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Document 8: John B. Ellis, *Free Love and its Votaries; or American Socialism Unmasked* (New York: United States Publishing, 1870), pp. 174-78, 180-81, 187-88., by John B. Ellis. Included in [Were Women in the Oneida Community Liberated or Oppressed by Bible Communism, 1848-1880?](#), by Jennifer Cubic and Heather Rogan under the direction of Kathryn Kish Sklar

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Introduction

This book was a historical and descriptive account of the rise and progress of various free love associations in the United States. Its author, John B. Ellis, was an opponent of societies such as the Oneida Community that practiced Free Love. Ellis expressed his concern very clearly in his preface, arguing that "the evil principle of Free Love has spread with marvellous rapidity, until it has manifested itself in almost every class of society. It has not only drawn men and women into organized associations, but has lowered the moral tone of society to an extent which is truly alarming."^[30] This account was one of many that criticized the community's practices.

Free love was a term which John H. Noyes invented and was later appropriated by other sexual reformers to represent practices contrary to those at the Oneida Community. The term free love was often misinterpreted by traditional society as licentious behavior. For women of the Oneida Community, free love offered an opportunity to choose or exclude sexual partners -- an opportunity rarely afforded women in traditional society. Although free love eliminated the issues of spousal rape and unsolicited sexual encounters, the early age at which young girls were sexually initiated was emotionally intimidating.

CHAPTER XII.

I have examined the theory of the relation of the sexes held by Noyes and his followers, and have stated it in the language of the former. I shall now glance at the practical workings of this theory as seen in the every-day life of the Community.

There is no marriage here, consequently there are no such things as husbands and wives. All are brothers and sisters. Even the relations of the father, mother, parent, child, give way to this universal brotherhood. Men and women are entirely unrestrained in their approaches to each other. Promiscuous intercourse is the rule. No man has any claim to the exclusive possession of any woman, and no woman can keep herself entirely for any one man. Each person is the property of the Community, and must submit to the will of the whole body. Apart from its business organization, the Community is based upon a total abolition of female virtue. The women are the common property of men, and *vice versa*. No woman being a wife can claim a husband's protection against the advances of those who are personally repugnant to her. She must submit. She must love all alike.

In spite of the assertions of the Saints, this Community of persons is not the happiest assemblage in the world. Quarrels do break out here, jealousies do exist, sometimes secret and smouldering, sometimes open and bitter. These Saints, perfect as they claim to be, are merely men and women, endowed with the same feelings and passions which distinguish their fellows in the world without. Though they have separated themselves from that world, they have not changed their natures, and they must be judged by the same rules by which ordinary humanity is tried.

It will be plain to the reader that, in a Community in which the person of a female is at the mercy of every man, there will always be more than one applicant for the favors of the most attractive woman. She must make her selection for the time, and must then go the round of all her suitors. Not to do this, is to violate the essential principle of sympathy of which the Saints boast so loudly. She must love all alike.

Another principle, well known and carried out in the Communities, is, *that persons shall not be obliged to receive, under any circumstances, the attentions of those whom they do not like*. They abhor rapes, whether committed under the cover of marriage or elsewhere. The Communities are pledged to protect all their members from disagreeable social approaches. Every woman is free to refuse every man's attentions." This is very fair in theory, but it is not maintained in the practice of the Community. Indeed, it is opposed to the vital principle of sympathy. A woman cannot love every member alike, if some are disagreeable to her. She must have no preference. It is the same with a man. Each person is given to understand that he or she must be in sympathy with each and every other member of the Community, and must be ready and willing at all times to "confer happiness," as the Saints express it, upon any one desiring their affections.

A sister attracts the attention of some brother, who desires her society. The brother does not suit her fancy, and she declines to "confer happiness" upon him. If Noyes tells the truth in the above statement, she is exercising an inalienable right. The facts of the case, however, prove that he has not stated the matter fairly. The woman's refusal shows that she is not in sympathy with, that she does not love perfectly, at least one member of the Community. She is a proper subject for criticism, and is at once condemned to that ordeal, until, wearied out, and her moral courages broken down, she consents to accept the love of the brother in question, and to receive such attentions as he sees fit to offer her.

