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**Free Love = Free Marriage?**  
***'Free Love' and the Belgian Socialists, 1880-1940***

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### **What did the concept imply?**

There is no one way in which to interpret the concept of 'free love'. Definitions will vary according to different periods, trends and the people involved. The term is also used by the Belgian social democrats, but it no longer has anything to do with the 'love as a foundation for society' of the utopian Fourier.

Fourier claimed that most people's sexual desire was polygamous. His '*Harmone*' social system banned all sexual taboos and was a synthesis of all passions where '*nul plaisir est dédaigné*', so that love could not be limited to one couple.<sup>1</sup>

According to Poldervaart and Moors, in the Belgian Phalanstères the emphasis lay more on economic relationships; there was no mention at all of Fourier's ideas involving the elimination of the family and all sexual taboos.<sup>2</sup>

Almost half a century later the British philosopher and mathematician, Bertrand Russell, who was also a well-known adherent of 'free love', published a manifesto for sexual liberation entitled *Marriage and Morals* (1929), in which he advocated the trial marriage. It was not intended to lead to loose living, however. Self-discipline and moral responsibility were necessary ingredients in a free marriage, to prevent things from getting out of hand and leading to a life of dissipation.

There are echoes of this closer to home, in the book *Wordend Huwelijk*, by the Dutch social democrat couple, Wibaut-Berdenis van Berlekom. They take things a step further than Russell in that married couples are allowed to have multiple affairs, but unlike Russell they are against 'sexuality for the sake of sexuality'. Through rationality and caring for each other, this type of union is superior to the traditional civil marriage.<sup>3</sup>

### **Members of the BWP and 'free love'**

The budding social democrats in Belgium had little interest in sexuality in a socialist society. The term 'free love' was rarely written or spoken and the concept hardly referred to, except by individuals or small groups. Nevertheless it remained a part of the party's political view of sexual relationships between the sexes, within the framework of the very real problem of birth control.

In the BWP (Belgian Workers' Party, 1886), the term 'free love' was mostly used in the context of Neo-Malthusianism. Cesar De Paepe, founder and theorist of the party and 'doctor to the poor', and the BWP's other godfather Louis Bertrand both favoured the use of contraceptives. De Paepe went even further and supported abortion, but only if the mother's life was at risk. The involvement of the Belgian socialists only extended to family politics and the struggle against poverty caused by, amongst other things, the large number of children in a family, as well as a high percentage of illegitimate children.

However, the greatest interest in problems of sexuality such as birth control, prostitution and changes in traditional conjugal ethics came from socialist women. In an article in an 1894 edition of *De Vrouw*, Emilie Claeys, who was the founder of the social women's movement in Ghent (1886), lashed out at the 'sexual urge'. There was no question of pleasure. She advocated the use of contraceptives, 'not for pleasure, but in order to preserve the offspring. Emilie Claeys' basic assumption was that ideally, the way to restrict the number of children was through restricting sexual urges 'without inordinate abstinence'. But in view of the fact that

<sup>1</sup> Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Moors, 'De drempels van de droom: vrouwen, vrouwelijkheid en socialisme 1830-1870', *Begeerte heeft ons aangeraakt*. Gent, Provinciebestuur van Oost-Vlaanderen/Amsab, 1999, pp. 17-58, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Mathilde Wibaut-Berdenis van Berlekom en M. Wibaut, *Wordend huwelijk*. Haarlem, 1932.

this was as yet unattainable, people were forced to resort to Neo-Malthusian measures as a sort of transitional arrangement. By this statement, she opposed the prevailing socialist doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Her Dutch friend Nellie van Kol, who was co-publisher of *De Vrouw*, did not regard 'free love' as being inconsistent with high morals. It was acceptable 'if honest and true, because I consider nine out of ten marriages today to be base and immoral...' She too was in favour of the use of contraceptives 'because I do not consider our miserable, sick and nervous sex to be capable of *practising birth control through abstinence*' (italics in the original text). Nevertheless, her preference was for 'chastity on behalf of my entire sex, for in many instances, chastity implies respect for the woman.'<sup>5</sup> Commenting on a passage in Bebel's *De vrouw en het socialisme* on monogamous marriage agreements, 'the most ideal of all agreements', she included those agreements not entered into at the city hall but which 'are therefore no less serious and permanent'. Marriage at that time was immoral in that it was usually reduced to no more than a business matter 'and even to prostituting the man or the woman'. Nellie's ideal was a marriage based on love only. She was also in favour of a trial marriage in which the woman had the rights over her possessions, and there was legal protection for children.

