

# CHOPPING BLOCK

by Jens Andersen

"History is bunk."  
This wise saying, first of all, applies to the so-called "facts of history, so many of which retain a highly dubious smell. One has only to consider the Duke of Wellington's comment that the true history of the Napoleonic wars would never be written, or read William Lederer's revelations of the crapola swallowed by the American public early in the Vietnam war (in his books *A Nation of Sheep* and *Our own Worst Enemy*), or ponder the readiness with which the public accepted H.L. Mencken's history of the bathtub as gospel truth, even after he loudly announced -twice- that it was a fraud; one needs only to meditate on these and other historical lessons before one begins to wonder how many other "facts" are simply fabrications.



One of my pet theories, for instance, is that the story of Christ was actually invented by some comic genius in a similar manner to the "Bathtub hoax": as a deadpan satire on the numerous Jewish sects and cults of the Christian era, and that it was simply adopted at face value and transcribed by the humorless and credulous folks who always comprise the majority of mankind.

In addition to questionable facts, there are the theories, analyses and generalizations which historians use to tie them together. These too contain a large admixture of bunk, whether it be the Christian theory that history shows God rewarding the faithful and punishing the sinful (which runs aground on events like earthquakes), or the Marxist theory that there is an economic or class cause for everything (which bumps into the curiosity of many scientists, and the urge to expression of many artists; both of which defy economic considerations and social expectations, sometimes quite dramatically).

Which brings me in a roundabout way to a book which recently came under my scrutiny: *The Dinner Party - A Symbol of Our Heritage*, by Judy Chicago. The book attempts to do a number of things: to present photographs of the "dinner plates" displayed in the renowned and controversial installation piece (the needlework is described in a separate volume), to give a history of how "The Dinner Party" evolved and was constructed, but, most importantly to present a "revised" historical view of women. As Judy Chicago says:

*I had been personally strengthened by discovering my rich heritage as a woman and the enormous amount of information that existed about women's contribution to society. This information, however, was totally outside the mainstream of historical thought and was certainly unknown to most people. And as long as women's achievements were excluded from our understanding of the past, we would continue to feel as if we had never done anything worthwhile.*

In this quote I detect a kernel of truth; women are ignored or de-emphasized in much, if not most history. But methinks the lady doth protest too much. After all, are Virginia Woolf and Queen Elizabeth I really outside the mainstream of historical thought? Yet they are two of the 39 women honored with place settings in a project aiming to bring to light "Women Who Were Eaten Alive." One could also argue with some of the 999 women listed on the "Heritage Floor" of "The Dinner Party": Katharine Hepburn, Rebecca West, Selma Lagerlof, Doris Lessing, Emma Goldman, Rachel Carson, Margaret Mead, Golda Meir, Jane Austen, Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and many more must be quite familiar to any halfway intelligent person.

Indeed, many of the women outshone the men in their lives. Who remembers any of Elizabeth's lovers? A few will remember Essex, but what of the others? And who among the multitudes that recognize Marie Curie remember that she had a husband who helped with her work?

Even a somewhat obscure figure like Mary Wollstonecraft is probably better known than her husband. She was mentioned in a *Doonisbury* strip some years back and is quite well known among feminists as one of the giants. But who remembers that her husband was an influential libertarian political thinker? In Chicago's book he is only mentioned in passing - he disowned their daughter for marrying the poet Percy Shelley. Which brings

another point up: didn't the daughter, Mary Shelley, become more famous for *Frankenstein* than her husband ever became for his poems?

In short, the great women that Chicago celebrates have not been "swallowed up and obscured by history instead of being recognized and honored," as she says, although they have usually had to work harder than men to get recognition. The story of astronomer Caroline Herschel is illustrative. Her mother was opposed to her education, and when she did begin to contribute to astronomy it was as assistant to her brother. Still, in the end even that great bastion of male chauvinism, the Royal Society, recognized her contribution and admitted her as an honorary member.

It seems to me, indeed that Chicago puts far too much emphasis on recognition; Herschel's contributions to astronomy were the significant thing in her life, and the support of intelligent fellow humans like the Royal Society should only be regarded as a means to that end. Fame itself is not worth fighting for. Chicago should be more like H.L. Mencken, who even regarded the Nobel Prize as a cheap distinction, and prided himself on being the only major American writer without an honorary degree from some two-bit university.

