

Marriage not always about romance

February 14 2011, By Anjum Nayyar

“Love and marriage, go together like the horse and carriage.”

When Sinatra sang those lyrics he said “you can’t have one without the other,” but Elizabeth Abbott, renowned historian and senior research associate at Trinity College, would argue otherwise.

Abbott, whose recent book *A History of [Marriage](#)* was nominated for the Governor-General’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction, says love wasn’t the predominant force behind marriages historically, something that began to change only towards the end of the 18th century.

“Marriage was always the organizing principle of society. Families married off their offspring to further the family interest. It wasn’t about happiness. People married understanding what their obligations and duties were. For women and some men too it could be quite onerous. Women who did not marry were the charge of their fathers. They became a financial burden.”

She said marriages were arranged and few were very happy. In a previous book, *A History of Mistresses*, Abbott looked at mistresses throughout history and found that the institution of mistressdom went hand in hand with that of “monogamous” marriage.

“Mistresses and concubines have been around since marriage has. Their existence was a way of institutionalizing the double standard that permitted men to have extramarital sexual relations but did not allow women the same privilege,” she said. “There was always a lot of

cheating. It was more dangerous for a woman to cheat because of the consequences of getting pregnant by somebody else. Yet we do know that many women did cheat. So I think that marriages today are not *more* susceptible to cheating, they are just *as* susceptible.”

While many people may say women are choosing to get married later in life, Abbott added that reflecting on the history of women in marriages, there are different reasons to enter marriage.

“The egalitarianism of our day enables women to get an education and study whatever they want. They’re not confined to non-science subjects; let’s not forget that not so long ago, math was thought to make women’s heads get so hot they’d go mad. Women can get jobs in whatever fields they want,” she noted.

“Of course women are still the ones to have children but they don’t have to have as many. Birth control was a huge advance for them because they control the number of their pregnancies. Because there’s so much more equality now you don’t have the great unhappiness that is endemic in relationships in which the balance of power is skewed. There isn’t a rush to get married anymore. The main rush comes from the ever-ticking biological clock.”

Abbott stated that the notion that singlehood is a phenomenon of modern day society is incorrect. She argues there were many women and men in the 18th and 19th centuries who did not marry for various reasons. Some were financially unable to marry as their dowries were too little or they were deemed ugly. In the case of men in societies with primogeniture, all but the first born could expect meagre or no inheritance at all, so they couldn’t provide for themselves, let alone a wife. Sometimes women chose to remain single. This was the case in late 19th- and early 20th-century Chicago where six “Eleanor Clubs” provided cheap, safe and

comfortable housing for thousands of single white women, enabling them to pursue careers in business and such professions as teaching.

“The Eleanor Clubs enabled ambitious single [women](#) to come to the city to train for a career and to work while lodging in safe and lovely mansions,” Abbott said. “Their meals were cooked and they lived in single bedrooms and enjoyed the company of compatible ‘Eleanors’. This type of lifestyle lasted for decades.”

So on this Valentine’s Day if you’re tempted to romanticize about love and marriage in the past, don’t. You just might be surprised to learn that our ancestors were not morally superior to us but rather were quite the same.

Provided by University of Toronto

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