Emily Claeys was involved with the concept of 'impurity' even before she disappeared from the socialist scene in 1896. She put the question to her readers, both male and female, as to whether or not a woman who had sexual relations was 'impure'. On the other hand, in the years that followed, Nellie van Kol talked about abstinence and asceticism.<sup>6</sup>

The theme of birth control and free love was not included in the feminist movement programme for quite a long time. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the problem of 'free love' became the concern mainly of anarchists, who were very much on the sidelines in Belgium. And yet it was not completely dead and buried, not before the First World War either. The following story about a group of young people from Ghent who called themselves supporters of free love shows us how they interpreted this concept.

### **Romantic idealists before World War One**

Traces of these romantic idealists are to be found in the works of the Belgian-American writer May Sarton.

'Wondelgem... the word is full of radiance for me, because of the tone in my mother's voice whenever she spoke its name.'<sup>7</sup> This is how May Sarton describes the house in which she was born in Wondelgem near Ghent. This is the house that the young scholar George Sarton moved into with his English wife, Eleanor Mabel Elwes, and where he laid the foundations for his international reputation as a historian of science. Her father, George Sarton (1884-1956) originally came from Ghent, where he grew up as a motherless child in his father's sombre, quiet

<sup>4</sup> Lilian [Emilie Claeys], 'Een ernstig woord', *De Vrouw I* (1894) 18 March, 1-3; Nellie, 'Boekbeoordeling', *De Vrouw I* (1894) 1 April, 3-4; Nellie, 'Boekbeoordeling', *De Vrouw I* (1894) 15 April, 5-6; *De Vrouw I* (1894) 24 June, 2-3; *De Vrouw II* (1894) 2 Sept., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Nellie, 'Doet een meisje kwaad?', *De Vrouw* (1895) 124-125.

<sup>6</sup> See also Hedwige Peemans-Poulet, "Le Contrôle des naissances chez Emilie Claeys: féminisme ou néo-malthusianisme?", *Gender and Class in the 20th Century International Colloquium Ghent*, April 27-30-1999. Ghent, Amsab/MIAT, 2000, pp. 83-107.

<sup>7</sup> May Sarton, *A World of Light*. London, The Women's Press, 1996, p. 59.

house. His father came from what could be described as a liberal, upper middle class background. George Sarton was an intelligent and precocious child, who at the age of ten decided that religion was not for him. He was a pupil at the grammar school for boys in Ghent, and a boarder at the grammar school in Chimay for four years.<sup>8</sup> When he was in his teens, he enjoyed recording things and kept a diary from a very early age. During the first few years of the twentieth century he had a private publisher print a hundred copies of his first profound thoughts, in a work entitled *Songerie N° VI. Notamment sur le Bonheur et la Gloire*. According to his daughter, numbers I to VI never existed, and she dates the book at around 1903.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that as a young student he had already sent texts on subjects such as social reform to the socialist leader Eduard Anseele.

Sarton had enrolled at Ghent University in 1902 as a student of philosophy but he disliked the course and left. He continued studying at home and spent his days reading, writing, wandering through Ghent and meditating in coffee houses about what to do with the rest of his life. It is clear that he was going through some sort of adolescent crisis. 'After two years of anxiety and uneasiness, I have returned to socialism. I shall do all I can for the socialist cause ... I do not believe that the socialist state is the ideal; it appears to me as simply a step towards anarchism, for which men today are far from ready. Socialism will lead them there, by making men good, generous and just'.<sup>10</sup> Here Sarton takes up his position in the socialist camp, but appears to have excessively high expectations of anarchy.

