H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean V. Matthews. *Women's Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1997. x + 212 pp. $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-146-4; $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-145-7.

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Published on H-Women (June, 1998)

In 1913, Virginia lawyer Conway Whittle Sams dismissed the woman suffrage movement as "a craze." Laws benefiting women, he declared with disdain in *Shall Women Vote? A Book for Men*, deserved to be catalogued "in a Museum of Legal Curiosities…in the section devoted to Legislative Attempts to Subordinate Men to Women and Children."[1] Despite such opposition (from both sexes), women would win the vote seven years later. The battle for equality, however, had begun over seventy years earlier. In July 1848, the first convention agitating for women's rights, held in Seneca Falls, New York, produced a Declaration of Sentiments asserting that "all men and women are created equal." Of those who signed it, only Charlotte Woodward, a glove-maker, lived to cast a vote in 1920, at age ninety-one.

In *Women's Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876*, Jean V. Matthews has crafted a concise and highly readable synthesis of recent suffrage scholarship. The fight for equality, she reminds her readers, was much more than the fight for the vote. "The women's movement," she maintains, "was one of the most important social and political forces of the nineteenth century" (p. vii). Especially in its first phase, the movement was revolutionary and emancipatory, claiming for women equality of rights, opportunities, and respect with men. More than paving the way to the ballot box, these early suffragists were attempting to rethink and redefine what womanhood meant–a threatening proposition to men and women alike.

A small minority of unusual women fought for suffrage. For most of the population, "the woman question" had already been answered by the system of separate spheres crafted in the early nineteenth century from the Revolutionary-era notion of republican motherhood.[2] Men, physically and mentally strong, were destined for the world of "war, work, and politics"; women, naturally weaker but morally purer, were meant for the home, "marriage, motherhood, domestic joys and charities." "In short," writes Matthews, "men's sphere was the public world, women's the private" (p. 5). This separate but dependent domestic sphere reflected the world and the experience of most nineteenth-century women. The majority were married, and once they married, few worked outside of the home, directing their energies instead to the bearing and raising of children. The doctrine of separate spheres, Matthews argues, was "a kind of sexual constitutionalism," a separation of powers designed to lessen competition between the sexes while affirming gender identity of both (p. 7). Women, nevertheless, were always dependent on men and subject to their authority.

Despite these boundaries, nineteenth-century women were making practical gains. Although no colleges admitted women, female literacy increased. Historians estimate that by 1850, half of American women were literate. The amount and availability of reading material grew; women came together in study clubs and reading groups; and educational pioneers like Emma Willard and Catharine Beecher opened higher education opportunities for women. Willard's female academy opened in Troy, New York in 1821, and by 1872 had educated twelve thousand girls, including Elizabeth Cady. Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary trained women to be teachers starting in 1823. Soon female academies opened throughout the United States, although none intended to challenge the longstanding "separate, and subordinate, sphere of women." Instead, they aimed to make girls better daughters, wives, and mothers. One graduate of Hartford Seminary, while insisting to a friend that "mental acquirements" were compatible with "the domestic usefulness of a woman," hesitated to share her skills with the world at large. "I think however great the acquirements which a woman has made," she reflected in a fashion typical of her contemporaries, "they should never be blazoned to the world—should be kept in the shade and never be exhibited or displayed" (p. 19).

As the nineteenth century progressed, women increasingly ventured out into the world, forging antebel-

lum revivalism, female associations, and reform movements. Historian Nancy Hewitt found three separate networks in her study of Rochester, New York: a charity relief network, an evangelical revival network aiming to rid society of intemperance and vice, and a small but vocal group of radical reformers aiming to break down boundaries between the spheres.[3] For most reformers, the question of women's involvement in politics divided moderate reform and radicalism. Although no organized national society was formed in 1848, the men and women who gathered at Seneca Falls demanded the vote, among other reforms. This spark ignited the women's movement, steered until the Civil War by a small core of leaders linked by friendship and experience.

Matthews tells her story with both style and substance, delving into the lives of familiar leaders like Susan B. Anthony and less visible workers like Emily Collins, "a lifelong soldier in the cause of women's rights" (p. 63). Chapter Three adeptly unravels the operations and competing aims of the movement. Women worked for the reform of oppressive laws and institutions; they also wanted "to transform men's ideas about women, and women's ideas about themselves" (p. 64). All of this came to a halt with the outbreak of the Civil War. Sandwiched between Matthews's chronology of the movement's development before and after the war is a chapter examining the question posed bluntly by the *New York Herald* in September 1852: "Who are these women? what do they want? what are the motives that impel them to this course of action?" (p. 84).

