

# A founder of *Feminist Review*

Mary McIntosh, 1936–2013

**M**ary McIntosh was an intellectual, a socialist and a feminist activist. She was a woman of strong principles, combined with an abundance of personal kindness. She occupied a pioneering role in many social movements of the late twentieth century, in particular the Gay Liberation Front and the second-wave feminist movements of the 1970s.

Mary was born in Hampstead to socialist parents. After being educated at High Wycombe school, she read Philosophy, Politics and Economics at St Anne's College, Oxford (1955–58). From there she went to the University of California at Berkeley, where her political outspokenness against McCarthyism resulted in her deportation from the USA. This event was a prefigurative moment in Mary's future career, during which she never shrank from political engagement; she interpreted the role of the intellectual as one fully engaged in the life political.

Mary invested as much of herself in her political activism as in being an academic. In the 1970s and 1980s – unlike today – when there was a burgeoning of new social movements, there was no sharp divide between the sphere of intellectual ideas and that of political engagement. The two activities infused each other, and creative thought and practical policies seemed to flow back and forth with ease. It is thus possible to see clear connections between Mary's publications and her work in movements. For example, in 1968 she published the profoundly influential paper 'The Homosexual Role' in the journal *Social Problems* (vol. 16, no. 2), while a few years later she was one of the key members of the newly formed UK Gay Liberation Front. She was subsequently appointed to the Policy Advisory Committee of the Criminal Law Revision Committee (1976–85) where she was instrumental in pressing for the lowering of the homosexual age of consent from 21 to 18 years.

This pattern of meshing intellectual thought and political activism was carried through into Mary's teaching. She started the very first courses in feminism and gender, after her appointment in 1975 to the Sociology Department at the University of Essex. By this time Mary was very much involved in the second-wave feminist movement. True to form, she was active in the establishment of the key demands of the movement, in particular the one that became known as the Fifth Demand, which was the call for women's financial and legal independence from men. At the same time she was developing her ideas about women's



subordination through marriage and the family and formulating critiques of the welfare state for its failure to acknowledge mothers as independent citizens with their own claims to welfare support. It was a key argument in Mary's thinking that women with small children who could not be fully self-supporting in the labour market shouldn't be forced into economic dependence on husbands and partners. She also argued against the then-dominant principle of the 'family wage' that reinforced the idea that women had no need for an independent and adequate wage or salary.

It is easy to forget how woeful the legal and economic position of married women and cohabitantes was in the 1970s, and Mary's work, both political and academic, was



a powerful force for change at that time. In particular her book *The Anti-Social Family* (Verso, 1982), written with Michèle Barrett, was a cornerstone of modern socialist feminist thinking on the family. In that text, Mary and Michèle argued against the hallowed status of the concept of 'the family' because of its overburdened ideological content. 'The family', they argued, was not a simple description of how people organized their personal lives, but an ideological form which justified the dominant status of men and the submission of women and children. The rosy view of 'the family' that dominated both popular culture and sociological writings at that time was seen as almost a confidence trick, which hid women's economic vulnerability, domestic violence and women's lack of welfare, pension and employment rights. In preference, they argued for the use of the term 'households' as this freed thinking from the gender bias inherent in the concept of the family. But this

book also took issue with radical feminist thinking of the time and rejected the increasingly prevalent concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy, Barrett and McIntosh argued, was a transhistorical concept based on biological determinism. In its stead, they argued for a historically contextualized understanding of social relations which combined analysis of class difference with that of gender difference. In this argument, Mary's socialist, and specifically Marxist, background was central to the development of a highly significant branch of feminist thinking.

As part of this movement within feminism, Mary, with a collective of other like-minded feminists, established the journal *Feminist Review*. It described itself in 1979 on its inauguration as 'a vehicle to unite research and theory with political practice, and contribute to the development of both'. Mary remained part of this collective until the early 1990s and during those years *Feminist Review* was essential reading for all socialist feminists. It was also the case that *Feminist Review*, in those early decades, saw itself as offering an alternative to radical or revolutionary feminism, and a great deal of Mary's political engagement at that time was focused on developing theories of women's oppression that could build on a basic awareness of class dominance. In this sense Mary's work was profoundly sociological, and she never let go of her commitment to understanding the intersections between different forms of oppression.

Mary's writings provide a fascinating map of a rich intellectual life. She started her career in fairly orthodox criminology, but quickly switched to the more critical stance embodied by the National Deviancy Conference, which she co-founded in 1968. During that phase she edited *Deviance and Social Control* (Tavistock, 1974). Thereafter she wrote on homosexuality and prostitution, followed by work on women's economic independence and the family. In later years she returned to issues of sexuality, in particular work on pornography and censorship, published in the book she co-edited with Lynne Segal, *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (Virago, 1992). At that

time she was involved with the Feminists Against Censorship group, thus continuing the pattern of debate within feminism as well as more widely. In addition Mary donated her own political papers and scrapbooks to the London School of Economics Archives in 1996. These papers give a valuable insight into Mary's political life. However, there are other, more fragile, traces of Mary that are less tangible, and it is to these that I turn in my final remarks.

I first got to know Mary in 1974 when she was a research fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. She was already by then an important figure in critical criminology and she agreed to read some of my work on prostitution. She took the time to meet with me and make many suggestions on how I could improve my arguments and ideas. As a young feminist without a proper job in academia I was struck by her kindness and willingness to help someone so insignificant. She taught me a lesson about intellectual sharing and generosity that I have not forgotten (although I do not pretend to have lived up to her standards). Over the following two decades or so I was sometimes able to collaborate with Mary and I often heard her speak at both academic meetings (such as the British Sociological Association annual conference) and meetings of the Women's Movement. When she spoke, Mary was in her element. She would arrive at meetings or seminars with a few notes scribbled on a surprisingly small piece of paper, and with only these brief notes as support she would speak fluently and absorbingly for an hour. She was a truly impressive speaker because she could educate her audience in detailed analysis and argument, while always engaging their attention and interest. She was equally good at making interventions at conferences, often to the surprise of speakers, who, having noted the middle-aged woman with her petit point embroidery in the front row, no doubt dismissed her as a misplaced housewife. But Mary's embroidery was a powerful intellectual ally because, she argued, it allowed her to concentrate on what was being said without distraction. It was also a political statement about women's undervalued skills!

Mary retired from the University of Essex, and from academic life, in 1996 at the age of 60. She did not pursue further publications or research, choosing instead to throw herself into work for the Citizens' Advice Bureau in North London and to continue her political activities.

**Carol Smart**

Mary McIntosh's Commentary, 'Dependency Culture? Women, Welfare and Work', appeared in *Radical Philosophy* 91, September/October 1998, pp. 2–5.

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