In the meanwhile he had opted for a scientific career. He registered as a student at the Faculty of Sciences, with the aim of studying mathematics and physics, with a particular interest in crystallography. He was lonely and sought contact in the student world, where he made a few lifelong friends. He became a member of the liberal student association, '*t Zal Wel Gaan* (It will be all right). Together with a group of students he paid his own way for a study trip to Leiden. One of the group was a medical student by the name of Irénée Van der Ginst, whom he had recently befriended. Van der Ginst persuaded him to join *Ter Waerheid* (In the Name of Truth), a left-wing students' association that was a splinter group of the anticlerical '*t Zal Wel Gaan*, which it regarded as being conventionally moderate and politically conformist. It was here that George met Hendrik De Man, who had founded a new socialist students' association in 1905.

*Ter Waerheid* comprised all forms of nonconformity, ranging from the most ardent Flemish nationalism to the most apolitical anarchism. A debate with Anseele on the way in which the university in Ghent was to become Flemish brought the students into contact with the labour movement for the first time. Although Anseele had his doubts and held a fluctuating view of the Vlaamse Beweging (Flemish Movement) and the founding of a Dutch-language college, he could not ignore the constructive proposals of the group of students and university members of staff in his own party. The young intellectuals defended the universal single vote system and the workers' demands, and the socialists promised to make a stand for the gradual conversion of the university to Flemish.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Roger Calcoen, 'Wie was George Sarton?', *Technologia*, 7 (1984) 3, pp. 62-72.

<sup>9</sup> May Sarton, *I Knew a Phoenix*. New York -London, Norton, 1955, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> From George Sarton's Diary, January 1905, in May Sarton, *I Knew a Phoenix*, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Craeybeckx, *Arbeidersbeweging en Vlaamsgezindheid vóór de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Brussel, 1978. Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België. Klasse der Letteren, XLI (1978)3, p. 8; Mieke Claeys-Van Haegendoren, red. *Hendrik De Man. Autobiografie*.

In June 1905 there was a long-term strike by cotton workers in Ghent for shorter working hours. After a battle that lasted a full three months, the strikers triumphed over the obstinacy of the factory owners. At one of Edward Anseele's meetings, Sarton found himself addressed in French by the man seated next to him. It was to be the start of a lifelong friendship with the poet and philosopher Raymond Limbosch, who was also the son of a very well-to-do family in Brussels. Limbosch had started off as a student of engineering at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, and then gone on to study agriculture in France. A confirmed anarchist, he wished to put his philosophy of life into practice. He worked as a gardener in a garden nursery in Ledeberg. A conversation developed between the socialist and the anarchist on the art of poetry.

During the cotton strike, socialist students under the leadership of Hendrik De Man and George Sarton organised lessons for 'the spiritual development' of the strikers. After this, De Man left for Germany and we hear no more about the *Ter Waerheid* group.<sup>12</sup>

### Reiner Leven and the 'prégarçonnes of the Jugendstil'

After De Man's departure, Sarton brought together a group of idealistic young people, called *Reiner Leven* possibly in imitation of the Dutch *Rein Leven* (Pure Life) Movement. Following its foundation in Holland around 1901, this movement had made a clear stand against Neo-Malthusianism and found its inspiration in the Christian-anarchist ideas of the Russian writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy. *Rein Leven* wanted to break with church dogmatism and fight ignorance, prostitution and fornication; indeed, in the eyes of the movement, Neo-Malthusianism positively encouraged prostitution and fornication. The concept of 'rein leven' (pure life) alluded to a new sexual morality, and advocated greater openness in matters of sexuality, respect for a free relationship without marriage, and sexual education. Sex was only permitted between heterosexual couples if procreation was possible and if there were feelings of love. Sensual feelings were not allowed to dominate the lives of a (married) couple, and the only acceptable form of contraception was moral abstinence. It was opposed to prostitution, Neo-Malthusianism, homosexuality, 'sexual acts', and onanism.<sup>13</sup>

The *Reiner Leven* group in Ghent held meetings in a teetotallers' centre. Under the motto of '*Pour être fort sois pur*' they hoped to raise the moral standards of the students and discourage them from going to prostitutes.<sup>14</sup> Besides Sarton, Limbosch and Van der Ghinst, other members included Gérard Ceunis and Robert Aerens, both of whom were artists. *Rein Leven* published a manifesto of its aims on the 25/10/1905. This provoked a response from Auguste Van Langendonck, who was then lecturer at the Sint Jan Berchmanscollege in Antwerp. Van Langendonck attacked the lectures that '*préconisaient des extravagances telles*

Antwerpen-Amsterdam, 1974, p. 114. (Hendrik de Man, *Personen en ideeën*, 1).

