

REVOLUTIONARY

LIVES *Anna Strunksy*

& William English Walling



JAMES BOYLAN

REVOLUTIONARY LIVES

Anna Strunsky

and William English Walling



JAMES BOYLAN

Introduction

"This Aspiring and Questing World"

In the years before the Great War, William English Walling and Anna Strunsky were among the most glorious of the American left's Beautiful People: "millionaire Socialists," rivaled only by the Lincolnesque James Graham Phelps Stokes and his immigrant journalist bride, Rose Pastor.¹ English and Anna were striking individuals—on the platform, under bylines, or as (frequently) reported in the Sunday supplements. As seen in the press, they were almost caricatures: he slim and imperious, the Southern aristocrat; she warm, passionate, voluble, a touch of something foreign in her voice.

They were seen, and saw themselves, as destiny's couple, plunging always toward the heart of their times—revolution, pogrom, labor war, racial violence, radical controversy. Freed by affluence to choose his roles, he played the controversialist, the journalist *engagé*, the publicist in the old sense of that term: the writer who minds the world's business. She was a novelist by aspiration, a reluctant but moving orator, and ever the idealist. Their influence on their era was not inconsiderable: They fed American sympathy for the Russian revolution of 1905, struck the initial spark for the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and rode the tide of prewar American socialism when it seemed capable of transforming American politics and society.

Yet their names are today known chiefly to specialists, and the world of radicalism that they inhabited can seem more remote than, say, the first Elizabethan era. Their present obscurity is to a degree deserved, for they never fully won the conventional attributes of fame: achievement, enduring reputation, or power. By the time other members of their generation were rising to eminence with the New Deal, they had all but vanished from public view. The coin in which they traded before the war had become all but worthless.

The title *Revolutionary Lives*—taken from that of an unpublished book by Anna Strunsky—is to a degree ironic; Anna and English Walling were self-styled revolutionaries whose radicalism was ultimately played out in bourgeois settings. Yet for forty years they *did* lead revolutionary lives, in the sense that they continually discarded old identities for new, old issues for

REVOLUTIONARY LIVES

Anna Strunsky

& William English Walling



JAMES BOYLAN

new; like their contemporary Hutchins Hapgood, they were exemplars of Victorians seeking to emerge into the modern world.²

Moreover, they led adventurous lives, marked with episodes of physical and intellectual daring, even recklessness, and a restlessness that led them always to believe that their lifework was incomplete. Not the least of their struggles, in the end, was the conflict in their own household, centering on increasingly divergent views of humanity and society, peace and war. Their remarkably variegated pilgrimage, their largely untold story, I am persuaded, enriches our understanding of that era—"this aspiring and questing world," as Anna's cousin Simeon Strunsky called it—of American radicalism before 1914, and its extinction in the Great War.³

Where twenty or thirty years ago I, like many of my contemporaries, might have dismissed half of the tale—Anna's half—as irrelevant or inconsequential, it is now possible to study the two of them on equal terms, and justifiably so. We can explore more freely now the links between domestic and public spheres, between personal acts and social consequences. In this perspective, Anna and English have equal salience.

If the tale proceeds more through her eyes than his, it is not only because he habitually concealed his inner self but because she left such rich if sometimes enigmatic resources. She clearly hoped that her papers would one day be used by historians, and I have tried to employ them in the spirit that she prescribed during her literary apprenticeship, when she defended W. E. Henley's critical biography of Robert Louis Stevenson: "There are . . . two manifestations of the principle of loyalty—that of the fanatic, eager, superlative, puerile, bent only on seating the little god of its making on a throne in a drama of one night's running, and that of the lover in whose love something of the iron has entered, but who feels that to posterity it were a gain to have the picture true."⁴