

The four Simone Weils

by Erica DaCosta

Simone Weil: As We Knew Her by Joseph Marie Perrin,

Gustave Thibon, and J. P. Little; translated by

Emma Crauford. New York: Routledge,

2004, 208 pp., \$19.95 hardcover.

The deceased did kill and slay herself," wrote Simone Weil's doctor—with unwarranted certainty—after she died in London in 1943. At age 34, in exile from her beloved France, Simone Weil died of uprootedness. Her unique character and prismatic thought continue to be influential today. Biographical writings have always been popular, as her life and death were dramatic, and she suffered an "excess of temperament," but during her lifetime, her developing philosophy and political activism garnered equal attention. Since her death, however, her mystical thought has taken center stage, and her work as an educator and educational theorist has largely been eclipsed. I believe there are four Simone Weils that deserve equal weight: the theorist, the political scientist/activist, the educator, and the mystic.

J. P. Little, in a new introduction to *Simone Weil: As We Knew Her*, a joint reminiscence originally published in 1952, tells us that "when Paris was occupied by the Nazis in 1941, Simone Weil, accompanied by her parents, fled south, arriving eventually in Marseilles." As a French Jew, she had been recently excluded from the teaching profession and was seeking work on a farm—she often sought out manual labor jobs, since she found unpalatable the fact that those who made decisions in society had no experience of such work. She was introduced to Joseph Marie Perrin, a Catholic priest, who put her in touch with Gustave Thibon, a farmer, Catholic, and autodidact. In return for her help on his farm, she gave him lessons in classical Greek (he was clearly no ordinary farmer). She spent many months in the company of Thibon and Perrin, and when she left for the US with her parents in May 1942, she entrusted Thibon and Perrin with her notebooks and papers. The two men came together to produce this reminiscence and editions of her work.

Simone-Weil-the-theorist described herself as a Bolshevik before she was 15 years of age, but by the time she graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, she had become "a stern critic of both Right and Left," T. S. Eliot said of her in his introduction to Weil's *The Need for Roots*. She saw clearly that the Soviet Union would become a system for destroying initiative, culture, and thought, while she also despised the wastefulness and dehumanizing effects of capitalism. She believed that in order to abolish what Marx described as "the degrading division of labor into intellectual and manual work," workers must increase their control of language. This led her to become Simone-Weil-the-political-activist, who organized and taught evening classes for laborers. She worked as a trade unionist, hosted Trotsky in Paris (and debated vigorously with him), fought in the Spanish Civil War, and wrote extensively against France's colonial oppression around the world. (Little has also edited and translated a collection of Weil's writings on the subject, *Simone Weil on Colonialism: An Ethic of the Other* [2003].) Her final work, *The Need for*

Roots, was her attempt to guide her country out of what she perceived as the moral, spiritual, and political decay into which it had fallen.