<sup>12</sup> Avanti, *Een terugblik*. Gent, 1930, pp. 272-277; Raymond Limbosch (1884-1953) son of a famous high fashion-shop in Brussels, where his mother designed clothes and artefacts for the nobility; Guy Vanschoenbeek, *De wortels van de sociaal-democratie III: De Wereld van Vooruit*, p. 651 (Doctoral Thesis); Mieke Claeys-Van Haegendoren, *Hendrik de Man*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>13</sup> G. Nabrink, *Seksuele hervorming in Nederland: achtergronden en geschiedenis van de Nieuw-Malthusiaanse bond (NMB) en de Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervorming (NVSH), 1881-1971*. Nijmegen, 1978, pp. 145-146 and p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> *Gentsche Studenten Almanak* uitgegeven door het Taalminnend Studentengenootschap 't Zal wel gaan 1906-1907, p. 16.

*qu'on se verrait bien forcé de lui dénier tout caractère moral*'. His anger was largely directed at the propaganda for the '*union libre*'. Although he did not go so far as to label the members of *Reiner Leven* amoral, he found their ideas of what was 'pure' far too limited. It would be better to talk of an individual purity, a purity that forbade '*des fautes solitaires*' and unnatural sexual acts ('*des fautes contre nature*'), because they were detrimental to the health and individual beauty '*tout en étant partisans de l'union libre*'. And this was inadmissible in Van Lagendonck's view. The toleration of free love could only lead to a breakdown of the social order. He then adopted a Jesuit line of reasoning in order to convince the college students that 'we (the Catholics) allow moral obligations whereas the founders of *Reiner Leven* deny them'.<sup>15</sup>

It was through *Reiner Leven* that twenty-two year old George met Eleanor Mabel Elwes (1878-1950). The Elwes family came from Suffolk. Mabel's father was one of the first Fabians and a friend of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. As a civil engineer, Gervase Elwes was often abroad. He designed the bridges for one of the first railways in the Himalayas. His wife, who was not Mabel's mother, accompanied him on his journeys to faraway countries. The child was placed in care in rural Wales and then sent to boarding school. As a teenager, Mabel enrolled as a student at the Institut Charles de Kerckhove in Ghent, in order to learn French.

When Gervase found himself a ruined man through an unwise investment in Rhodesian mines, Mabel was an art student in London. At the age of nineteen she was forced to seek employment, and managed to find a poorly paid job as a supervisor in her old school in Ghent. She became friendly with one of the most outspoken pupils at the Institute, Céline Dangotte. Céline's mother Cécile ran La Maison Dangotte, a very well-known business in Ghent that specialised in interior design, furniture, materials and curtaining in an art nouveau style. She took Mabel into the family and taught her the trade.

Mabel and Céline were members of a group of enterprising young women called *Les Courageuses* (Women with Spirit), which responded to an advertisement placed by *Reiner Leven*. *Les Courageuses* was a mixed group of working women and students, a literary and artistic circle of young feminists who addressed one another by their christian names and thought that married women should continue working, in order to support themselves and not become dependent on their husbands. Some of them were university students and others primary school teachers. Recruitment was in the hands of Marie Patyn, who was also the secretary of the Dangotte firm. It was through her that Mabel and Céline became members of the group. Augusta De Taeye, a nursery school teacher, met Mabel in the Dangotte shop and they became lifelong friends. Later on, her son Herman Thiery, better known as the author Johan Daisne, described the period of *Les Courageuses* and *Reiner Leven* as 'the time when the term 'modern' suggested something fresh and clean and the *pré-garçonnes* of the Jugendstil joined *Reiner Leven*'.<sup>16</sup>

The young women would go out into the countryside at weekends with a knapsack on their backs, and came together to attend lectures and to talk about

<sup>15</sup> Auguste Van Langendonck, "*Reiner Leven*" (*Vivons plus purs*). Anvers, 1er mars 1906 (University of Ghent Archives, bio R. 1.2).

