

New Perspectives on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott:

A review of recent work on the history of nineteenth-century women's rights

Reviewed by Louise Newman, University of Florida

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Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement*.

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978-0-19-518265-1 (cl)

Sue Davis, *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*. New York and London:

New York University Press, 2008. x + 299 pp. ISBN-13

978-0-8147-1998-5 (cl)

Christine L. Ridarsky and Mary M. Huth, eds. *Susan B. Anthony and the Struggle for*

*Equal Rights*. New York: University of Rochester Press, 2012.

x +245 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-58046-425-3 (cl)

Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in*

*Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

Press, 2011. [uncorrected page proofs]

Over the last two decades, scholars have been re-examining the nineteenth-century woman's rights and abolitionist movements and paying homage to its most influential leaders. There has been a spate of excellent biographies— Dorothy Sterling on Abby Kelley (1991); Andrea Kerr on Lucy Stone (1992); Carolyn Karcher

on Lydia Maria Child (1994); Nell Painter on Sojourner Truth (1996); Jean Fagan Yellin on Harriet Jacobs (2004); and Lori Ginzberg on Elizabeth Cady Stanton (2009) to mention a few, as well as new treatments of the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 (Judith Wellman, 2004, Lori Ginzberg, 2005) and the connections between abolitionism and women's rights (Kathryn Kish Sklar, ed., 2000). The works under review here continue in this vein and make significant contributions to the field. Carol Faulkner's insightful treatment of Lucretia Mott is the first scholarly biography of Mott to appear in thirty years and is likely to remain the standard for decades to come. Christine Ridarsky and Mary Huth's anthology showcases new scholarship on Susan B. Anthony, and Sue Davis situates Elizabeth Cady Stanton in relation to male political philosophers, enhancing our appreciation of Stanton's contribution to U.S. political theory. Sally G. McMillen's narrative of the events leading up to and emanating from the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 is a fruitful way to introduce both undergraduate and graduate students to white women's activism of the nineteenth century.

**Sally G. McMillen's *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights***

***Movement*** covers a fifty-year period, from 1840 to 1890, by focusing on the lives of four white women: Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), two organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention, and Lucy Stone (1818-1893) and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), two of the most famous abolitionists/suffragists of the time period. Early chapters describe what life was like for U.S. women in the decades preceding the convention, while middle chapters focus

on the convention itself and the organizing for women's rights that took place among white women during the 1850s. The two final chapters of this excellent synthetic narrative offer detailed analysis of the events of the 1860s and 1870s, including the divisions that occurred among white suffragists in the aftermath of the Civil War.

This book is part of a series, "Pivotal Moments in American History," aimed at undergraduates. As James McPherson, co-editor of the series, reminds readers: women's rights was one of "two of the most egalitarian and far-reaching reform movements" of the nineteenth century, the other being abolitionism (ix). But as McMillen appreciates, it is sometimes difficult to grasp how radical the women's rights movement was in its own day, given that the concerns discussed at Seneca Falls hardly seem radical to us now. "Today," McMillen writes, "no one questions the right of American women to vote, serve on juries, hold public office, claim their own possessions, earn equal wages, acquire a good education, have access to divorce, and pursue meaningful work" (71).

Aware that most students have never heard of Seneca Falls, neither the convention nor the town in which it took place, McMillen explains why approximately 300 people gathered for a two-day meeting in a small town located in upstate New York. In the mid-nineteenth century, Seneca Falls was a prosperous and growing industrial center, an important point in a nexus of commerce that extended from the midwest to the eastern seaboard. This region of New York state was home to four of the five organizers: Jane C. Hunt and Mary Ann M'Clintock, residents of Waterloo, Martha Coffin Wright of Auburn, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton of Seneca

Falls. The event was timed to take advantage of the presence of the fifth organizer, Lucretia Coffin Mott, the famous Quaker abolitionist from Philadelphia, who was travelling in upstate New York and staying with her younger sister, Martha Coffin Wright (84).

