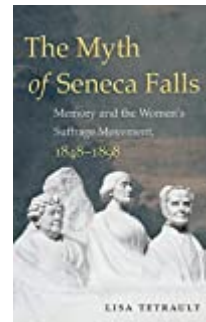


Lisa Tetrault. *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898.* Gender and American Culture Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. xiv + 279 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-1427-4.



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The Mythology of the Suffrage Movement

Susan B. Anthony is often included on lists of women whose portrait should appear on the redesigned ten-dollar bill. Elizabeth Cady Stanton sometimes surfaces, but longtime suffrage leader Lucy Stone goes unmentioned. Lisa Tetrault's *The Myth of Seneca Falls* tells the story behind this selective collective historical memory of the woman suffrage movement.

Tetrault examines the myth that the 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, launched the woman suffrage movement. She does not argue that the Seneca Falls meeting was unimportant. Instead, she states that it has become a venerated and celebrated story that requires further scrutiny (p. 5). Tetrault demonstrates that Stanton and Anthony crafted this historical narrative during the late nineteenth century to ensure that their contemporaries and later generations recognized them as the movement's leaders. By dating the movement to this meeting, Stanton, who helped organize the event and drafted the Declaration of Sentiments, became a founding mother. Inaccurate accounts placed Anthony at the meeting as well.

Stanton and Anthony created this suffrage narrative to establish a centralized movement under their leadership so they could dictate its aims and strategies. They believed suffragists needed a unified movement devoted to a suffrage amendment, not a movement made up of unaffiliated groups coordinating costly state-by-state campaigns. They used this narrative to turn other influential leaders like Stone, who led the rival suffrage association, into minor characters.

The pair created this suffragist memory primarily through text publications and commemorative ceremonies during the post-Civil War period. For example, Tetrault spends a chapter examining the three volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage* published in the 1880s. Stanton, Anthony, and suffrage newspaper editor Matilda Joselyn Gage edited the series. They wrote content, but they also reprinted publications and requested material from fellow activists. The trio (but especially Stanton and Anthony) edited these contributions often without the consent of the authors to fit space constraints and their narrative.

The *History of Woman Suffrage* editors crafted their narrative to show that they were the inevitable leaders of the cause. Stanton, Anthony, and Gage understood history writing to be a critical form of social activism because they firmly believed that writing history could shape the future (pp. 119-120). Three volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage* were published during the organizational split among suffragists in the 1880s, and Tetrault argues that the power of its narrative was one reason Stone acquiesced to the unification of the two organizations in 1890. The volumes at roughly one thousand pages each presented an authoritative history of the movement that Stone's suffrage newspaper could not compete with.

The narrative crafted by Stanton and Anthony in the *History of Woman Suffrage* and elsewhere continues to influence the history of the nineteenth-century woman movement. Seneca Falls, of course, remains a dominant starting point. Stanton and Anthony argued that the antislavery movement was hostile to woman's rights, which allowed them to choose the 1848 meeting as the first call for suffrage. This version does not have a place for activists like the Grimké sisters, who lectured about abolition and woman's rights. Stone, who was not at the meeting, in contrast, argued that the woman's rights movement emerged earlier within the antislavery movement or later at the first woman's rights convention in 1850.

The Seneca Falls myth, as Tetrault demonstrates, is just one of Stanton and Anthony's stories that continues to shape suffrage narratives. Rather than acknowledging demands for a range of woman's rights (even at the 1848 meeting), suffrage was the only goal in their story. Stone's competing national organization received little attention. Stanton and Anthony's history prized white women's participation. They mentioned Sojourner Truth briefly, but ignored the contributions of other women of color like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In their efforts to demonstrate that women could be political leaders, furthermore, the narrative largely excluded male suffragists. Frederick Douglass, Parker Pillsbury, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson became minor figures.

The Myth of Seneca Falls highlights the politics of writing history and contributes to literature on the making of Civil War memory. Anthony and Stanton established this narrative at the height of emancipationist and reconciliationist memory making. Tetrault suggests that this suffragist memory was part of suffragists' strategies to enter the theater of memory and thus compete

in this arena of politics (p. 40). She demonstrates that reformers wanted to shift this conversation to emphasize women's contributions to war efforts. Ultimately, though, they failed to make their cause an integral part of the war's legacy (p. 113). Tetrault's argument that post-Civil War commemorations inspired suffragists to celebrate their history is convincing, but further elaboration on the ways they aimed for their narrative to compete with emancipationist and reconciliationist memories would have been useful.

By detailing the history constructed by Stanton and Anthony and comparing it to her own research, *The Myth of Seneca Falls*, most importantly, frees scholars from the seemingly authoritative narrative handed down to us by the powerful pair. Tetrault liberates scholars who have been constrained by a Seneca Falls periodization along with that story's moral (white political rights above all other rights) (p. 199). The fact that scholars still grapple with the *History of Woman Suffrage* over 120 years after the publication of its first volume testifies to its continued influence. How many other nineteenth-century histories continue to influence modern scholarship to such a degree?

The Myth of Seneca Falls opens up woman's rights and woman suffrage movements to new interpretations and periodizations. Different leaders, strategies, and themes would likely emerge in a new suffrage narrative. The men and women originally excluded from Stanton and Anthony's story could gain a more prominent place. The role of race in the movement and the importance of the early suffrage victories in western states may be more fully integrated into the history as well. Perhaps rather than the suffrage movement, additionally, more works will situate this cause within the broader woman's rights movement. *The Myth of Seneca Falls* scrutinizes the established narrative rather than presenting the new one that this book will help foster. It would be interesting to learn what Tetrault thinks the new turning points might be and which leaders scholars might find more central.

Tetrault's book, finally, is a useful reference because it is one of the few scholarly works that have traced the suffrage movement from the beginning to end since Eleanor Flexnor's *Century of Struggle* (1959). Suffrage scholarship tends to focus on turning points in the movement, such as the establishment of national organizations in 1869 or the final decades of suffrage activism. Tetrault's work is a necessary read for scholars of the long nineteenth century because it sheds new light on the era's politics and social movements and paves the way for broad new interpretations.

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