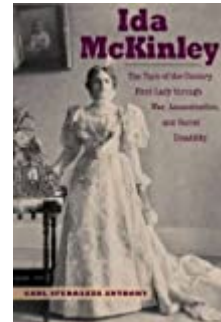




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The Personal Is Political: Ida and William McKinley's Partnership

In *Ida McKinley: The Turn-of-the-Century First Lady through War, Assassination, and Secret Disability*, historian of first ladies Carl Sferazza Anthony has taken on a subject that raises fascinating questions about the role of gender in Gilded Age politics. For Anthony, the key to understanding Ida and William McKinley's relationship is performance. The real limitations imposed by Ida's health, combined with their desire to conceal her epilepsy from the public, resulted in the careful crafting of the couple's roles. William's role as a martyr to her invalidism and an attentive husband indulging a loving wife defined his public persona (pp. xii, xiv); Ida played the dedicated wife who sacrificed her own desire to live quietly at home to her husband's career. Anthony argues that this mutual devotion was both very real and carefully staged for maximum effectiveness. The McKinleys thus serve as an example of the ways the distinctions between public and private were continually blurred in the service of politics.

The first two chapters of the book show a very different Ida than the suffering patient she later became.

Ida Saxton was born in 1847 in Canton, Ohio, the oldest child of James and Kate Dewalt Saxton. Theirs was a closely knit family, strongly identified with Canton. Her paternal grandfather, John Saxton, was a newspaper publisher, abolitionist, and supporter of women's education. Ida attended the Union School, whose principal, Betsy Mix Cowles, was a founder of the Ohio Women's Rights Association and the Women's Anti-Slavery Society. Ida was also a student at a number of female academies, eventually graduating from Brooke Hall Female Seminary in Media, Pennsylvania, in 1867.

Upon returning to Canton, Ida began working in her father's bank rather unusual choice for a well-to-do young woman, but one that she clearly enjoyed. When not at work, she amused herself with surrey rides, dances, ice cream socials, and church picnics. In fact, it was at one of these picnics, in the summer of 1868, that Ida first met William McKinley, but she was too busy eating creamed chicken on a waffle to pay much attention to him. In any case, Ida, the belle of Canton, would soon become engaged to former Confederate army major John Wright.

Before her marriage, Ida, along with her younger sister Mary, set off on one last great adventure. The sisters headed to Europe in June 1869 and spent six months seeing the sights and indulging in one of Ida's favorite pastimes, vigorous hiking in the Alps. The pleasure of the trip was marred, however, by the news of Wright's sudden death from meningitis. Ida returned to work at the bank in January 1870, and a year later, she and McKinley were married.

The early years of the McKinleys' marriage were happy ones. Ida gave birth to a daughter, Katie, on Christmas Day, 1871. However, Ida's mother died in March 1873, just two weeks before Ida's second daughter, also named Ida, was born. Baby Ida was sickly from birth and succumbed to cholera when she was only four and a half months old. Losing her mother and her infant daughter within such a short space of time was devastating, but Anthony also emphasizes that Ida suffered from some genuine physical malady. She seems to have had some kind of traumatic fall, just before or after her baby's death, that affected her mobility, possibly a spinal injury resulting in nerve damage.

It was Ida's limited mobility that led to the public's perception of her as an invalid. Moreover, by focusing on her mobility, it was possible to keep from disclosing her other symptoms, variously described as fits, apoplexies, or convulsions (p. 26). As Anthony notes, epilepsy was classified as a psychiatric disorder in the late nineteenth century, and was popularly understood as a form of insanity. Anthony also points to the difficulty of making any kind of definite medical diagnosis at this remove, given the McKinleys' reluctance to speak or write openly about Ida's symptoms and the vagueness with which they were described when they did. Epilepsy can indeed be caused by head trauma or postpartum complications, either or both of which could explain the late onset of the disease.