Because the book is intended as a text for survey courses, the early chapters cover basic information about the social conditions that made reform so necessary and introduce readers to the fundamental frameworks of U.S. women's history. Thus chapter 1 covers legal understandings, religious beliefs, and social customs encompassed in the term "separate spheres" and links this concept to "republican motherhood," a term that scholars use to refer to cultural understandings that mothers had a critical role to play in the new nation's future. Tracing the economic changes (early stages of industrialization and an emerging market economy), which resulted in a separation of the home/private sphere from the workplace/public sphere, McMillen explains how a widening "gap between male and female duties" occurred, "especially among the growing middle class" (16). Yet McMillen is also sensitive to the fact that "the ideology [of separate spheres] had little to no meaning in slave and poor farm families," (26) and so also briefly explores the racial/class hierarchies that structured social relations among women in the nineteenth century.

Subsequent chapters introduce readers to the Quaker and abolitionist circles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, describing the places where Mott, Stanton, and Anthony lived: Nantucket, Poughkeepsie and Philadelphia for Mott, Rochester for Susan B. Anthony, Boston and Seneca Falls for Elizabeth Cady

Stanton. We encounter the leading Quakers and white abolitionists of the day, including the famous couples of Angelina Grimke-Theodore Weld and Antoinette Brown-Samuel Blackwell, as well as black abolitionists and reformers, notably Frederick Douglass and Maria Stewart. McMillen offers a succinct discussion of the myriad religious communities, social reform movements, ideologies, and educational institutions of the nineteenth century—the Millerites, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Oneida, Brook Farm, Transcendentalism, alternative medicine, homoeopathy, spiritualism, phrenology, mesmerism, Oberlin and Antioch in Ohio; Genesee Wesleyan Seminary and New York Central College in upstate New York.

Later chapters are devoted to the impact that the Civil War had on women's lives and key events of the 1870s: Victoria Woodhull's role in exposing the affair between Henry Ward Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton; state referendum campaigns; and the early stages in the writing of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, undertaken by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage. At this point, the book is less effective as an introductory text and becomes much more useful to graduate students and scholars wanting an efficient way to catch up on recent historiography. There is good coverage of the division among suffragists in 1869, as white suffragists split over whether to support the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—a topic that has been the subject of much historiographical debate. As McMillen explains, “a few scholars perceive the split as a positive step” (183), but her own position is that “personal issues more than institutional structure or goals”

intensified the division. McMillen's final ruminations are to wonder whether women "would have won their right to vote sooner" had they been able to overcome their "personal, often petty, disagreements" in order to work together (183-184). Although these speculations may not sit well with everyone in the field, I know of no other source where the details of this span of events are so carefully and thoroughly summarized.

Just as McMillen's intention was to make undergraduates aware of the significance that women's rights has had in the larger history of the United States, **Sue Davis's *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*** is meant to introduce students to Stanton as a first-rate political thinker, although she is rarely treated as such in surveys of U.S. political thought. What makes this book so valuable is Davis' forthright treatment of what historians have found difficult to reconcile in Stanton's philosophy and writings: her use of inegalitarian arguments, alongside natural rights theory, to challenge the patriarchal assumptions that denied women the right to participate in public life. Davis calls our attention to this tension in Stanton's thought and writings by posing questions that have deeply troubled historians: Was Stanton "genuinely committed to a philosophy of individual rights and equality?" (3) "Alternatively, did she consider women to be different from or morally superior to men because of their unique experiences as childbearers and mothers?" (3) "Is it possible that she was less a political thinker than a rational political actor—a strategist—who simply gauged which type of argument would be most likely to further her goals in any given context?" (3)

Davis argues that Stanton's political argumentation shifted over time-- becoming more "illiberal" (156) by the 1880s, reflecting changes in the larger American political culture. Using Rogers M. Smith's "multiple-traditions thesis" (11) to frame her analysis, Davis explains how many American political thinkers of this era struggled to reconcile liberalism and republicanism with what Smith terms "inegalitarian ascriptive forms of Americanism," (11) which ascribed particular moral, intellectual and physical qualities to individuals on the basis of their sex, race, and nationality.

Here is Davis' argument at its clearest: "Why did Cady Stanton in the years following the Civil War increasingly support her demands for women's rights with undemocratic and inegalitarian arguments," (155) despite the fact that her commitment to liberal principles never wavered? Davis' answer: "The explanation lies in the dynamics of historical and intellectual forces with which Cady Stanton was interacting," (155) including the "resentment and isolation engendered by the abolitionists' and Republicans' desertion of the cause of women's rights" (155) during Reconstruction, and the new intellectual currents of the 1870s-- specifically "Auguste Comte's Positivism... and social Darwinism," (155) which posited "natural sexual differences, as well as a racial hierarchy in which white women's superiority not only entitled them to participate in politics but also made it essential for them to do so to counteract the influence of African Americans and immigrants" (155-56).

