



Critique of Thorstein Veblen: Victorian Firebrand by Henry and Elizabeth Jorgensen

By Dr. Mason Gaffney

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Critique of Thorstein Veblen: Victorian Firebrand by Henry and Elizabeth Jorgensen

Jorgensen, Henry and Elizabeth, 1999, *Thorstein Veblen: Victorian Firebrand*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe

Critique by Mason Gaffney, early October 1999. Revised October 30 after discussions with Esther Baran, daughter and confidante of Becky Veblen, adopted daughter of Thorstein Veblen.

This is an interesting and useful book, advancing a good deal of new material about the personal and professional travails of Thorstein Veblen (T.V.), and interpreting them in new ways more favorable to T.V. On the whole, this is probably a change for the better. Unfortunately, the book's credibility is compromised by negligent handling of evidence and lack of editing. The present critique focuses on the treatment of Wallace Walter Atwood (W.W.A.) and his wife, Harriet, the sister of T.V.'s second wife. This treatment is flawed by inconsistencies and serious misattributions that never should have passed the editing process. It is in part gratuitous, irrelevant to the basic Veblen story, as though the Jorgensens had made a supplemental agenda out of attacking the Atwoods, for reasons not given.

I. Alleged 1914 Clubbing Incident

P. 144, note 29, supposedly supports saying that W.W.A. was "against any activity that involved Thorstein Veblen." Cit. is to Upton Sinclair, *The Goose Step*, p. 293. However, there is no reference to Veblen there. Evidently note 29 was meant to go with the previous sentence, that W.W.A. was "one-hundred percent pious ... patriotic ... and plutocratic." A gratuitous opinion like that, which cheapens Sinclair's otherwise useful and fascinating book, hardly warrants an endnote, and has nothing to do with Veblen. Note 29 serves another, and fraudulent, role, however.

This citation to Sinclair is placed as if to support the allegation of Becky Veblen (T.V.'s adopted daughter) that W.W.A. struck Babe's head with a rifle butt, in Chicago, in 1914, to persuade her not to marry Veblen. The endnote itself, on p. 251, clearly links Sinclair as the source for the 1914 incident. But when you read Sinclair, he is discussing an entirely different event in a different time and place, at Clark, in 1922. Sinclair says nothing about the alleged 1914 incident, for which there is only one source: a statement by Becky made in the 1990s. The Jorgensens are beefing up their inadequate sourcing by invoking imaginary support from Sinclair. This is at best gravely negligent.

The Jorgensens' note 29 also says there are "variations on this story." That should raise a red flag, as it surely would in court. There is only one accuser and eyewitness, Becky, and she spoke up only seventy years or more after the alleged fact. "Variations" in a story are a sign of low credibility. Prudence and fairness should have made the Jorgensens look further, or resist the temptation to publish such a damaging charge in the guise of established fact. Becky was a dear person, whose eccentricities I admired, and whom I cherished as a friend and correspondent, but

in her nineties she seemed a bit fey. Even earlier, T.V., no male chauvinist, called her "scatterbrained," according to the Jorgensens.

The heavy and uncritical reliance on Becky (and on her loving, proud, and devoted daughter, Esther Baran, who passes on what she heard from her mother, and understandably supports) is in contrast with the high skepticism the Jorgensens show towards Ellen Rolfe, whose motives and mental stability they impugn (p. 183, Chap. 23, *et passim*). They may be right, but it is not clear why the anti-Veblen witness is dismissed and the anti-Atwood witness is accepted uncritically. After all, Becky's mother, the alleged victim, lost her sanity toward the end, and who knows what she said that influenced her dutiful and impressionable daughter, Becky. Family loyalty counts positively in life, but negatively in weighing testimony.

The Jorgensens provide a hint of a reason for their attitude: they interpolate some gratuitous characterizations that suggest they may be making a case, or at least indulging some biases. They label W.W.A. as "an ultra-conservative professor of physio-geography." Physio-geography has no left and right wings to speak of, any more than chemistry, so "ultra-conservative" is there just to discredit W.W.A. for their intended audience, the audience of the publisher, M.E. Sharpe. Sharpe is a quality publisher (in spite of the careless flaws in the Jorgensen book), but it is relevant here that they are known for specializing in anti-"ultra-conservative" works.