On the other hand, it sometimes happens that men and women fancy each other to such a degree, that to each the thought of relinquishing each other is torment. As long as the Community are satisfied to let them alone, all goes well; but at length there comes a time when some member, male or female, desiring the society of one or the other, makes a demand for it. Then, any reluctance to separate is denounced as sinful, as selfish. No matter how devoutly the couple may love one another, each must be prepared to relinquish the other to someone else upon the first demand. They are criticized until their reluctance to do this is conquered; or, if they persist in their selfishness, they must leave the Community. So much in this ordeal of criticism dreaded, and so anxious are the members to be in full sympathy with the Community, that it rarely happens that any serious resistance is offered in this respect. The women, having given themselves over to this species of debauchery rarely make any effort to resist their fate. On the contrary, the most of them, having their appetite whetted by the life they lead, enjoy the variety at their command, and would seriously object to any interruption in the rotation system. The men naturally prefer the present arrangement. It gives them a wider field for the gratification of thier lusts, and furnishes each Saint with about one hundred mistresses instead of one. . . .

Can anything be more revolting to nature than the yoking of a young girl just budding into womanhood with an old man whose feet are fast going down to the grave? Equally revolting is the practice of compelling vigorous young men to be the companions of women old enough to be their grandmothers. Yet this is the practical result of the doctrine of "ascending fellowship." The natural affections and appetites must be stifled, and in their place a system utterly horrible and disgusting must be adopted.

I have felt the profoundest pity for some of the young people of the Community. The majority of the old women are hideous and loathsome in appearance, and it seems to me the most horrible fate in the world to be linked with one of them even for a short period of a few days. There are a few fresh, attractive young women in the place, and, if they be human beings in heart and soul, the society of the elders, to which the customs of the Community condemn them, must be torture to them. The object of all this, says Noyes, is "to teach every one self-control;" and certainly a severer, more ingenious method of accomplishing this end, could not have been devised. Ah, the terrible heart-histories that could be told by the saints, were they free to speak the truth-the struggles, the crushed affections, the better and nobler feelings degraded, or "conquered," as these people term it. What a volume would they form, could they be written out; and how strangely would they contrast with the assertions of the Saints, that perfect happiness and contentment reign in their midst! I grant that Noyes and his assistants may succeed in degrading human beings to such a level that they will accept anything and everything with that recklessness or apathy which is so often seen in inmates of brothels; but that this a condition of perfect happiness, the writer entirely denies; and he believes that, could the members of the Community speak the convictions of their better moments, they would sustain him in his denial. Even Noyes himself confesses that his followers do sometimes rebel against the practices to which they are condemned. Even he bears unwilling witness to the struggles which their better natures make against their degradation; but he blasphemously attributes these outbreaks, these strong efforts of the little that is divine in human nature against the fate he assigns it, to the influence of Satan. They are the result of selfishness, of unholiness, he says; and, in his eyes, to put out this devine spark, to degrade one's self to the level of a prostitute or an adulterer, is to be

perfectly holy. And this practice, he tells us, is enjoined by God, and prevails in the kingdom of heaven. . . .

It is not always possible, however, to keep young lovers apart. Like will seek like, and love will blossom and flourish in spite of the principle of ascending fellowship, even if it must do so in secret. Stolen interviews are the result. The young do enjoy each other's society, and even Father Noyes' potential word is set at defiance. Viewing the matter in the light of complex marriage, there can be no harm in this. Noyes has no right to complain if the young do associate together. No one possesses anything exclusively here. Women are free to grant favors to whom they please, and men can seek pleasure anywhere. A young Saint seeking the smiles of a blooming damsel is guilty only of infidelity to the principle of ascending fellowship. In all other respects he is guiltless.

In the Oneida Community all the distinctions of the world without are done away with. As there are no husbands and wives, as in the world, so there are no parents and children. Men and women are simply brothers and sisters. A man is married in the Community to each and every woman in it. He may have a sister, a mother, a daughter, among the Saints. He is simply her brother, and marries her with the rest. In view of this peculiar relation towards her, he may take her to his bed without sin. In plain English, according to the doctrine of the Oneida Community, a man may have sexual intercourse with his grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, or with all of them and be blameless. The world calls this incest, and brands it as a crime of the darkest dye. God's holy Word emphatically denounces it as of the devil; but at the Oneida Community it is regarded as simply conferring happiness, and is perfectly lawful and right. . . .

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