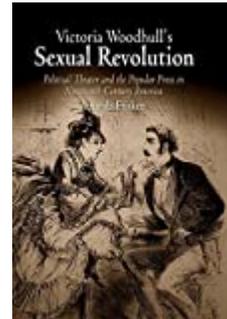




Amanda Frisken. *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. ix + 225 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3798-6.



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Commercialized Popular Culture and the Notorious Victoria Woodhull

Rather than write another conventional biography of Victoria Woodhull, Amanda Frisken's short book (156 pages of text) focuses on Woodhull's public career from 1870 to 1877. In less than a decade, Woodhull (often accompanied by her sister, Tennessee Claflin) opened up a Wall Street stock brokerage firm, presented a pro-woman suffrage argument to the House Judiciary Committee, launched her own journal, helped form Section Twelve of Marx's International Workingmen's Association, became president of the American Association of Spiritualists, attempted to vote, was nominated by the Equal Rights Party to be its presidential candidate in the national election of 1872, advocated free love, exposed the adultery of the famous minister Henry Ward Beecher, was subsequently arrested for obscenity, challenged the Comstock censorship laws, and toured the country giving popular lectures. Frisken ends her book in 1877, when Woodhull left the U.S. for England where she continued her popular lecturing. That year, she met her future husband, the wealthy British banker John Biddulph Martin, and began to pursue a new path toward respectability. Although Frisken tries to connect Woodhull directly to radical Republican politics, the book is really a study of the 1870s

more generally than a study of political Reconstruction.

Born into a large and poor family on the Ohio Valley frontier, Victoria's parents forced her to marry an alcoholic doctor when she was only fourteen. Victoria and Tennessee performed separately and together in family-run traveling medical shows as clairvoyants and healers in order to support their birth family and Victoria's husband and their two children. Frisken suggests that Woodhull and Claflin's unusual family background prepared her to promote her social beliefs and earn a living by orchestrating public spectacles. Unlike most other women's rights advocates, the sisters did not fear losing their respectability since they had never had it. They took more risks, Frisken argues, because of their already marginalized positions in American society.

Frisken's American Studies background enhances her ability to use images as a tool for analysis and historical understanding. Reaching out to the broadest possible male reading audience, men's sporting newspapers featured sensational illustrations of female vaudeville entertainers and actresses in titillating ankle-high skirts and low (for the era) necklines. Other women were featured

in the sporting news because of their alleged criminal behavior, including murdering mothers or madames of infamous brothels. Woodhull and Claflin were regularly featured on the cover of *The Day's Doings* as women who broke the boundaries of proper feminine behavior as they entered into the male-dominated spheres of economics and politics.

The illustrated papers caricatured Woodhull and Claflin derogatorily either as masculine-looking free lovers or as ankle-revealing prostitutes. Frisken demonstrates that this negative publicity compromised Woodhull's ability to make people take her seriously as an advocate for woman suffrage or as a presidential candidate. By highlighting the dangerous link between women's public activism and a lack of respectability, Woodhull's notoriety ultimately drove the comparatively more conservative women in the National Woman Suffrage Association to reject her as an ally. Woodhull's relationship to the popular press is complicated. In spite of the media's often negative characterization of her stance on free love and her critique of the sexual double standard for men and women, Frisken suggests that Woodhull managed to master the media in the end. Even negative publicity, she claims, gave Woodhull at least part of what she wanted in the form of money, fame, and audiences for her journal as well as her lucrative lecture series. However, the seriousness of Woodhull's social and political thought was often diluted or lost in the scandal that accompanied her literally making a spectacle of herself. Frisken concedes that Woodhull "would frame a spectacular event in the language of social principles; media coverage would then reinterpret it as a titillating spectacle" (p. 5).