Ida seemed to be progressing toward recovery when, in June 1875, another blow fell: three-year-old Katie died of scarlet fever. Until this time, Ida had been a regular churchgoer and apparently a devout Christian. Now she found herself unable to find solace in religion, believing that God had abandoned her. William and Ida probably could have had other children, but they seem to have believed there was a danger of passing on Ida's epilepsy. For the next twenty-six years, William and his political career would receive Ida's full attention. In turn, William would build his political persona on his devotion to his suffering wife. To do this, the McKinleys had to make

public rituals of their private relationship. For example, during his term as governor of Ohio, each morning McKinley would wave from the capitol plaza to Ida, who watched from the window of their hotel suite across the street. Careful observers would have noticed that McKinley did this even on days when Ida was known to be at home in Canton. It was all part of the performance.

Anthony notes that for most of her life, Ida did not fit the mold of traditional Christian womanhood. She had no children, and she never went to church. William did much of the work of organizing their household. Moreover, she was known to enjoy the theater, playing cards, and the occasional glass of wine. But their partnership, though unconventional, was very effective. Ida's invalidism provided a convenient excuse in a number of situations. A tour of the South in 1895, intended to pave the way for McKinley's nomination at the next Republican convention, was explained as a restful trip to a warmer climate; McKinley avoided making a whistle-stop tour during the campaign of 1896 (knowing he could not compete as an orator with William Jennings Bryan) by claiming that he needed to stay close to home for Ida's sake. Moreover, McKinley's devotion also provided a tactical advantage over the lobbyists, journalists, and politicians who came to question or negotiate with him, lowering their guard and making them less likely to exploit such a gentle soul (p. 46). Ida was a willing collaborator in these schemes; Anthony suggests that she did more than anyone to publicize McKinley's devotion because it mitigated her guilt at being unable to help in a more active way (p. 83).

One of the most interesting sections of the book is Anthony's description of the way McKinley's presidential campaign team staged his home in Canton, creating settings that would display the candidate to his best advantage. The two key spaces were William's office and Ida's parlor. While both rooms did serve those functions, their greater purpose was to act as an event staging area and ceremonial site, illustrating the McKinley story (p. 77). These public spaces were given the illusion of privacy through the clever use of props. The props in William's office included his law books; Civil War prints; and engravings of Abraham Lincoln, Rutherford B. Hayes, and Ulysses S. Grant. In Ida's parlor, a chair sat in a bay window and current journals and newspapers were set out. Family pictures and autographed photos of performers she had met during her time as first lady of Ohio were scattered about the room. Of particular interest to visitors were a portrait of Katie, and her little rocking chair. The entire house blend[ed] the pub-

lic and private, political and personalâ (pp. 77-78). Indeed, the first campaign event held at the Canton house was a celebration of the McKinleysâ silver anniversary, suggesting that there was no real distinction between the two spheres.

Anthony also considers what influence Ida might have had on her husbandâs policies. He was known to discuss issues with her extensively, and though there is no direct evidence, Anthony believes Ida was a major factor in McKinleyâs decision to keep the Philippines as a US colonial possession. Despite Idaâs own lack of interest in conventional Christianity, she was a supporter of the Methodist Womanâs Foreign Missionary Society and its educational work among children in the Philippines. Ida was also intensely interested in the reports coming out of the Philippines of the âsavageâ Igorot people of Luzon; like many Americans, she felt they were desperately in need of the blessings of American civilization. Regardless of Idaâs actual influence, Anthony sees a definite parallel between McKinleyâs feelings about his obligation to care for Ida and the United Statesâ duty to âupliftâ the

Philippines.

Ida lost her protector, of course, when McKinley was shot by Leon Czolgosz at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. After McKinleyâs death in 1901, Ida continued to be a figure of public interest, becoming a symbol of the nationâs mourning and of patient suffering. For a time, she refused to leave the house except to visit her husbandâs burial vault. But during the last few years of her life, a different Ida emerged. Her two beloved nieces each had a daughter, and these children became a new focus of attention. Friends, family, and even Ida herself acknowledged that without William, she had become much more independent. In seeking to protect her, McKinley had also infantilized Ida to some degree.

Ida McKinley is thoroughly researched and draws on a wealth of primary sources, including the personal letters and papers of McKinley family and friends. It will be of interest to scholars of Gilded Age politics and gender, as well as those studying the history of medicine and disability.

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