

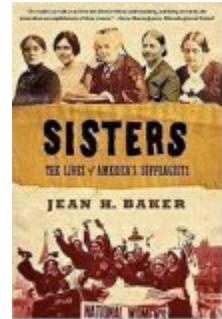
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean H. Baker. *Sisters: The Lives of America's Suffragists*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2005. xi + 277 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9528-5; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-8703-7.

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## An Enlightening Reconsideration of Woman Suffrage Leaders

When former President Gerald R. Ford's body lay in rest at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda earlier this year, television news anchor Charles Gibson noted that the only statue of a woman in the building's Statuary Hall was that of Frances Willard, the late nineteenth-century temperance reformer and long-time president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Echoing Gibson's comment, Jean H. Baker, professor of history at Goucher College, recently declared that the woman's suffrage movement in the United States suffered from a similarly seeming neglect in American history survey classes. While she agreed with historian Joan Hoff that the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification in 1920 came too late to fully develop women's political and civic development in this country, Baker added that "voting moved women out of a previously gender-segregated public culture and created an American one based on the participation of political equality," a still significant development in United States history.[1] To help remedy this apparent neglect, Baker's new book concentrates on the lives of five suffragists: Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frances Willard, and Alice Paul. The result is an interesting, enlightening, albeit not flawless reconsideration of these five women, who for the most part made important contributions to the suffrage movement from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s.

Baker discusses in her introduction why she chose her five subjects. They all demonstrated qualities of "leadership, optimism, stamina, and remarkable longevity," the author asserts, and their activities also

shaped the goals of what Baker calls the first wave of feminism (pp. 4-5). But Baker intends to do more than just provide analyses of her subjects' public achievements. Instead, reflecting the call of current feminists "that the personal is the political," she sets out to integrate the women's private lives into their public work. By doing so, she concludes, these five women will "become part of the American political tradition" (p. 11). Baker therefore intends to do a feminist version of Richard Hofstadter's 1948 classic, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*.

The outstanding part of *Sisters* comes in Baker's consideration of Stone, Anthony, and Stanton. These three women emerge not only as distinct individuals, but also as different parts of the mosaic that comprised the suffrage movement from the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention to Anthony's death in 1906. Stone (1818-1893) emerges as the principled loner, Anthony as the tireless organizer, and Stanton as the intellectual of the early suffrage movement. Stone only knew an abused mother and a hard-bitten, alcoholic father in her childhood. Rebelling against what she perceived as a repressive, patriarchal family, she attended Oberlin College, and then became a popular lecturer on women's issues. Her native pessimism—Stone described herself as a "disappointed woman"—received ample support during her long life. She endured a complicated marriage with Henry Blackwell, a discreet philanderer who nonetheless renounced his legal rights over her when they married in 1855. Her stubborn adherence to principle caused

an equally complicated public life. Stone refused to deliver a commencement speech at Oberlin when college authorities denied her a gender-integrated audience. She also emerged as more socially conservative than her contemporary suffragists (she disagreed with Stanton about divorce reform) and also supported suffrage for black men, which Anthony and Stanton opposed. Stone eventually founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in opposition to Anthony and Stanton's suffrage organization, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). Not only did this development terminate Stone's friendship with Anthony, but the two organizations did not consolidate as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) until 1892.

Anthony, born in 1820, emerges as a figure far different from Stone in three ways. First, she came from a family which emphasized achievement and strong Quaker principles. Second, she became a constant traveler and agitator, wearing special "bloomer outfits," finding herself convicted of a felony after trying to vote in the 1872 presidential election, and eventually initiating the fight for a national constitutional suffrage amendment. Finally, Anthony found personal fulfillment in close relationships with several younger women. Baker carefully delineates the extent of these relationships, noting that while contemporary definitions of women's relationships did not automatically encompass lesbianism, Victorian women still engaged in "emotionally and sexually gratifying relationships as kindred spirits" (p. 76).