Simone-Weil-the-educator has been underexamined. Thibon tells us that

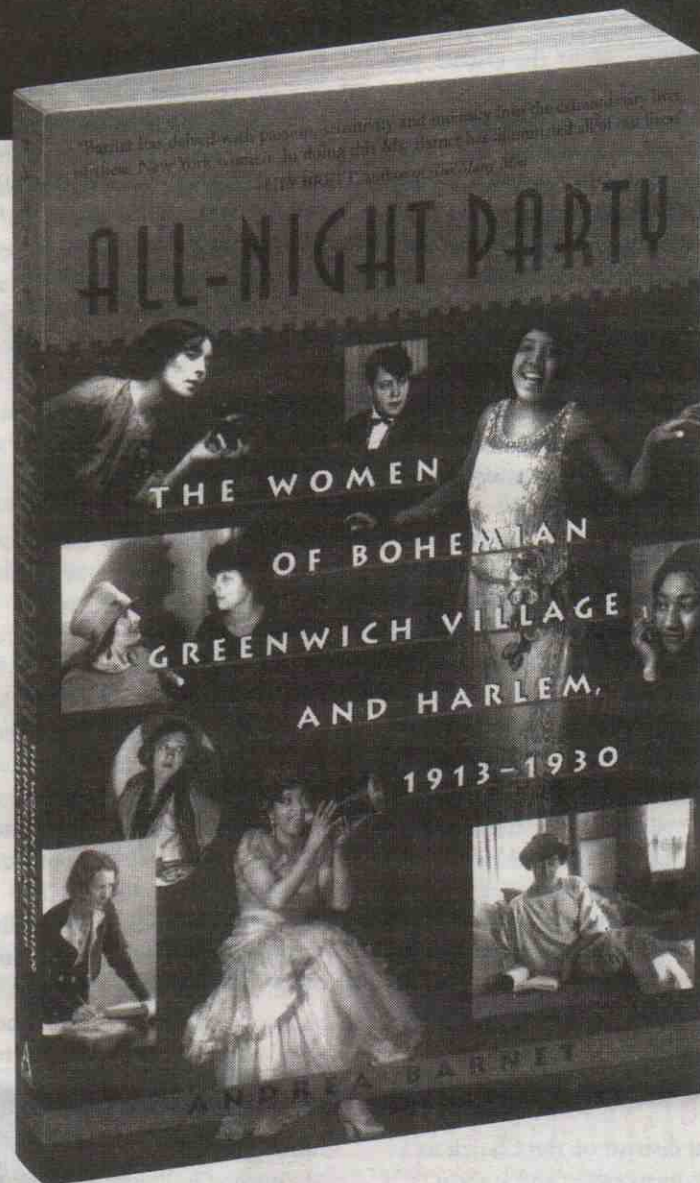
her gifts as a teacher were tremendous: if she was inclined to overestimate the possibilities of culture in all men, she knew how to place herself on the level of no matter what pupil in order to teach no matter what subject. I can imagine her carrying out the duties of an elementary school teacher just as well as those of a university professor....she brought to the task...that quality of extreme attention which, in her doctrine, is closely associated with prayer. (p. 117)

Weil taught after she graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and in addition to her pedagogical talents, she developed a fertile body of ideas on the subject of education. She asserted that "the first duty of a school is to develop the power of attention in children ... [T]hey must learn to be attentive in order to be able, later on, to be just" (from Weil's *Ecrit Londres* as quoted by Richard Bell in *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice, the Way of Compassion* [1998]). As Thibon noted, her doctrine of attention is at the root of all her modes of thought. For Weil, justice flows from attention. A judge, for example, "should first be taught to see the suffering in the vagrant that stands before her." Weil elegantly equates care and justice when she offers this scenario, and she identifies the primary deficiency in both judge and vagrant as lack of education. "Nothing...is more frightful than to see some poor wretch in the police court stammering before a magistrate who keeps up an elegant flow of witticisms," she says in her *Selected Essays*. This is the same kind of attention to which Sara Ruddick refers in her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1990). Citing Weil, Ruddick expands upon the idea: "Attentive love...represents a kind of knowing that takes truthfulness as its aim but makes truth serve lovingly the person known." It is the attention of genuine interest and generous vision, acting freely outside the prisons of ideological systems or personal defenses.

Weil's doctrine of attention bears striking resemblance to contemporary feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan's ethic of care. Gilligan notices a general divergence in women's and men's senses of justice, with women more likely to start from a point of care than from a notion of impartiality. Though Weil would likely have disowned the division Gilligan makes between men and women, both Gilligan and Weil point to the inescapable yet grossly obscured fact of human interdependency. However, to align Gilligan and Weil is as awkward as it is pro-

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—Bust magazine

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—Publishers Weekly

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ductive. Weil was far removed from her own femaleness and from sexuality altogether. She never managed to achieve a full understanding of herself as an embodied creature, much less as a woman. However this should not obscure her view of all beings as "thickly situated" in a time, a place, and a web of human relationships.

Simone-Weil-the-mystic often overshadows the others, in spite of the fact that Weil published not one piece of religious writing during her lifetime and shared her religious life with startlingly few besides. The emphasis on her religion developed because of the crucial, penultimate period she spent with Thibon and Perrin. Thus, Weil-as-mystic is revived with the re-publication of these reminiscences, perhaps at the expense of her identities as teacher, theorist, and political activist. Yet, what we are offered in this memoir is unique and exquisite—a witness to a life. The love and reverence these two intellectually formidable men display in their writing are moving, and they stand as a monument to Weil's power as both thinker and being. This is not to suggest that Perrin and Thibon have produced a hagiography. In fact, they wrote this piece in protest against the hagiography they had noticed emerging in the years previous, which they felt misrepresented and dehumanized her.

