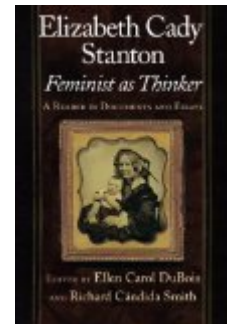


Ellen Carol DuBois, Richard Cándida Smith, eds. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 336 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1982-4.

Reviewed by Tiffany K. Wayne (independent scholar)

Published on H-Women (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt



## Placing Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Feminism in American Intellectual History

This collection of scholarly essays, accompanied by sixteen primary sources, seeks to place Elizabeth Cady Stanton in a broader historical and intellectual context. The book is made up of eight essays by such established Stanton scholars as Ellen Carol DuBois, Ann D. Gordon, and Kathi Kern, and others from the fields of nineteenth-century women's and feminist history. The essays constitute nearly half of the book, and the remainder of the volume includes "articles, speeches and pamphlets" published by Stanton between 1854 and 1901 (p. 2). The volume does not include Stanton's most widely available pieces—"The Declaration of Sentiments" (1848) and the "Solitude of Self" (1892)—but these more familiar works are central to the analyses throughout the essays. In selecting which primary sources to include, the editors tried to fill in the gaps between these two documents that chronologically framed her career. The documents included make up the heart of Stanton's public speaking and writing career, and allow the reader to assess how her ideas evolved over time, as the editors point out, from her legal analyses (Stanton was the daughter of a lawyer) of the 1850s, to debates over the political rights of women and blacks in the 1860s and 1870s, to broader theoretical inquiries (into religion, for example) in the last decades of her life.

After decades of historical scholarship complicating the story of nineteenth-century American feminism, Stanton remains primarily identified with the Seneca Falls meeting of 1848 and with suffrage. This volume

succeeds in arguing that Stanton was much more complicated as a feminist reformer and thinker; indeed, thirteen of the sixteen speeches or writings included here are from the post-Civil War era, showing the breadth and depth of her theorizing beyond the question of the vote, and through the end of the century. As the subtitle indicates, the volume thus seeks to secure Stanton's place not only in the history of reform but also in American (indeed, transnational) intellectual history.

The editors present "eight interpretive essays grouped into four pairs" (p. 5). Each pair represents contrasting or complementary approaches to specific aspects of Stanton's thought and career, such as her "legacy for contemporary feminism" (in the essays by Vivan Gornick and Christine Stansell); her place "in the major Anglo-American intellectual currents of her day" (essays by Barbara Caine and Richard Cándida Smith); "Stanton's analysis of the institutional anchors of women's subordination" (essays by DuBois and Kern); and a consideration of "how Stanton's adherence to then-current ideas of inherent racial difference interacted with her strong democratic and natural rights commitments" (essays by Gordon and Michelle Mitchell) (pp. 5, 6, 7). These stated pairings, however, are more fluid than the editors indicate, as most of the essays address each of these themes in some regard. Taken together, the analyses collected here speak to the continued relevance of Stanton's thought for contemporary feminism.

At least three essays (by Stansell, Gordon, and Mitchell) directly tackle one of the biggest issues overshadowing Stanton's legacy—the question of her racism and strained post-Civil War relationships with black activists in the suffrage and civil rights movements. In “Missed Connections: Abolitionist Feminism in the Nineteenth Century,” Stansell places Stanton in generational context, arguing that Stanton (born in 1815) “missed” the collaboration of black and white women that shaped the political commitments of the early antislavery movement of the 1820s and 30s. This first generation of female reformers is exemplified by the career of the Grimké sisters (Angelina and Sarah), who not only allied with black reformers in the north, but also had witnessed slavery firsthand as daughters of a southern slaveholder. In contrast, Stanton had only superficial relationships with African Americans and, as a New Yorker, no firsthand experience of slavery.

Whereas Stansell distances Stanton from the concerns of other nineteenth-century feminists by drawing these generational and regional lines, in “‘Lower Orders,’ Racial Hierarchies, and Rights Rhetoric: Evolutionary Echoes in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Thought during the Late 1860s,” Mitchell argues that Stanton’s scientific racism was not an anomaly, but, in fact, aligned her with the most prominent progressive intellectuals of her time. According to Mitchell, Stanton was a thinker who took all ideas seriously, even those that seemingly conflicted with her egalitarian ideals. Gordon, in “Stanton and the Right to Vote: On Account of Race or Sex,” bridges these two views to forcefully argue that Stanton’s reliance on racial stereotypes and her belief in racial differences coexisted with her belief in equal rights, and did not (or should not) negate that commitment.