<sup>16</sup> Johan Daisne. *Lago Maggiore*. Brussel, s.d., pp. 39-46.

art and life in general. When, in the artistic and social ferment of Ghent after the turn of the century, *Les Courageuses* joined *Reiner Leven*, it gave rise to a group of young, mostly middle-class people who called themselves socialists, were vegetarians, teetotallers and advocates of women's liberation. They read Morris, Ruskin, Ibsen, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, and continued the discussions in between meetings by writing long letters to one another. They attempted to create a bridge between intellectuals and workers, both male and female, and advocated the "free union".

George and Mabel became friends, but their relationship became very strained, to put it mildly, when the subject of sex was broached. The reason for this was not only because George did not want to get married and support a wife, but also because Mabel, who was already twenty-eight, wished to further her career as a designer and be independent. Moreover, even though they were mentally and artistically compatible, they were sexually incompatible. Mabel was afraid of sex and the physical, while George, according to her, had a rather strong libido. They tortured one another in long letters about their incompatible feelings. Between 1906 and 1909 they wrote to one another more frequently than they saw one another. Gradually she came to trust men; 'my friend, do you know you are one of the only men I know, with whom I have no feeling of distrust any longer?'<sup>17</sup> The whole situation finally resulted in Mabel going into a depression. She gave up her miniature painting and went to Zurich to learn bookbinding at the Kunstgewerbestube.

Sarton became active in the student world once more. In March 1910, a general student association was founded in collaboration with Russian, Bulgarian and Greek students. Sarton became chairman. The Ghent section of the BWP agreed to a series of lectures given by the students themselves. Most of these were in French, which meant that the original aim of the Flemish-orientated *Ter Waerheid*, the education of workers, was ignored. One of the lectures was on the 'procréation consciente' and was given by the socialist Emile Vinck. Its content can more or less be deduced from a pamphlet written by Vinck in answer to a pastoral letter from Cardinal Mercier entitled, *Les devoirs de la vie conjugale*. At a single stroke and in no uncertain terms he condemned Neo-Malthusianism, contraceptives and abortion. The pastoral letter meant the start of the Catholic campaign against contraception and abortion. As a Neo-Malthusian, Vinck accused the church of advocating strict abstinence as the only form of contraception. This doctrine produced 'unnatural moral behaviour on the one hand and infidelity in marriage on the other'. According to Vinck, the modern concept of sexual morality was not much better, in that (married) couples had no choice but to allow themselves to be guided by moral responsibility. With this Vinck conceded the validity of the ideas of *Reiner Leven*. Free love was not a problem, but it was only acceptable if there was a situation involving love.<sup>18</sup> The question

<sup>17</sup> George Sarton to Raymond Limbosch, August 11, 1907, in P. Van Oye, *George Sarton. De mens en zijn werk uit brieven aan vrienden en kennissen*. Brussel, Paleis der Academiën, 1965.

<sup>18</sup> George Sarton and Hendrik de Man dealt his opinion. Emile Vinck, *Procréation consciente. Réponse à une lettre pastorale de Monseigneur Mercier*. Gand, 1909; B.W.P.-arrondissementsfederatie Gent-Eeklo, Verslag Middencomiteit. Partijvergadering van 12 oktober 1910 (BWP of Ghent, reunion, 12-12-1910 (AMSAB archives); M. Claeys-Van Hagendoren, *Hendrik de Man*, pp. 117-118; Guy Vanschoenbeek, *De wortels van de democratie*, III, p. 652.

of having children was not broached. Lovers had to turn to 'Science' for inspiration.

In the meantime George Sarton was rapidly building up a scientific career, and as a student was awarded a variety of medals and other distinctions. His undergraduate thesis was a scientific-philosophical study of the principles of Newtonian mechanics. There was also a breakthrough in his relationship with Mabel Elwes; through Céline Dangotte and other members of *Reiner Leven* they came together once more after having been separated for a year. George graduated *cum laude* in physics and mathematics in May 1911, and married Mabel on 31st June in Ghent town hall. The other members of *Reiner Leven* were not very good at putting the principle of free marriage into practice either. They married one another and kept in touch with each other as married couples.