But there is a more serious defect in Chicago's book than exaggerating the oppression and low profile of women. That defect is female chauvinism, and it takes many forms. For example:

*All archeological evidence indicates that these (ancient) matriarchal cultures were egalitarian, democratic and peaceful. But female-oriented agricultural societies gradually gave way to a male-dominated political state in which occupational specialization, commerce, social stratification and militarism developed.*

Garden of Eden myth, anyone? Another example:

*Women were developing agriculture, pottery, and basket-making. From them emanated all that sustained life, and early peoples began to fashion images of these magical creatures.*

And yet again:

*As long as women had ruled the (ancient) world, wars had been rare.*

Phrases like "distorted male thinking" crop up with tiresome regularity. All of which prompts the reply that these notions are as absurd as the male-supremacy ideas they mimic.

The female superiority complex carries over into the biographies. To judge from them, the famous women had scarcely a blemish, literary frauds like Gertrude Stein were the equals of geniuses like Willa Cather, Carrie Nation of the Women's Christian Temperance Union wasn't really a manic obsessive, etc., etc. In fact the unqualified praise often reads like the simplistic, eulogistic nonsense one reads in children's storybooks. Here, for example, is Chicago on Hatshepsut, ruler of ancient Egypt:

*Hatshepsut, the mighty ruler of the XVIII dynasty, was the daughter of a great warrior king. She continued her father's policies of strengthening the country's defense, leading military expeditions to achieve this end. She initiated many construction projects, including the building and refurbishing of temples; she bolstered Egypt's economy through trade and achieved peace and prosperity during her reign.*

*Hatshepsut's own words reveal the pride she felt in her accomplishments: "My command stands firm like the mountains and the sun's disk shines and spreads rays over the titulary of my august person, and my falcon rises high above the kingly banner unto all eternity."*

If the person uttering these last lines had been an egotistical male ass like Trudeau it would be interpreted as insufferable arrogance, and any sensible person hearing it would be rolling on the floor in paroxysms of laughter at his colossal conceit. But because she is a female chauvinist dealing with a female, Chicago treats Hatshepsut's braggadocio with the utmost solemnity.

For relief from this baloney we must go to Will Cuppy, humorist and impeccable historian, who describes Hatshepsut and her male rival Thutmose III more completely and detachedly:

*Part of the time Hatshepsut and Thutmose would build ruined temples in Thebes, but mostly they stuck to obelisks. Hatshepsut would put up two obelisks covered with pictures of Egyptians going both ways at once and other hieroglyphics telling how good she was. The next day Thutmose would rush out and put up two much taller obelisks telling how good he was, and this went on until neither of them could think of any more lies.*

But of course Cuppy, unlike Chicago, is not burdened with any doctrinaire theories about history.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA co-sponsored by Alberta CULTURE

## sub theatre

### MARCH

tues 15



STANLEY KUBRICK'S

## CLOCKWORK ORANGE

Tuesday - 8:00 pm. - **CLOCKWORK ORANGE** - 1971, Great Britain, 137 min. Dir: Stanley Kubrick Cast: Malcolm McDowell, Patrick Magee. **Restricted Adult.**

thurs 17

PAUL NEWMAN SALLY FIELD

## ABSENCE OF MALICE

Thursday - 8:00 pm. - **ABSENCE OF MALICE** - 1981, USA, 116 min. Dir: Sydney Pollack Cast: Paul Newman, Sally Field, Bob Balaban, Luther Adler, Melinda Dillon, **Restricted adult.**

### CINEMA: DOOR SALES ONLY

Regular Admission: \$3.50/\$2.50 with U of A ID  
Double Features: \$4.50/\$3.50 with U of A ID

**SUB Theatre** is located on the 2nd floor of the Students' Union Building, University of Alberta campus. For more information call 432-4764.

Tuesday March 22, 7 pm.

Tickets: SUB Box Office all BASS outlets.



With Special Guests The IDOLS

Spoons



## Editors Wanted

The Gateway is accepting applications for the various editorial positions for the upcoming year as follows:

- |             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Arts        | News       |
| Sports      | News       |
| Managing    | Production |
| Circulation | Photo      |

If you are interested in any of the above positions, or would simply like to know more information about them, please submit a brief letter of intent to Brent Jang, Room 282 SUB.

**Deadline: March 21, 1983**