Later, the Jorgensens represent Mrs. Atwood as "saying [or more probably shrieking]: 'You cannot marry Professor Veblen.'" The part in brackets is from the Jorgensens. There is no evidence that Mrs. Atwood "shrieked," and the only reason for interpolating it seems to be "to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative" (W.S. Gilbert). They doctored Becky's testimony to fit an unflattering image of Mrs. Atwood, whom the Jorgensens malign several times without ever specifying why, and without its bearing on their main theme anyway.

They should consider the possibility that the Atwoods' opposition to Babe's marrying Veblen was based on social, rather than political, conservatism. Babe's and Mrs. Atwood's father, Alexander Stuart Bradley, was actually something of an activist liberal reformer (p. 94); their mother was an atheist. He had been involved in winning a case for the attorney general of the state of Illinois against a land grab by the I.C.R.R. (Illinois Central Railroad Co. v. State of Illinois, 146 U.S. 387 (1892)). This case helped establish the public trust doctrine in the United States, and is often cited as a landmark. It was decided a month after J.P. Altgeld, another Chicago lawyer, was elected governor of Illinois, and it is highly likely that Bradley and Altgeld admired each other.

Yet Bradley threatened to "put his dying curse" on Babe if she married Veblen. Presumably this was not because he was offended by Veblen's, or anyone's, criticism of human follies. It might more likely be because T.V. was still married, and Babe would have to precipitate his divorce (which she did) in order to marry him. Babe had been wooing T.V. for years, 1905-1914, before he was free to propose marriage, so you might think social conservatives would have preferred marriage. However, nine years of premarital relations, even if justified by circumstances, might well have turned off almost any middle-class Midwestern family of that era.

The clubbing allegation itself is extremely grave, and not to be published lightly. Newspaper editors commonly require reporters to have at least one corroborating source. Paul Veblen did make an attempt to evaluate Becky's story. Paul Veblen does not appear in the index, nor in the bibliography, but he is the source of note 2, Chapter 21—an interview he taped in 1993 with Becky Meyers and her daughter, Esther Baran. (The Jorgensens say 1992, but my letters with William Melton—see next paragraph—indicate 1993, when Becky would have been ninety-two years old.)

This interview was an indirect result of a request made to me by William Melton, who wanted someone to interview Becky and Esther and inquire, among other things, into this clubbing allegation. I was tempted, but declined, not wanting to be the agent to dig up an old scandal that might hurt people now living, for no current purpose. I did go so far as to suggest Paul Veblen, whom Melton knew anyway. He is a retired news editor (Santa Barbara), presumably skilled in interviewing, and evaluating sources and stories. He also happened to be travelling to Idaho, where Becky and Esther then lived. And he was an interested relative. Thus, an independent effort was made to corroborate Becky's story—an effort the Jorgensens apparently did not make themselves. Apparently, too, they found nothing in the tape to corroborate the story, or they would have used it. This omission bears little weight, however, one way or the other, because both Paul Veblen and Esther Baran (who was present) believe that Paul was too rushed during the interview, and Becky clammed up. Esther thinks that Paul was too aggressive for Becky, and she stonewalled.

The Jorgensens' account of the clubbing incident is jumbled. On p. 141 it occurred after W.W.A. had "come in" to Babe's parents' home, where she received the call from T.V., and W.W.A. "tried to stop her phone call." Becky arrived after Babe had hung up, after having accepted T.V.'s marriage proposal. However, on p. 251, note 29, it was Babe who phoned T.V., and "she spoke with Atwood as she was going out the front door." We are left to imagine how she went backwards from the front door to the interior to be clubbed, and how this stopped a phone call already completed.

This would also have been a good place for the Jorgensens to bring out that Babe's body was autopsied (she died six years after the alleged blow), and no evidence was found of any blow to the head. They mention this elsewhere, but in another connection, in an endnote (p. 256, n. 33). If one is going to pass along a damaging tale, one should set it in conjunction with relevant evidence, pro or con. What the Jorgensens do, however, is allude to it later as an established fact (p. 159), and claim it had lasting results in the form of severe headaches (they give no source for this, but it is clearly Becky).