Yet this was not the first time that Stanton's thinking contained an "illiberal strain" (156). On this point Davis is insistent: "her own ideas from the beginning

contained strains of illiberalism.... the politics of Reconstruction and the dominant intellectual currents worked in conjunction with her early predilections to produce an approach that was less liberal and more ascriptive than it had been before the Civil War” (155). And “although her elitism and ascriptivism grew more pronounced as the political and intellectual climate became more hospitable to such ideas, there was an illiberal strain in Cady Stanton’s earliest work” (156).

Some women’s historians may be inclined to take issue with these assertions (although I do not), but the much more important point is that Davis argues that this characterization should *not* detract from Stanton’s status as a major political thinker (4) and is quick to point out how the work of other renowned political thinkers, Thomas Jefferson included, were also characterized by similar tensions.

Although Davis does not raise concerns that other scholars have not already pondered, her treatment may prompt some readers to reconsider their earlier understandings. Similarly, **Christine L. Ridarsky and Mary M. Huth’s excellent anthology, *Susan B. Anthony and the Struggle for Equal Rights***, introduces scholars to a more complex Anthony than previously known, while also addressing how race informs the history of women’s rights more generally. The seven essays presented in this volume feature the work of established historians (Kathi Kern, Alison M. Parker and Ann D. Gordon), as well promising young scholars (Lisa Tetrault, Laura E. Free, Melissa Ryan and Tara M. McCarthy) and is delightfully broad-ranging, including excellent treatments of the meaning of the “Indian Problem” for white women’s rights activists (by Melissa Ryan); of Frances Watkins Harper’s



attempts to forge interracial alliances with white women in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (by Alison M. Parker); and of the ways that Anthony's commitment to Quakerism led to her having different priorities and strategies from Stanton in the postbellum period (by Kathi Kern).

However in this review, I want to focus on Lisa Tetrault's "We Shall Be Remembered: Susan B. Anthony and the Politics of Writing History" and Ann D. Gordon's "Knowing Susan B. Anthony: The Stories We Tell of a Life," for the new insights these two essays generate about how we have come to know what we believe to be true about the "real" Anthony. Tetrault's essay details how Anthony purposefully, skillfully controlled access to the primary sources and the interpretations of those documents that became the foundation of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, the publication of which, Tetrault argues, helped Anthony consolidate her power at a crucial time, as the unification of the AWSA and NWSA was taking place between 1887 and 1889.

By contrast, Gordon's article downplays Anthony's role in shaping her own legacy, exploring instead the myriad representations of Anthony that circulated during her lifetime and afterwards, along with offering readers insightful analyses of three biographies: Ida Husted Harper's *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*, (1898, 1908); Rheta Childe Dorr's *Susan B. Anthony: The Woman Who Changed the Mind of a Nation* (1928) and Kathleen Barry's *Susan B. Anthony: The Life of a Singular Feminist*, (1988).

As Tetrault points out, Susan B. Anthony is unique among suffrage activists for the sheer volume of historical information she published for posterity: first through her role as one of the editors (and eventually sole proprietor) of the multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage* and then for providing the material for what would become a three-volume biography written by Harper. Yet as Tetrault argues, we rarely think of Anthony as a historian or memoirist, someone who had a hand in composing the narratives we have of her. Rather, we know her as an organizer and strategist-- the most effective and beloved leader of the suffrage movement in the nineteenth century. That Anthony herself played a critical role in constructing this understanding is one of the insights that emerges from this brilliant essay, from which it is possible to conclude that it was, if not Anthony's explicit purpose, then a desired result nonetheless, to "erase strife from the historical record" (42)-- to impose one overarching story on the diverse, disparate accounts that existed regarding the women's suffrage activism.