In a chapter titled "Diagnosing the Problem," Matthews sketches a composite portrait of the female reformer. Many were from small towns in regions already rich with reform ideas and organizations: upstate New York, Massachusetts, parts of Pennsylvania, and the Ohio Western Reserve. (Although Matthews argues that the women's movement did not penetrate the South, Elizabeth R. Varon has recently demonstrated that white Southern women were involved in politics throughout the antebellum period, lending their support to often-controversial reforms.[4]) Most were members of the middle class, and were already involved in antislavery and temperance. Nearly all were native born, married, and well educated. Most of the female population, however, did not attach themselves to the women's movement; Matthews skillfully outlines the motivations of those few who chose to challenge the expected. Women were often motivated to join the fight for equality because they felt "unjustly deprived of opportunity for growth" and after they had witnessed, but not necessarily suffered, oppression or abuse (p. 92). Converts were painfully aware, however accomplished they were, of belonging to "an inferior caste" (p. 93). By 1860, the movement was working toward equal rights for women as citizens, as well as the right to vote; perhaps more importantly, it was building change on the foundation of a new, self-developed, economically independent womanhood.

Matthews argues that the Civil War was a turning point in the woman's movement. The question of the vote was dramatically changed by emancipation; with the Fourteenth Amendment, the word "male" was introduced into the Constitution for the first time, making implicit "the linkage between citizenship, voting, and male gender" (p. 121). In addition, the constituency of the movement changed and broadened after the war. In 1869, two woman suffrage organizations were formed. The National Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, called for a separate federal amendment to enfranchise women, and worked to address other issues concerning women's rights. The American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone, her husband Henry Blackwell, Julia Ward Howe, and others, endorsed the Fifteenth Amendment, and, unlike the NWSA, concentrated solely on developing support for woman suffrage on the state level through constitutional reform. Matthews effectively weighs the benefits and disadvantages of the split in the women's movement, and examines the prickly but undeniable issue of racism among suffragists.[5]

If the issue of race did not derail the suffrage movement, the issue of sex nearly did. The in the early 1870s, the NWSA tangled with free-love advocate Victoria Woodhull, whose life has recently been examined in detail by Barbara Goldsmith and Mary Gabriel.[6] Cady Stanton and Anthony, meanwhile, were involved as advocates in several sensational trials with sexual themes, and two prominent pro-feminist men–Theodore Tilton and Henry Ward Beecher–were the protagonists in a long-running sex scandal of their own creation. Organized antisuffragism among women developed in the 1870s as membership in suffrage organizations dropped and membership in new, more traditional organizations, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, grew.[7]

In the midst of these doldrums, the United States prepared to celebrate its centennial. Matthews closes her history here. Denied space in the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia, and with Lucy Stone's exhibit protesting taxation without representation tucked away into a dusty corner of the Woman's

Pavilion, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage decided to crash the opening ceremonies. The president of the Exhibition had been blunt in his refusal: "Tomorrow we propose to celebrate what we have done the last hundred years," he said, "not what we have failed to do."[8] For a small group of suffragists, these were fighting words. On July 4, five women interrupted the ceremonies at Independence Hall to unfurl a three-foot-long scroll inscribed with a declaration of women's rights and handed copies out to the crowd. A reading by Susan B. Anthony followed outside. Summing up the goals of the movement's first phase, the document offered "an open-ended view of emancipation." With no example to guide them, these women bravely invented "new ways of being a woman" (p. 185).

Matthews herself, like the women she writes about, has bravely ventured into uncharted territory. A narrative history of the early years of the women's movement was sorely needed, and she has provided an excellent example of what a well-written synthesis should be. In lively, spare prose, she outlines the story, surveys the sources, incorporates varying interpretations, and peppers the text with the experiences and the words of the participants. Her meaty "Note on Sources" provides an excellent survey of suffrage scholarship, as well as a section on primary sources, underscoring the author's assertion that "there is no substitute for reading the words of the historical actors themselves" (p. 187). In *Women's Struggle for Equality*, Jean V. Matthews has written a skillful introduction to and examination of the early years of a revolutionary movement.

Notes

[1]. Conway Whittle Sams, *Shall Women Vote? A Book for Men* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1913), 282-83.

[2]. As described by Linda K. Kerber in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 199-200, 283-87.

[3]. *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York 1822-1872* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974).

[4]. Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[5]. As discussed in Suzanne Lebsock's "Women Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 62-100.

[6]. Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandolous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1998).

[7]. The origins of the southern antisuffrage movement are explored by Elna C. Green in *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[8]. Quoted by Linda K. Kerber, "'Ourselves and Our Daughters Forever': Women and the Constitution, 1787-1876," in *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement* edited by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, (Troutdale, Oregon: New Sage Press, 1995), 22.

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Citation: Jennifer D. McDaid. Review of Matthews, Jean V., *Women's Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2147

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