A possibly relevant point is that Rollin Atwood, son of W.W.A., refused to have a gun in the house, even after retiring in semi-rural Virginia, where many neighbors routinely owned and used guns. Rollin idolized and emulated his father. This makes one wonder how likely it is that W.W.A. would have been handy with the rifle butt, and whose rifle it was, as the alleged incident allegedly occurred in the home of Babe's parents. Rollin's daughter, Letitia, does not believe that W.W.A. owned a gun. It is hard enough to believe that any man would presume to order his wife's sister whom she may not marry, in any house, and then try to enforce his will by clubbing her after she had already accepted the proposal.

Babe, on the other hand, was noted as a "crack shot," a regular "Calamity Jane," according to the Jorgensens, known for "determination and a fiery nature." (p. 95). She was brave, independent, and feisty. She once threatened to kill a man who allegedly had molested Becky, and she frightened a band of drunken marauders from her Idaho cabin by winging one through the hat in the dark (p. 121). That does not jibe with Becky's later image of Babe as passive victim. What college professor would take up a rifle, presumably the homeowner's, against a fiery Calamity Jane, in her own parents' house, with family around? It's a hard tale to swallow. (Veblen himself, it is surprising to learn, kept an automatic pistol—n. 26, p. 247. As he owned nothing worth stealing, one wonders why.)

Becky explains Babe's silence on the matter, and her own as well, by Babe's wanting to protect her cousin Rollin from knowing that W.W.A. had struck her; and she made Becky, a witness, promise to keep the secret until Rollin died. One problem with that is that Rollin's widow was still living. Also still living was (and is) Rollin's little sister "Polly" (Mrs. Elliott Hedge), a Veblen fan, who has now had to read the allegation in what will likely become a much-quoted book.

I can also vouch from personal experience that Rollin (my father-in-law) was loyal to T.V., whom he claimed as his uncle, and would not tolerate any of the idle gossip one hears about T.V.'s alleged promiscuity. It is hard for me to believe that W.W.A. and T.V. were bitter enemies.

The Jorgensens write that Becky supported herself by babysitting. Certainly she lived frugally, in VERY tight and humble quarters. They might have mentioned something about her husband and Esther's father, a union organizer named Meyers, who was killed in a traffic accident when Esther was about four years old. Becky hinted to me that it was not an accident. Maybe it wasn't, but such hinting also raises the possibility that Becky, the sole witness against W.W.A., may have shipped on some of her mother's documented paranoia. The Jorgensens, before retailing the clubbing story, should have looked into that.

On p. 178, Esther is quoted that Becky had been "close to getting a master's degree in microbiology." The Becky that I met once, and valued as a friend and correspondent, showed no signs of intensive scientific training or mindset. This was the same Becky, only slightly younger, that the Jorgensens interviewed. They might have checked the allegation. My impression is that Becky had enjoyed dabbling in science and culture at Chicago, but without much depth. On April 7, 1988, Becky wrote me:

"He (T.V.) felt obliged to put Babe's orphans (16 & 17 yrs old) [Note by M.G.: When Babe died in 1920, Becky would have been nineteen] through college, U. of Chicago, etc.—me—I just went on and on: geology, spiral nebula theory of Earth's beginning, paleontology, zoology, anthrop., pre-medical, preventive medicine. Until Toyse Dr wrote me that T.V. was very frail and couldn't live another year in New York City trying to keep job at New School. Could I take him to Florida or Calif."

The Jorgensens say that Becky apparently misdiagnosed her mother's cause of death as meningitis, "on the basis of what she knew" (p. 256, n. 33). That is not inconsistent with a hypothesis that Becky was an unreliable medical observer and/or reporter, prone to jump to

conclusions. The actual cause, say the Jorgensens, was a lung infection. Veblen called it an abscess. However, the Jorgensens give no source for Becky's opinion. In a letter to me, dated April 4, 1988, and cited by the Jorgensens on their p. 243, note 1, Becky writes, "Autopsy showed mastoid as cause of death." Meningitis, lung infection, mastoid, abscess, whatever... The Jorgensens should have sorted that out for their readers.