Although specialists know the larger outlines of the infighting that lay behind the "unification" of the American (AWSA) and National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1889 and have understood that the narratives contained in the *History of Woman Suffrage* marginalized the AWSA, nonetheless Tetrault's essay is full of fascinating details concerning the debates that Anthony, Stanton and Gage had among themselves as well as with others. The upshot for Tetrault: "Anthony depicted her leadership as she wanted it to appear, not as it was" (40); she was a "savvy politician

who had to build her power within the movement” (40); and she used “history writing, among other endeavors, to further her ambitions” (40).

Then, as Tetrault explains, “near the end of her life, Anthony approved a shocking decision: to burn part of the large archive assembled in her attic. The destruction, supervised by Harper with Anthony’s collaboration, must have been enormous, because bonfires reportedly burned in her back yard for days” (43). Tetrault’s interpretation of this event is unequivocal: “Anthony meant the multivolume *History* and her (auto)biography to be the documentary record. The existence of documents that might undermine her account would have been unwelcome” (44).

There’s no doubt that this assessment will not appeal to everyone working in the field. Indeed, Ann Gordon’s essay in this anthology takes issue with the claim that “Susan B. Anthony was concentrating power in her own person in the years after 1887” (210). Gordon narrates Anthony’s relationship to the power struggles among suffragists this way: “The aging and often ailing Anthony both pulled back and was pushed back from power.... Anthony retained leadership because no one with less seniority could hold the competing groups together.... At age seventy years in 1890, and surrounded by ambitious younger women, she could try to unify but rarely could she direct” (210-11).

Where Tetrault credits Anthony with having a hand in the representations of herself that are contained in Harper’s biography, Gordon stresses that Harper had her own purposes and worked independently of Anthony, both in composing the three-

volume biography (the last volume of which was written and published after Anthony's death) and in the decision to burn much of the archival record. Regardless of which assessment we prefer—Tetrault's or Gordon's-- the larger point is that there is much that scholars don't yet agree upon regarding this towering figure in the history of women's rights. Paradoxically, the massive amounts of information available make it that much more difficult to come to any consensus. As Gordon argues, it has become increasingly difficult to distill a "flesh-and-blood Anthony," (201) for she has "acquired a kind of shadow self on which her contemporaries inscribed their responses to her political message" (201). Even today, as the antiabortion movement claims Anthony for an ally, that "shadow self" continues to bear "the burden of intense conflict over women's rights" (227). And as scholars continue to reflect on Anthony's "rank in the hierarchy of women's rights advocates" and "the purity of her intentions," (227) such debate about Anthony is unlikely to end soon.

If it is deeply ironic that despite having access to a rich historical record, we still have no definitive biography of Anthony, then Tetrault's and Gordon's essays help us to understand why that is so. Similarly, until recently, it might have been observed of Lucretia Mott, that other towering figure in the history of women's rights, that such an important person deserved to be better understood. Fortunately, a pathbreaking biography by Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, now offers scholars and students a

detailed account of Mott's public activities, while also leaving readers with the feeling that they know something about her as a person. This achievement is all the more remarkable given that Mott did not leave a significant body of published writings or keep a diary (except for a brief period of time), and her letters, which have only recently been published (and which Faulkner helped to edit), are "filled with family news rather than introspection" (4).

Nonetheless, in Faulkner's capable hands, Lucretia Mott and the diverse worlds she inhabited come alive— her childhood in Nantucket and Boston; her adolescence at Nine Partners Boarding School in Dutchess County, New York; and her adulthood in Philadelphia. As a result, readers gain a much better understanding of Mott as a young girl who was high-spirited, independent-minded and intellectually gifted; a woman who passionately loved her husband, and contributed significantly to the family's support, who was a devoted mother, and yet somehow managed to travel and lecture widely, inspiring people everywhere she went. Most importantly, we gain a profound appreciation of this woman's self-confidence and courage, which enabled her to follow a Quaker practice that met the dictates of her conscience.

The iconic photographic images we have of Lucretia Mott (one is featured on the cover of the biography; others are contained in the insert between chapters 6 and 7) show an elderly woman, one whose jaw is set and gaze is steadfast, with her Quaker cap covering her hair and silk shawl encircling her shoulders. So we are likely to have forgotten, if we ever knew, that Mott had a "radiant personality," was considered attractive, even beautiful by her contemporaries (33), was an eloquent

speaker with a sweet and melodious voice (41), and that she preached—extemporaneously—to thousands of people, audiences that included men and women, “Quakers and non-Quakers, Europeans and Americans, southerners and abolitionists, “politicians, and clergy,” (6) and, of course, suffragists and advocates of women’s rights.

