

BOOK REVIEW

Woman's Evolution

From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family

BY EVELYN REED

Reviewed by: Ann Karpf

Me Jane, you Tarzan

If any member of that primitive species, the male anthropologist, is still stalking about, unashamedly snarling that woman is but a weakly naked ape, biologically inferior to man, let him beware. The next fortnight will make a monkey of him. For Evelyn Reed, the noted American feminist anthropologist, has just arrived in Britain for a two week nationwide lecture tour (starting tonight in Conway Hall, London) to promote her book *Woman's Evolution*.

First published two years ago, this study of the matriarchy has sold 45,000 copies, has been translated into seven languages, and catapulted Ms Reed (who is over 60) into the centre of the American women's movement. It came as the culmination of 25 years solitary but determined investigation.

Ms Reed's thesis is that male anthropologists have refused to look back beyond the beginnings of patriarchal society to the matriarchal clans which preceded it. Once upon a time, she claims, there was no father-family where men dominated women socially and economically. On the contrary, society was organised around the maternal clan.

Nor was it Man the Hunter who civilized society. It was Woman. Far from rendering them weak and vulnerable, women's child-bearing function made them uniquely suited to socialise human beings away from a crude cannibalistic society.

The need to provide for their offspring, and their relative immobility helped them initiate a whole range of productive processes: being gatherers and diggers, they organised a food supply more stable than the unpredictabilities of hunting. They domesticated stock animals, were the first to use fire, made textiles, pots, were leather-makers, architects, and engineers.

These were no private, domestic, household activities, but economically essential and carried out collectively. In short, Ms Reed marshals a formidable array of scientific evidence to show that primitive woman held a more esteemed and pioneering role in society.

She turns out to be a delightfully forthright lady, with much intellectual spring, glowing conviction, and blue eyes that are doomed to be described as mischievous, if not twinkling. Although questioning male historical prejudice has become almost respectable these days, Ms Reed —by profession a painter —started her researches in 1952 in a library in London, with no scientific or anthropological training whatsoever.

"I came to England with my husband (the Marxist philosopher and writer George Novack), and was curious about the so-called universal incest taboo. So, I took myself off to the Royal Anthropological

Institute to read up about it, and was startled to find that this taboo was originally not a sex but a food taboo, and began as a female reaction against cannibalism.

“Within a day or two I knew I was on the right track—it was like a flash of lightening—and one door led to another.” Ms Reed’s work was informed by both her feminism—“I’ve been a feminist since I was born, but I probably didn’t know it”—and her socialism which was sparked off by a chance encounter with a New York Trotskyist professor in 1938 in a bar on 10th Street. She says that before the birth of the feminist movement “the loneliness was excruciating. I had to keep all my ideas to myself—I didn’t have circles of people to discuss them with. What sustained me was my curiosity, and when I met George he was very supportive. But what I needed most of all were women to talk to.”

She spent 25 years on the book and was convinced no one would publish it. But, “I finished my first draft just when the women’s movement broke and then I knew it would be published.” She took to the lecture circuit and was acclaimed by feminists, and avoided by anthropologists, who reject the idea of a matriarchy, and who she tried to bully into debating with her. Most of them cravenly refused.

But she reserves her most lethal disdain for what she calls the “nothing but” school of anthropologists. Including among them Desmond Morris, author of *The Naked Ape*, Robert Ardrey, and Konrad Lorenz, they argue that because man is an animal, he is nothing but an animal or “an ape with a few extra tricks.” Animal instincts are used to justify human behavior: war is simply our innate animal aggression (Ardrey), women preen themselves with cosmetics and fashion to attract men just like female animals do (Morris), and so on.

Ms Reed deftly flays this argument. “Instincts have long been supplanted by learned behaviour as the dominant factor in social and cultural behaviour,” she says. “These writers ignore the extent to which man has himself changed in the course of history. A child, for example, must today be taught the dangers of fire which animals flee from by instinct.” And the fact that humans can make tools, engage in labour, and not simply reproduce themselves but also produce the necessities of life, separates them from animals. Reed sees the “nothing but” philosophy as a pernicious brand of *laissez-faire*, particularly harmful to women.

But is there not a danger that she has simply sought out evidence to corroborate her own pre-conceived opinions about women? “Is there not a danger that my opponents have done the same?” she comes back smartly. And her sources are scientifically impeccable.

“We’re not going back to a matriarchy, because those times were very primitive. Those of us born in this scientific era will never relinquish what we know, but we have to try and get rid of some of the bad things.” She suggests that primitive savage society was far more egalitarian than arrogant modern man gives it credit for, and that this—along with Marx—suggests that human beings have changed and can change again. She believes that the women’s movement is leading the way in the next change, toward a more collective, sharing society.

Meanwhile, Ms Reed spiritedly challenges her opponents to stand up and be counted. “I invite the male anthropologists who have laid down the ground rules to come out and debate with me on the matriarchy. Why won’t they defend their view? Why are they hiding in the closets? I want Lévi-Strauss and the others right out there on a public platform.”