To help evaluate Becky's state of mind, I quote below what I wrote to Bill Melton on June 24, 1993, when I had just spent several hours with Becky and the impressions were fresh:

"Becky told me that her mother, Ann, told her never to tell Rollin, Tish's father, about the gun incident. Rollin was a beloved playmate. He idolized his father; Ann wanted to protect him from the knowledge. Accordingly, Becky says, she kept mum until Rollin died, after which she felt free to tell someone. Apparently she has now told several people, and soon the world.

"Becky is not the most credible witness. There is something of the 'professional victim' about her; at times she is fey. The narrative you sent me, transcribed by Esther, wanders—only a Veblen scholar would understand all the allusions that lack antecedents. History relates, anyway, that her mother Ann became paranoid in her late 30s, and was institutionalized. The girls, Becky and Ann,¹ were sent to live with relatives or friends in Massachusetts. Her narrative refers to life in an orphanage, with a period of serious, exploitive neglect evocative of Little Orphan Annie. Who knows what effect this had on Becky's psyche.

"She is a lovable, apparently pacific and idealistic person; I doubt she would intentionally slander anyone. She might, however, tend to overestimate the power and malevolence of a traditionalist, self-righteous, hawkish, domineering person who had spoken imperiously and presumptuously to her mother."

Maybe W.W.A. was guilty as charged. I do not claim to know. I do not agree with his politics. I like many things about Scott Nearing, whom he silenced, and Upton Sinclair, who criticized him. I do know, however, that the burden of proof is on the accuser, and the Jorgensens have not come close to meeting that burden. I also know that the accused or his agent has a right to confront and cross-examine the accusers, a right denied to W.W.A. by virtue of Babe's and Becky's long silence. I also know the statute of limitations applies. The Jorgensens rightly criticize college presidents at Chicago and Stanford for trumping up personal charges against Veblen and other professors whom they wished to dismiss on ideological grounds. This fine sense of decency and fair play should work both ways.

II. The Jorgensens on Atwood and the Nearing Incident, 1922

On pp. 171-172 the Jorgensens bring up a 1922 incident involving Wallace W. Atwood (W.W.A.) and Scott Nearing. The connection with T.V. is forced and tenuous. The authors use it to trump up a feud between W.W.A. and T.V., and attack W.W.A. and mock his wife. The only

¹Becky's narrative refers to a brother, Tommy. This is the first I had heard of him.

relevance to T.V.'s life is that Mrs. Atwood was Babe's sister. In the process the authors make several errors that lower their credibility.

On p. 144, note 29 is there supposedly to support saying that W.W.A. was "against any activity that involved Thorstein Veblen." The citation is to Upton Sinclair, *The Goose Step*, p. 293. However, Sinclair does not mention Veblen there. Evidently note 29 was meant to go with the previous sentence, that W.W.A. was "one-hundred percent pious ... patriotic ... and plutocratic." Sinclair does write that, although it is just a gratuitous opinion, without any support or specifics, and without any relevance to T.V. (On the first point, W.W.A. was a Unitarian and something of a freethinker in religion—not the usual meaning of "one-hundred percent pious." His mother-in-law, with whom he was on close terms, was "an amateur herb-doctor and a self-proclaimed atheist," p. 94.)

On p. 297, Sinclair does allude to T.V. He writes that Nearing, a speaker whom W.W.A. cut off, was drawing at the moment on T.V.'s *The Higher Learning in America*. However, W.W.A. is quoted as saying that Nearing was misquoting and misinterpreting T.V.—not that he was "against any activity that involved Thorstein Veblen." One could equally well write that W.W.A. was defending T.V. against being misinterpreted. Indeed, the Jorgensens say themselves that Nearing "extrapolated unwarranted socialistic meanings from [Veblen's writings]" (p. 172). That has a ring of truth: many socialists did that to T.V., who was not himself a socialist, as the Jorgensens point out many times. In this case the Jorgensens, in circling the Atwood punching bag, are tripping over their feet.

The Jorgensens fault W.W.A. for making himself an "overnight, authentic Veblen scholar," yet the sarcasm seems misplaced—it was nine years earlier that W.W.A. and T.V. had become brothers-in-law, at which time W.W.A. already knew a lot about Veblen, a former colleague at Chicago, who had been seeing his wife's sister from 1905. (I have a book that T.V. gave to W.W.A. in 1923, and I surmise it was not the first such gift.)