Due to the nature of the surviving historical record, this account reveals Mott in snatches, but they are vividly and powerfully rendered: we overhear an experienced minister giving a young journalist, William Lloyd Garrison, pointers on how to improve his public speaking: “William, if thee expects to set forth thy cause by word of mouth thee must lay aside thy paper” (62). We glimpse a mother of five working tirelessly to keep her family afloat when her father and husband (who were in business together) suffered serious economic setbacks; we are shown how little this woman cared about social mores, welcoming into her home in the 1830s black friends and visitors, including “a fifteen-year-old Haitian boy who sat in her front window all day” (60). For an instant, we can take pleasure in Mott’s rhetorical skills, which she put to the service of abolitionism as well as women’s rights: “we may be personally defeated, but our principles never” (65) and bask in her personal warmth, hearing her description of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whom she had just met at the World’s Anti-slavery Convention in London in 1840: “bright, open lovely”—“I love her now as one belonging to us” (94).

Yet Faulkner is also refreshingly frank in characterizing Mott as an “ideologue,” whose “preference for principles over pragmatism had a real—and

undoubtedly negative—impact on individual slaves” (6). Her primary example is Mott’s support of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society’s resolution in 1847, which denounced British abolitionists for buying the freedom of Frederick Douglass. Faulkner’s treatment of this issue enables us to understand Mott’s reasoning without condemning her for it: For Mott, “buying slaves, even to free them, accepted the slaveholders’ definition of slaves as property” (116) and she argued that the purchase would only diminish Douglass’s effectiveness as an abolitionist. “Mott urged that abolitionists’ attention be directed at the ‘whole class’ of slaves, not just a ‘few isolated cases’ . . . . In taking this stance, Mott advanced what she saw as the purest form of immediate abolitionism, but her disregard for the individuality of slaves was as troubling to her contemporaries, including William Lloyd Garrison, as it is today” (116).

This biography has so much to recommend it and I have been able to point out only a few of its remarkable qualities. However, one other deserves mention, and that is Faulkner’s narration of the schism between Orthodox and Hicksite Quakers in 1827. In this chapter, Faulkner clearly explains how the schism involved much more than ideological differences over scripture—including fundamental arguments over how Quakers should relate to/engage in an economy in which slavery was integral. This discussion reveals a woman who “banned slave produce from her home, much to the dismay of her husband and children” (54) and then helped persuade her husband to stop trading in cotton and deal in wool instead (55). Mott and her husband were among a group of Philadelphian Quakers who called for abolition early on, several

years prior to William Lloyd Garrison. Mott was a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (in 1833) and part of the inner circle that directed the interracial Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, remaining an active member of this organization for 36 years. She went on to read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and to take up a myriad of causes that today are encompassed under the term "women's rights." But as Faulkner argues, Mott's interest and involvement in women's rights, while ongoing and profound, "never trumped her support for abolition or racial equality" (4).

Upon her death in 1880, Mott was memorialized as a domestic saint by suffragists, while her contributions to abolitionism were ignored by many of her male colleagues in the abolitionist movement, who had already begun publishing their memoirs. An exception was William Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (1872), which paid tribute to Mott, referring to her as an "enfranchised spirit," "free from all control save that of conscience and God" (217). Faulkner's book picks up where Still's left off-- illuminating that spirit and elucidating Mott's public actions, considered heretical in her own time. As Faulkner writes on the final page, "in a period dominated by evangelicalism, Mott's rejection of scriptural and ecclesiastical authority was deeply unsettling to many Americans. Her racial egalitarianism made her unusual even among fellow abolitionists. And her commitment to abolition and racial equality over women's suffrage was unique among feminists" (218).

Individually each of the works reviewed here is important, but taken together they are of monumental significance-- an indication of how much the field of



women's history has matured in the last forty years. We now have a much richer understanding of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott as "flesh-and-blood women," rather than just "shadow selves" who are made to bear the ideological struggles of both their age and ours. These women were among the most important, effective and astute reformers of the nineteenth century, and we can now more fully appreciate the challenges they faced in their struggles to bring about a more just world.