Weil drew liberally from the world's major wisdom traditions—especially Buddhism and Taoism—but was most drawn to Christianity. Thibon and Perrin, steeped in philosophic Christianity, offered Weil—all four Weils—the most rigorous and fruitful kind of dialogue: It fed her for the rest of her life. Although she considered baptism, she ultimately resisted it. Thibon says: "[H]er constant refusal of baptism and the judgments she passed on the Church are sufficient proof that her conscious doctrinal thought was not Catholic." He goes on to describe her

radical distrust of the Church as a social organization and authority....modelled on imperial Rome, and confiscating for its own advantage the liberty of man and the gifts of God. Her conscience rebelled against a spiritual power which proclaimed that there was no salvation outside the Church. (p. 148)

This is why we must contend with Weil-the-mystic rather than Weil-the-Christian. Though her capacity for mystical experience and thought was enormous, it is her very mysticism that is, for many, problematic, if not incomprehensible. This unfortunately fosters disengagement with the other three Simone Weils. Moreover, the fact that Weil spent virtually no time developing a systematic philosophy, or even polishing the fragments that piled up in her notebooks, was compounded by the language she used, which, as Thibon notes, "so often leads to confusion between the ontological and mystical planes." Mystical writings necessarily have a kind of topsy-turvy Zen about them, since their purpose is to jolt our thought out of typical patterns. Thibon understands better than most that Weil wrote on both the classically philosophical and the mystical planes without confusing the two. Thibon and Perrin serve as admirable navigators through both the complications and the voids.

Whatever one's theoretical orientation, it is hard not to be dazzled by the relevance and vitality of the exchange among these three people. When, for example, Thibon tries to address Weil's disgust with the corruption of the church, he essentially addresses the problem of evil:

Everywhere...I see as you do, the pharisaism, the conventionality, the false virtues and false glories, all that deception which is inherent in social things...This armour of conventions and lies risks stifling the divine germ, and at the same time it protects it. It is no easier to dissociate them than to separate the wheat from the tares before the harvest. ...Here on earth they are indissolubly joined to each other. This is a scandal for the weak or for the unintelligent....but it is a necessity... It is unavoidable that this transitory world, where we have the two-fold duty of accepting life as long as it lasts and consenting to death when it comes, should be compounded of good and evil. For, if it were only evil, how could we consent to live? And if it were only good, how could we resign ourselves to dying? (p. 152)

Whether viewed through a secular or religious lens, this treatment of evil is, if not entirely novel, extraordinary.

There is also the personal Simone Weil, the one who, after the German invasion, accidentally dropped a suitcase filled with French resistance papers on a city sidewalk and scrambled frantically to gather them up. The one who declared that the room Thibon offered her was "too comfortable," putting him to a great deal of trouble to arrange a small residence for her on another part of his property, and who smoked prodigiously. The one whose mother made Gustave Thibon promise that he would look after Simone's safety and the one whose brother, Andre Weil, was one of the greatest mathematicians of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the Simone who refused to take food sufficient to sustain her is the one too often brought to the fore. Weil biographer Francine Du Plessix Gray makes it central. However, Hilary Mantel in her recent article, "Some Girls Want Out," in the March 2004 *London Review of Books*, says:

[N]oting that anorexic girls have contempt for their own flesh, we hospitalise them and force-feed them, taking away their liberties as if they were criminals or infants.... But we don't extend the same contempt to pub brawlers or career soldiers. Men own their bodies, but women's bodies are owned by the wider society.

Enough has been said about this manifestation of Weil's personality, especially since her neuroses certainly did not limit themselves to the intake of food.

Despite the enormous strength of her will and the force of her opinions, Weil perceived personal ambition as a human grotesquery—an idol that must be destroyed because it denied both the mystery of iniquity and the possibility of relief for the afflicted. She earnestly desired to efface all trace of a separate self in order to achieve union with the good, the true, and her special conception of God. When Thibon recounts their last meeting before she sailed to the US, not long before her death, we feel his rich, attentive love for her. The painful void of disunion that Weil often experienced had, at least momentarily, vanished. Thibon observes, "I will only say that I had the impression of being in the presence of an absolutely transparent soul which was ready to be reabsorbed into original light."

Irish women rebels

by Lauren Byrne

Daughters of Ireland: The Rebellious Kingsborough Sisters and the Making of a Modern Nation by Janet Todd.

