
JOYCE OLDHAM APPLEBY



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Married with young children and living in Pasadena, California in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Joyce Appleby might have had a clear path in front of her as a suburban mother and then matron in a prosperous, unthreatened social world. Those who knew her in later years would always be struck by certain vestiges of that seemingly inevitable destiny: her perfect posture, her effortless social graces, and her impeccable taste, whether for clothes or the wine to be served with an elegant meal she prepared herself. Something in her character confounded those expectations, though its source was uncertain. Was it the searing memory of long lines outside soup kitchens in Omaha, Nebraska that she saw as a child; the more prosaic wish to make a mark as the youngest child in the family; or an intellectual curiosity that could not be satisfied by part-time journalism?

Whatever the source, she retained that habit of confounding expectations throughout her life. It made her a truly original scholar, an inspiring teacher, and on occasion an infuriating interlocutor to her friends and, no doubt, her family. The French have the perfect expression for it, an *esprit de contradiction*, and it served her well. There was no verity she could not question, and as a consequence she saw no real barrier to exploring the questions that seemed most important to her. At the same time, she kept that sense of social justice awakened in her as a young child and never let pass an occasion for making a difference, whether it was creating new courses for first-year students lost in a huge public university, organizing shipments of American studies libraries to universities across the world, or agitating for a living wage for workers in Los Angeles.

Joyce came to be known as one of the leading historians of the United States, but she started her career with studies in French and British history. She gained a certain freedom from starting late and from earning her Ph.D. at the Claremont Graduate University, which, as she described it, was the only Ph.D.-granting university close to her home and children. Long before the word “transnational” entered the vocabulary of historians, Joyce chose to write her dissertation on the way a group of French deputies at the beginning of the French Revolution used the American model to gain political advantage against those who favored the British example in which aristocrats played an outsized role. Joyce credited her advisors at Claremont for alerting her to the need to put U.S. history in the broadest possible context, but she probably took their advice even further than anyone anticipated. This broader Atlantic context would influence all of her subsequent work.

But that work would take time. Divorced, remarried to Andrew (Andy) Bell Appleby, and now with three children, she took a job at San Diego State University in 1967. Teaching four courses on Monday,

Wednesday, and Friday gave her new skills and an inexhaustible enthusiasm for teaching, but along with her obligations at home, she had precious little time for research and writing. This apparent obstacle only provoked higher ambitions. Andy's research for his Ph.D. took them to England, so Joyce dove into English history and wrote a book that became an instant classic, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (1978). Many great British historians (then an almost entirely male set of luminaries) had made their reputations by tackling aspects of the country's political history. When Joyce wrote about the intellectual history of capitalism's impact—assessing how contemporaries made sense of wealth and the market and naturalized both, and relating these to the political trajectory of liberalism—almost no one else had. These were Marxist-inspired questions now answered within the idiom of Joyce's left-of-center liberalism. She despised smugness and ruthless exploitation yet she could not accept an alternative to capitalism that privileged state ownership.

One of the longest reviews came from J. G. A. Pocock, whose epic work on republicanism, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), had taken a very different tack; he argued that republican thought in the Anglo-American tradition was essentially hostile to possessive individualism and the spirit and reality of capitalist endeavor. While granting the importance of Joyce's book, he resisted what he termed a Whig history of the rise of liberal and Lockean ideals and regretted Joyce's emphasis on ideology as a deep structuring force. He preferred the more fluid and less obviously political term of "conceptual languages." His work coincided with and further inspired an upsurge of interest among Americanists in republicanism. Given her own Anglo-American interests, it is perhaps not surprising that Joyce would take up the gauntlet. Having prepared the way with a series of articles, she laid out her alternative stance in *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (1984), which she deepened in *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (1992). She saw republicanism and liberalism as complementing each other and offered a nuanced but optimistic account of the embrace of capitalism in the new U.S. republic. The debate that ensued was spirited but always respectful. It played out in local and national conferences and countless articles and review essays.