Tellingly, as Woodhull refined her public lecture persona to appeal to larger audiences, she dropped many of her more controversial free love claims. By 1876, she was ready to take her lecture tour to the south. There, she spoke to sold-out halls but only after she sacrificed her reform dress, her shorter hair, and even her message for the sake of commercial success. Woodhull's new lecture was called "The Human Body, The Temple of God," in which she advocated a form of Darwinian motherhood based on scientific breeding and sex education. As Frisken contends: "the new lecture reined in Woodhull's earlier radical demands for women's sexual rights: it was a far cry from her 1871 claim to the right to change lovers daily" (p. 141).

The fascinating sporting paper images of Woodhull and Claflin reappear in Frisken's concluding chapter as proof that Woodhull actively stopped courting notoriety

and instead attempted to rehabilitate her reputation by making herself more respectable. Frisken reveals that Woodhull had the earlier sporting paper images of herself and her sister altered and republished after their marriages to respectable Englishmen. Woodhull commissioned a book called *One Moral Standard for All: Extracts from the Lives of Victoria Claflin Woodhull, Now Mrs. John Biddulph Martin, and Tennessee Claflin, Now Lady Cook* (1900). The original images from the sporting papers, with their risqué displays of ankles and caricatures of the sisters with masculinized features were now neutralized by the addition of layers of cloth at the bottoms of their dresses to cover their ankles, by a softening of their features, and by the replacement of their dress reform attire of short jackets and shorter hair with more feminine clothing and longer hair. Interestingly, Frisken suggests that Woodhull's intervention was successful; these cleaned-up images have been incorrectly viewed and reprinted as the sporting paper originals by previous historians and biographers.

Unlike her more compelling sections on the sporting paper images and Victoria Woodhull's commercialism, Frisken's claims regarding the connections between Woodhull and Republican Radical Reconstruction need to be more fully developed to be convincing. As it stands, Frisken is able to point out interesting coincidences rather than compellingly linked histories. For instance, while it is not untrue that Woodhull's "revolutionary program coincided with Radical Reconstruction" and even that "by 1876 both movements were in decline" (p. 20), what is less clear is the nature of the connection between them. Frisken seems to suggest that Woodhull's radical thought, especially her free love ideology, appealed to a segment of the American public in the early 1870s precisely because this was the phase of Radical Reconstruction when suffrage and civil rights were being expanded to new constituents. Arguably, however, even by 1870 Reconstruction's radicalism had begun to dissipate; radicals' calls for land redistribution in the South had gone unheeded and even an agent of more moderate reform, the Freedmen's Bureau, lost its Congressional funding and closed down by 1869.

Confusingly, Frisken claims on the one hand that as Radical Reconstruction became discredited so too did Woodhull and, on the other hand, that Woodhull herself contributed directly to the decline of Reconstruction. As Frisken puts it: "In the early 1870s, Woodhull's notoriety in sporting and commercial newspapers helped splinter the radical movements of Reconstruction. Negative, highly sexualized stereotyping of Woodhull discouraged

even the radical reformers who favored women's suffrage, international socialism, and civil rights, let alone more moderate reformers" (p. 149). Frisken herself admits that "Woodhull's notoriety provides an overly pat explanation for the failure of left-wing political movements to retain control of the universal rights discourse during Reconstruction" (p. 153). She does not, however, move beyond this admission. Furthermore, Frisken's assertion that "Woodhull's extreme individualism, and the commercial success of her sexual politics, provided a popular transition to the free market libertarianism of the Gilded Age" (p. 156) does not seem to mesh with her other assertion that Woodhull represented an early, aborted phase of radical Reconstruction.

Overall, Amanda Frisken's well-written study of Woodhull fruitfully explores the complicated interactions between the popular press, radical sexual politics, and commercial entertainment in the 1870s. It will be of interest to historians and students of women since it explores the public life of one of the most controversial women of her era. In addition, it provides a fascinating account of Woodhull and Claflin's decision to form Section Twelve of the International Workingmen's Association in order to align the working classes with the sex radicals' critique of class and gender. Finally, those interested in the free love movement, censorship and free speech debates of the 1870s, and popular culture will enjoy Frisken's book.

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