New York: Ballantine Books, 2003,

346 pp., \$25.95 hardcover.

No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923 by Sinéad McCoole.

Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press,

2003, 288 pp., \$29.95 hardcover.

Irish history isn't all popery and potato famine. The aristocracy have their tales too. Ireland's landed class was made up almost entirely of English Protestants after 1652, when Oliver Cromwell confiscated the best lands from the Norman-Irish and old Gaelic families and shunted them to the arid west of the country. In the 19th century, the whimsical tales of writing partners (and cousins) Edith Somerville and Violet Martin (who wrote under the name of Martin Ross), authors of *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* [royal magistrate] and other books, helped shape the popular image of the Anglo-Irish after land reform had robbed them of much of their gilded status. In the late 20th century, Molly Keane's comic novels portrayed the deeply eccentric lives of the Anglo-Irish who stayed on after independence, islanded by snobbery and poverty behind the crumbling walls of their demesnes. Even in their heyday, the Anglo-Irish suffered the peculiar woes of colonialists. Though loyal to the crown, they resented the authority of the lord lieutenant of Ireland, the crown's representative who governed the country from Dublin Castle. Although they were as well heeled as their counterparts across the Irish Sea, they were victims of English snobbery.

Born into the last quarter of the 18th century, the Kingsborough sisters represented the cream of the Irish Ascendancy (the name their relation George Ogle coined for their class). It was a period that saw the Anglo-Irish at their most spirited. Enjoying more parliamentary control in Ireland than they would ever have again, their capital city, Dublin, was awash with cultural entertainments that rivaled London's any day. Architect James Gandon's many successful commissions (including the Custom House and the Four Courts) were giving that city the distinctive Georgian look that would be its saving grace even after it and its privileged class had declined into more squalid times.

Lacking the volumes of extant correspondence that made Stella Tillyard's account of the Lennox sisters in *Aristocrats* (1994) and Amanda Foreman's best-selling *Diana, Duchess of Devonshire* (1998) such riveting reading, Todd's subjects do not come as vividly to life. Mary, the younger of the two sisters is seen only in outline (presumably no portrait exists of her either). But in place of Tillyard's sweeping psychological assertions, Todd brings the birdcage existences of aristocratic women sharply into focus. Political and social pawns to be sold on the marriage market as early as age 13, the aristocratic female was

expected to reflect glory on her brothers by a suitable marriage and to breed annually for several years to protect her husband's property rights (the Duchess of Leinster had 22 children). It's remarkable, says Todd, that aristocrats, "raised by servants to consider their own desires paramount and their own persons effortlessly significant, ever managed to live together." The marriage of the 15-year-old heiress Caroline Fitzgerald to her 16-year-old cousin, Robert King, Lord Kingsborough, in 1769, was fairly typical. Its purpose was to reunite vast King holdings in Cork and Roscommon. The fractious Caroline dutifully produced several children (including the two who are the subjects of Todd's book) before taking off for London and the joys of court gossip. At home, Robert took mistresses and abused his tenants.

Caroline's daughters, Margaret, born around 1771, and Mary, born shortly thereafter arrived in an era that prized emotion over reason, so it's not surprising that they were less compliant than their mother. However, Mary Wollstonecraft, their governess for a year, gets most of the blame for their willfulness. When she accepted the position, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and scandalous love affairs were still in the future, but her ideas about a woman's right to self-determination were not, and these she imparted to her charges. Given the dearth of information about the girls' younger days and Todd's extensive knowledge of Wollstonecraft (she's written a biography of her), it can feel at times as if Todd is exaggerating the influence of the girls' governess almost as much as the gossipy bishop who claimed that Wollstonecraft's theories were leading young girls "to the vestibule of the Corinthian temple of Seduction and Adultery."

Hairstyles may also have contributed to Margaret's taste for rebellion. Tall and angular, she did not find the towering hairstyles of the 1780s flattering, and she often dressed as a boy. Wollstonecraft's preference for plain dress and her scorn of aristocratic entertainments must have been balm to Margaret's soul. Though she later claimed Wollstonecraft as the greatest influence on her life, Margaret never actively espoused her governess's feminist cause. And while Wollstonecraft commented, "As a nation I do not admire the Irish," it was to the not-too-well-defined notion of Irish independence that Margaret directed her energies.

Revolution was in the air. In 1791, inspired by activities in America and France, members of Ireland's middle

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