Stanton’s thought reveals a central paradox or dilemma in nineteenth-century feminism—that a movement for equality for women, by definition, asserted the primacy of sex over race (or class) as the source of oppression. Is it only because the era of slavery and Reconstruction so forcefully and publicly required a response that Stanton’s equivocations seem so blatant, compared to the more subtle racism of today? Indeed, was Stanton’s dilemma (commitment to equality for all within a social and intellectual system that depends on and upholds difference) not just the dilemma of feminism, but, as Gornick suggests, the “essence of Americanism” itself (p. 20)? This continued need to explain Stanton’s attitudes and behaviors is necessary but painful for scholars who see Stanton’s racism as a disqualification for taking her seriously as a thinker.

In addition to linking Stanton to other strands of nineteenth-century American political thought, several essays examine Stanton’s place alongside European feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Frances Cobbe. In “Elizabeth Cady Stanton, John Stuart Mill, and the Nature of Feminist Thought,” Caine breaks through the assumption that males equaled thought and females equaled action in the history of liberal political reform. Caine points out that, while women were acknowledged as important activists in both British and American reform movements, a man (Mill) came to be regarded as the “most important and influential theorist” of nineteenth-century feminism (p. 50). Gornick also considers this question and posits that Stanton’s near invisibility within Western and feminist intellectual history is due to the fact that she did not write “the book”—a single text or manifesto with which she could be identified. Instead, Stanton was “thinking the matter out decade by decade, provocation by provocation” (p. 18).

Caine’s intellectual history approach complements Kern’s essay, “‘Free Woman Is a Divine Being, the Savior of Mankind’: Stanton’s Exploration of Religion and Gender,” which examines Stanton’s later commitment to *The Woman’s Bible*, published in two volumes in 1895 and 1898. The controversial project risked Stanton’s half-century reputation as leader of the women’s movement, and yet she boldly declared, “I would rather never vote” than have “religious bigotry” continue to influence “the politics of our government (p. 93). Kern argues that seeing Stanton as a thinker must take into account her radical views on religion, which led many reformers and even friends to distance themselves from her at the end of her life.

Stanton’s work on *The Woman’s Bible*, however, actually situates her more strongly in a later nineteenth-century intellectual context in which comparative religion, free thought, and positivism dominated in the world of ideas. Stanton’s work had a more complicated relationship to feminism at that time, for, as Kern points out, her critique of religion as one of the main foundations of female oppression—and her commitment to free thought—placed Stanton at odds not only with individual Christian reformers but also with the entire *collective* nature of the women’s movement. Likewise, Smith looks at Stanton’s capstone speech, “Solitude of Self,” as both a manifesto of intellectual independence, and evidence of Stanton’s continued place in and dependence on a community of thinkers. If Stanton rejected institutions (such as organized religion), she never sought to reject communities of learning and the need for cooper-

ative action. Indeed, the writings and speeches included here show Stanton as a theorist of women’s “social and personal development,” not one over the other (p. 1).

While the essays achieve their purpose in elevating Stanton as thinker, fleshing out the different aspects of, and interconnections between, her ideas, do they do enough in placing her in context with other nineteenth-century thinkers, especially other feminists? While Caine situates Stanton alongside European theorists, such as Wollstonecraft and Mill, one reading this book might think that Stanton existed in an American feminist intellectual vacuum. There is no mention of Margaret Fuller or Caroline Dall (about whom much has been written in recent years and with whom Stanton shared the commitment to women’s self-development) or with Matilda Joslyn Gage (with whom Stanton shared an interest in a feminist analysis of religion). How did America’s premiere feminist thinker (which Stanton undoubtedly was) fit into the trajectory of other thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? It seems that the project of recovering a feminist intellectual tradition is still ongoing, although Stanton’s place in that history should be firmly secured with the publication of this volume.

Additionally, although the stated emphasis in the volume is on her ideas rather than her activism, Stanton was prominent as both thinker and activist. While the essays

show that Stanton had much broader and deeper intellectual concerns than the narrowly focused movement for women’s legal and political rights, this reader was still left wanting to understand more about how Stanton’s theories influenced the movement that she led for fifty years, as well as her legacy for continued feminist debates into the twentieth (and even twenty-first) century. Should she visit us today, in the age of identity politics, global feminism, and the possibility of a female president, Stanton would undoubtedly continue to challenge us and push us to look at the continued underlying cultural and theoretical foundations of women’s subordination. As Gornick, in the opening essay, “Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Long View,” relates her own feminist epiphany, “We are beginning where she left off” (p. 31).

By collecting and making accessible a more diverse selection of Stanton’s writings, presented side by side with the latest currents in Stanton scholarship represented by the essays here, the volume will undoubtedly encourage a new generation of scholars on Stanton as thinker. If the scholars gathered here agree on one thing, it is that Stanton grappled seriously with the issues of her time—including ideas about race, sex, science, and religion. What emerges from Stanton’s actions and words (as well as from the analyses here) is a complicated, paradoxical, and ultimately more interesting figure in the history of American ideas.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Tiffany K. Wayne. Review of DuBois, Ellen Carol; Smith, Richard Cándida, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23106>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.