Stanton (1815-1902) emerges as the most complex figure of the early suffragists. Like Stone, she came from a complex familial situation. Her father once admitted to her that he had wanted a boy, and her mother's constant childbearing precluded much affection for the young woman. But, like Anthony, she became a woman forever restless with the strictures of society. Although she married a much older man, Anthony never automatically obeyed his dictates. She also became a forceful advocate of a wide-ranging women's rights agenda, which included divorce reform, child custody for women, and exposure of spousal abuse. Moreover, while not as dynamic a speaker as Anthony, Stanton eventually emerged as the suffrage movement's most politically astute leader, presiding over both the NWSA and the NAWSA. She also engaged in intellectual activities, trying to amend the Bible's patriarchal overtones in the controversial *The Woman's Bible* and writing the influential contemplation of women's role in American society, *The Solitude of Self*.

Baker's gift of bringing her subjects to life comes

through most clearly in these initial chapters. A prolific biographer who has written studies of Mary Todd Lincoln and President James Buchanan, she etches out each woman in precise detail. Baker does not also treat her subjects as moral exemplars. Although Stone supported the Fifteenth Amendment's granting of suffrage to black men, she later opposed the extension of voting to immigrants. Anthony and Stanton not only opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, but also refused to create coalitions with black women. This refusal becomes doubly ironic when one considers that these two women first became involved in reform because of the abolitionist movement.

The author's interesting discussion of her subjects' personal and public lives continues with her discussion of Willard (1839-1898). The WCTU president emerges as a rounded person, with her dynamic political leadership contrasted with her sexual struggles. Baker shows how Willard used the close relationship with her mother as a model for her public leadership. As she aptly puts it, Willard educated, comforted, and sacrificed herself for WCTU members "even as they honored and obeyed her" (p. 139). After assuming the organization's presidency in 1879, Willard allowed decentralization, but still kept tight control with her speeches, visits with WCTU locals, and supervision of the national newspaper. The major weakness of Baker's discussion of Willard lies in demonstrating her subject as a leading suffragist. While she supported suffrage after becoming WCTU secretary in 1874, Willard's major efforts concentrated on "sexual purity," temperance, and the formation of a national progressive coalition. She only emerges as a supporter of the national suffrage movement.

Baker's final chapter returns her book to its former strengths. Perhaps her most interesting analysis centers on the similarities between Paul (1885-1977) and Paul's seeming archrival, President Woodrow Wilson. Both came from strictly religious and Ivy League backgrounds—Quakerism and the University of Pennsylvania in Paul's case, Presbyterianism and Princeton University in Wilson's situation. Both possessed seemingly aloof characters and waged principled struggles which eventually led to heavy personal costs. Paul's fight for women's suffrage forced her into prison many times and exposed her to the agony of force-feeding, while Wilson's refusal to compromise on the League of Nations partially led to his devastating stroke in 1919. The author is also impressive in describing how Paul's dynamic leadership revived a seemingly moribund suffrage movement after her return from Great Britain in 1911, and how her initiation of picket lines around the White House

in 1917 created considerable pressure on Wilson to support women's suffrage. The president finally expressed his public support of the pending suffrage amendment when the U.S. Senate voted on the measure in September 1918. Baker could have made her analysis more convincing, however, if she also discussed in greater detail the contemporaneous efforts of other suffragist leaders such as Carrie Chapman Catt. While Paul impresses the reader as a courageous woman, as evidenced by her creating the National Woman's Party (NWP) in 1916, the NAWSA also deserves much credit for ensuring the Nineteenth Amendment's successful ratification. In addition, Baker's assertion that "women retired from participation in public life for nearly half a century" after Paul's efforts for ratification ended (p. 238) is belied by later examples such as Molly Dewson and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Baker continues her clear-eyed assessment in the latter part of her book, particularly when it comes to the issue of race. She notes how Willard refused to support Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching efforts, and how Paul's ac-

tions belied her claims of seeking cross-race coalitions. As the author concludes the NWP remained the "special preserve of elite, well-educated, mostly wealthy white women" (p. 211). One could add that this failure to include African American women in the national suffrage cause did not constitute a failure only within the NWP.

In conclusion, Baker's book substantially accomplishes its intended goals. It vividly demonstrates how her subjects' private lives intertwined with their public accomplishments, and also successfully demonstrates the importance of four of the five subjects to American political history.

#### Note

[1]. See Jean H. Baker, "Getting Right with Women's Suffrage," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5:1 (2006): 7-17. This article is a reprint of Baker's Distinguished Historian Address before the SHGAPE meeting in April 2005.

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