In the house in Wondelgem, George immediately concentrated on realising one of his greatest dreams, the founding of an international magazine on the history of science, which he named ISIS. He published it entirely at his own expense and was assisted in this by Mabel's earnings. At the same time he began to make notes for what would become his life's work, the Introduction to the History of Science. Locked away in his study he became 'the crusader for a holy war – the war to convince the universities and the academies that the history of sciences must be treated as a separate discipline'.<sup>19</sup> It was here that he started to work on the development of his neo-humanist concept. The history of science had to establish the link between science and humanism and so bridge the gap between science and the humanities and contribute towards the humanising of technology and industry.

There is no doubt that through his contacts with writers, scholars and artists, the *Reiner Leven* period influenced Sarton's intellectual development as well as being a determining factor in his neo-humanist doctrine. Later on Leo Apostel pointed out the fertile effect of Sarton's childhood years and socialism. 'Sarton, a confirmed socialist looking for a unity of the sciences in the development of their history, is a typical exponent of the coming together of the three guidelines namely, sociology, evolution and socialism'; the study of socialist doctrine had an effect that was no less fertile.<sup>20</sup>

Sarton was not prepared to go out to work in order to support a family. Mabel had to survive on the little money she earned as a designer. However, bouts of ill-health prevented her from working continuously. Moreover she was plagued by all sorts of psychosomatic complaints, severe migraine, nervousness and palpitations. Because of this, the couple did not want children, but 'moral restraint' proved to be an ineffective contraceptive, and May was born.

Mabel worked for 'Art Décorative Céline Dangotte' in Brussels. She made a name for herself designing modern furniture and cushion covers, glasswork and brightly coloured curtaining. After moving to the United States, George continued to work on his life's work at Washington University. He did not have an official university post, but had a gentleman's agreement with the chairman of the Carnegie Institute in Washington, which meant that in exchange for a study at

<sup>19</sup> May Sarton, *A World of Light*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Interview Leo Apostel by Karel Van Keymeulen, *Knack*, 10.10.1984, p. 30; Hossam Elkhadem, *George Sarton: ses années de formation et ses réalisations académiques à travers sa correspondance avec Irénée Van der Ghinst*. Bruxelles, Palais des Académies, 1985. Communications de l'Académie royale des Sciences, Lettres et Beaux-Arts de Belgique. Classe des Sciences, 47 (1985) 1, pp. 110-111.



Harvard's large Widener Library, he would work part-time and give a course in the history of science. He only received a professorship in 1940.<sup>21</sup>

### **Free love = free marriage?**

This is a question I have asked myself. The Belgian socialist viewpoint of free love underwent very little change during the period between the two world wars. One of the most striking pieces of evidence of this was provided by the views expressed by the leader of the socialist feminist movement, Isabelle Blume. She was very involved with matters such as the relationship between men and women in the family, and sexuality. In her view, the 'sexual act' was a natural function of the body that was neither beautiful nor disgusting. She too emphasised moral awareness. Making love continued to be linked to procreation, '*une fonction qui doit être remplie*'. Her ideal was what she referred to as the '*démocratie conjugale*', a marriage of comrades in which equality and mutual respect were more important than sex. The concept of marriage as a contract between friends did have a considerable effect on the socialist movement, especially the youth movement, in its strong emphasis on morality and self-control.

In any case, the socialists saw 'free love' as a private matter that was tolerated as long as it did not become public.

The term 'free love' was mainly seen as referring to a free marriage in which sexuality was experienced as the highest form of love, and a contract between friends that could be regarded as an institution either in or outside marriage.

This view was shared mainly by small minorities in the BWP or in groups calling themselves socialist and closely resembling the BWP, and initially more frequently held in the feminist movement than among the men. Nellie van Kol and Emilie Claeys were outsiders in that they opposed the prevailing socialist doctrine. Our case of *Reiner Leven* shows that small idealistic youth groups never lasted for long.

Nevertheless, the concept of 'free love' has never completely disappeared from the new progressive social movements of modernism.

<sup>21</sup> For the biographical notes about George Sarton and Mabel Elwes see:

- Eleanor Mabel Sarton, *Letters to May 1878-1950*. Selected, Edited and with an Introduction by May Sarton. Orono, Maine, Puckerbrush Press, 1986;
- May Sarton. *Selected Lettres 1916-1954*. Edited and Introduced by Susan Sherman. London, The Women's Press, 1997;
- Margot Peters, *May Sarton: A Biography*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.