignity as responsible and dynamic human beings.

The God of the Machine was not a commercial success. The literary community was split on its readability, with some claiming it to be a work of genius and others deriding it. It was, however, a transformative and powerful book for many in the individualism movement.

Paterson's greatest legacy has been her influence on those around her. As explored in a variety of recent articles and books, Paterson was the intellectual grandmother of the modern classical liberal and libertarian movement. Her impact was nothing short of remarkable, influencing both Ayn Rand and Rose Wilder Lane and scores of admirers, including William F. Buckley, Jr. of the *National Review* and Leonard E. Read of the Foundation for Economic Education.

Paterson's most famous interlocutor, Ayn Rand, credited Paterson with a profound influence on her understanding of capitalism (Doherty, 2007: 122). Throughout the early 1940s Rand and Paterson would stay up until the early morning discussing all manner of topics, with Rand literally sitting at her feet, asking questions and absorbing everything Paterson had to say (Cox, 2004: 220). It was a shocking relationship to observers who knew Rand. Rand deeply respected Paterson's knowledge and wit, and Paterson appreciated Rand's mental power; she regularly recommended Rand in her column (Cox, 2004: 221). The two began to split over clashes of principle and temperament until comments at a party finally dissolved the friendship (Cox, 2004: 314). Cox (2004: 305-306) and Doherty cite contention over religion as an important dividing line between them. Rand was a devout atheist and Paterson believed that "the axiom of liberty cannot be postulated except on the basis of Christian philosophy" (quoted in Doherty, 2007: 123). Despite the split, Rand continued give *The God of the Machine* glowing praise and recommend it as a primer on individualism (Cox, 2004: 359).

Paterson's relationship with Rose Wilder Lane was much more balanced. When Lane published *Credo*, her essay on individualism, in the *Saturday*

Evening Post in 1936, Paterson advertised it in her column and praised the subsequent book, *Give me Liberty*. The women visited multiple times, striking up a friendship and correspondence until they also had a falling out around 1946. However, as Stephen Cox has written, “no one who had been attracted to Paterson’s ideas ever seems to have lost respect for them, or for her” (2004: 359).

All three of these women published seminal works in 1943: Paterson’s *The God of the Machine*, Lane’s *Discovery of Freedom*, and Rand’s *The Fountainhead*. A feedback loop of creative energy circled them, with Paterson at the center. These women were all outsiders in a world dominated by men. Maybe as women they were naturally inclined to see the value of individual responsibility, initiative, and effort. As Jennifer Burns argues in her article in *The Journal of American History*, they raised their ideas to a philosophical level that transcended gender.

[T]he three women were widely acknowledged by the men they met as more politically astute and intellectually advanced. Lane, Paterson, and Rand pushed their correspondents toward a new hyperindividualism that gave the state no productive role in the economy and little positive role in society. They built this philosophy on the bedrock of nineteenth-century liberalism, modifying and updating the autonomous self for a new century. Their correspondents recognized the women’s ideas as different from—and in many ways more satisfying than—those of intellectual luminaries such as Friedrich A. Hayek, the famous author of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), or the libertarian economist Milton Friedman. Relying on persuasion, education, and relationship, their leadership would not survive the institutionalization of conservative intellectual life, nor would it be acknowledged in most histories of the movement. But by articulating, defining, and defending a radical philosophy of antistatism, they expanded the ideological borders of modern political thought. (Burns, 2015: 749)

It was Paterson’s work that “developed radical individualism into a philosophy of remarkable richness and explanatory power” (Cox, 2004: 4).

In 1949 *Turns* was cancelled, without fanfare, and Paterson was retired with a small pension. She took to retirement by writing another novel and submitting articles for publication, most notably with the *National Review*. She filled the rest of her days with reading, gardening, and managing her small number of properties. In January of 1961, after a short illness, Paterson passed away.

Paterson’s life could be encapsulated in a quote from one of her first novels, *The Magpie’s Nest*: “It’s expensive, but I like to own myself...” She lived, wrote, befriended, and unfriended according to her values, living a life of principle and personal responsibility. And along the way “she showed her readers how to find their own place on an intellectual circuit of energy” (Cox, 2004: 279).

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