That is not to justify W.W.A.'s cutting off the speaker, Nearing, which was a big mistake. It is, rather, to question the Jorgensens' handling of it, and of W.W.A.'s efforts to conciliate his critics and make amends. On p. 172 they note that W.W.A. invited T.V. himself to lecture at Clark, but T.V. declined, for health reasons. The Jorgensens spin this creditworthy act into another debit. W.W.A. only did this because he was "beleaguered," and "thought it wise." That is mind reading, not scholarship. They give no evidence for imputing an unworthy motive; they might equally have written that W.W.A. invited T.V. to redeem Clark's reputation as a haven of free speech. There is a strong impression that the Jorgensens are out to "get" Atwood, not sparing his wife, either as individuals or as symbols; and this supplemental agenda has little to do with the biography of T.V.

On p. 260, note 38, the Jorgensens try to explain the 1946 retirement of W.W.A. by the Nearing incident of 1922. That is too far-fetched. Tenure among college presidents is notoriously short; W.W.A. lasted twenty-four years after the Nearing episode. During that time Clark did become, as he planned, the place to specialize in geography. W.W.A. also patronized Robert Goddard, a professor of physics at Clark, en route to becoming the "father of American rocket science." Whether that was worth sacrificing other programs is a matter of judgment on which

the learned may differ, and do. It could be he learned something from the Nearing episode, which is to his credit. By 1946 he was well into the retirement years, anyway.

We learn elsewhere, p. 160, that in 1919 W.W.A., the alleged hater of Veblen and assailant of Babe, had stood in for the indisposed T.V. and escorted Babe from Bellevue to the McLean Hospital in Waverly, MA, near the Atwood home, and wrote comfortingly to T.V. about her condition. This suggests there was some degree of mutual trust, friendship, and respect. On p. 162, we read that T.V. stayed with the Atwoods for some time while visiting Babe in the McLean Hospital in Waverly. The Jorgensens make no effort to reconcile this behavior with the rest of their story of bitter conflict.

I can vouch that Rollin Atwood, who worshipped and emulated his father, W.W.A., was also loyal to T.V., whom he claimed as his uncle. Rollin was not just loyal to T.V., but fiercely so. He would not tolerate the idle gossip one hears about T.V.'s alleged promiscuity (a legend that the Jorgensens have laid to rest). It is hard to believe that W.W.A. and T.V. were bitter enemies, as the Jorgensens paint them.

III. Minor Editorial Flaws and Negligence

p. 22: ~~Miniver~~ Cheevy should be Miniver Cheevy.

p. 94: the wife of Alexander Stuart Bradley is cited as Harriet Ayer Tolle. It is spelled Towle, and has some relation to the silver firm.

p.94: A.S. Bradley is said to be descended from Senator William P. Fessenden. The family genealogist, Polly Atwood Hedge, and Becky Veblen both say it was from the senator's brother.

p. 98: the Jorgensens mislocate Washington Island. It is between Green Bay (the water body, not the city) and Lake Michigan, at the northern tip of Door County, the eastern "thumb" of Wisconsin.

p. 103: J.B. Clark is called a "follower of Adam Smith." One might expect that from a tyro, but Henry Jorgensen boasts an M.A. in Economics from J.B. Clark's old university, Columbia, and should know better. To the historian of economic thought, J.B. Clark stands as a major antagonist of Smith, and framer of a virtually new discipline, "neoclassical economics," which rejected the "classical political economy" of Smith, and is a watershed divide in the field.

p. 162: the Jorgensens identify Esther Baran as the granddaughter of her grandmother's father.

Index: Stuart Bradley appears as Stewart.

Endnotes: sources are identified by some code, e.g., WCMR, CURB & ML. However, no Rosetta Stone is provided.

IV. Conclusion

In fine, the Jorgensens have published a valuable contribution to Vebleniana, explaining and vindicating aspects of Veblen's personal behavior that his enemies have unfairly used against him for a century. They have also made a sympathetic character of Anne Fessenden Bradley,

whom he married. In the process, however, they have maligned Wallace Walter Atwood with no semblance of due scholarly or legal process, ignored evidence in his favor, and thereby lowered their overall credibility.