



# Jean Paton and the Struggle to Reform American Adoption

*E. Wayne Carp*

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Adoption activist Jean Paton (1908–2002) fought tirelessly to reform American adoption, dedicating her life to overcoming American society’s prejudices against adult adoptees and women who give birth out of wedlock. From the 1950s until the time of her death, Paton wrote widely and passionately about the adoption experience, corresponded with policymakers as well as individual adoptees, promoted the psychological well-being of adoptees, and facilitated reunions between adoptees and their birth parents.

She also led the struggle to re-open adoption records, creating a national movement that continues to this day. While “open adoption” is often now the rule for adoptions within the United States, for those in earlier eras, adopted in secrecy, the records remain sealed; many adoptees live (and die) without vital information that should be a birthright, and birth parents suffer a similar deprivation. At this writing, only seven of fifty states have open records. (Kansas and Alaska have never closed theirs.)

E. Wayne Carp’s masterful biography of Jean Paton brings this neglected civil-rights pioneer and her accomplishments into the light. Paton’s ceaseless activity created the preconditions for the explosive emergence of the adoption reform movement in the 1970s. She founded the Life History Study Center and Orphan Voyage and was also instrumental in forming two of the movement’s most vital organizations, Concerned United Birthparents and the American Adoption Congress. Her unflagging efforts over five decades helped reverse social workers’ harmful policy and practice concerning adoption and sealed adoption records and change lawmakers’ enactment of laws prejudicial to adult adoptees and birth mothers, struggles that continue to this day.

Read more about Jean Paton at <http://jeanpaton.com/>

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