After her husband Andy died suddenly of a heart attack, Joyce took up a new post at UCLA in 1981. For the next 20 years, she would be a key figure in the history department and on campus. Given her well-known attachment to liberalism, it probably amused her to be accused of being a leading Marxist during the skirmishes of the culture wars. She never hesitated to become involved, whether it was defending

the national history standards developed by UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools, setting up new programs for undergraduates, or protesting the planned removal of trees from the sculpture garden on campus. Having become a leader in the profession with an international reputation, many honors followed. In 1990–1991 she served as Harmsworth Professor of American History at Oxford University. She was elected president of the Organization of American Historians (1991), of the American Historical Association (1997), and of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic (1999). She was named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1993), Member of the American Philosophical Society (1994), and corresponding fellow of the British Academy (2001). With all these honors she never forgot other women historians and often put their names forward for similar acknowledgment.

Resting on her laurels was not in Joyce's nature. Her pace of publication quickened even as the topics broadened, and she gave unstintingly of her time to teach innovative undergraduate and graduate courses and mentor students and young faculty alike. She got high marks in her course evaluations but often with the groaning complaint that she assigned too much reading. Daunted but intrepid, she mastered PowerPoint, if only because she was prodded by the newly acquired skills of her co-teacher. There was a competitive edge to Joyce and, when coupled with her contrarian side, anyone could suddenly acquire a formidable adversary. There was no winning a case in favor of big money, government lies, or the fiction that the poor are where they are out of malfeasance.

Given her abiding interest in explaining the significance of scholarship to the public, it is not surprising that she closely followed the rise of postmodernist criticism and helped her students organize an accessible reader on the subject (*Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective*, 1996). In 1994 she published her own views on the subject in a book written with the two of us, called *Telling the Truth about History*; it addressed the issues of truth, science, nationalism, the culture wars, and postmodernism, making the case that a philosophically aware and empirically grounded notion of historical truth was an essential foundation of democratic societies. It was a primer for students and interested readers alike. It was not easy for three historians to write such a book, especially since each of us went over every sentence in it. The constant exchange of versions between two coasts—in the age before email attachments—created one set of challenges, and the effort to develop a unified presentation produced another. As might be expected, we did not agree on everything in the book; ever the critic, Joyce was much more dubious than we were about any nationalist bent

in U.S. history. Where we insisted that every nation depended on history to cement its identity, she was most alert to the ways in which this purpose enabled historians to neglect the contributions of minorities, women, workers, and Indigenous peoples. For her, history's critical role was paramount.

Joyce's fascination with the fragility of early American identity blossomed into *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (2000). This work was based on some 200 autobiographies and gave an up-close-and-personal view of the sensibilities of early Americans. Always she found them spirited and striving, enthralled by the prospect of innovation and, yes, even nation-building (Joyce was happy to contradict herself). When she retired, she announced a desire to garden and see her grandchildren rather than write, yet three books followed, aimed in different ways at the wider reading public: a short biography of one of her heroes, Thomas Jefferson; a general history of capitalism, *The Relentless Revolution* (2010); and a history of curiosity in the West, *Shores of Knowledge: New World Discoveries and the Scientific Imagination* (2013). Joyce had always embraced the public role of historians; she co-founded the History News Service with James M. Banner Jr., which helped historians place op-ed pieces in newspapers and with wire services. In her last books, she wanted to share her historical passions with as many readers as possible. She once laid out the deepest convictions of historians, which were clearly very much her own: "history arouses curiosity about humanity, teaches the lessons of unexpected consequences, and fortifies the will to study life in all its complexity while helping those who study it to reject consoling simplifications."

Joyce Appleby touched thousands through her books, teaching, public lectures, and television appearances, but perhaps even more lasting was the example she set, not just for the many women she mentored over the years, but for all scholars. Political engagement, fierce convictions, and bravura argument could sit side by side with loyalty, concern, emotional support, and sheer joy in life.

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