

**Judith Wellman.** *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xii + 297 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02904-2.



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Judith Wellman's inviting new book arrives at an opportune moment. Not only are historians scrutinizing the "origin story" (p. 11) that early participants created about the Seneca Falls Convention, but they are writing a wide variety of alternative narratives about the history of woman's rights activism in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Bonnie Anderson has chronicled the "first international women's movement" by revealing the many transatlantic connections between American and European woman's rights activists during the era between 1830 and 1860. Nancy Hewitt's current work places woman's rights activity in the United States within the broader context of the other revolutions of 1848. Historians of women's grassroots labor in the antislavery movement, especially in abolitionist petition campaigns, such as Julie Roy Jeffrey, Susan Zaeske, and Deborah Van Broekhoven, have put forward new material for understanding the connections and disconnections between antislavery and woman's rights activism. By analyzing antebellum debates at woman's rights and state constitutional conventions and within church circles, Nancy Isenberg has pressed historians to situate

specific demands (such as that for suffrage) within the much denser and more complex context of a "rights discourse" that, at base, addressed the essential political question of how to define citizenship. Ann D. Gordon, Patricia G. Holland, and their associates are making available the collected papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. And Jean Fagan Yellin's deeply researched biography of Harriet Jacobs has reconnected Jacobs's life, and that of her brother John S. Jacobs, to the networks of activist women and men who populated antislavery, black civil rights, and woman's rights meetings in places like Rochester and New York City. The antebellum woman's rights movement may now need to be described in the plural, i.e. "movements"; at the very least, its story is one of "untidy origins," as Lori Ginzberg suggests in the title of her new book.[1]

In this historiographical moment, Wellman's re-examination both of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and of the Seneca Falls Convention is particularly timely. Scholars have long been grateful for Wellman's indispensable article detailing the social,

religious, and biographical backgrounds of Convention attendees who lent their names as signers or supporters of its Declaration of Sentiments.[2] With this book, Wellman recreates and reinterprets the larger contexts that produced the convention and the declaration, placing special emphasis on how, during the 1840s, institutional, legal, economic, and religious developments, along with personal and familial networks, converged on one place--Seneca Falls--and in the figure of one person--Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Well researched and engagingly written, the book is accessible and interesting; it is likely to have a long life on reading lists for both undergraduate and graduate courses.

Readers can skip the first few pages, a misstep into imaginative recreation, in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton walks from her house to the Wesleyan Chapel for the Convention's opening, as Wellman quickly finds her footing and sets out the book's argument and approach. In developing the intertwined stories of Seneca Falls and Stanton, she shows definitively how the 1848 Convention came to be held in that particular town, organized (in part) by that particular woman. Because of the economic and religious history of the era, she suggests, "in time and place, Seneca Falls was at a fulcrum point" in 1848 (p. 12). Simultaneously, Stanton, who had arrived in the town only in 1847, served as the axis for connections among several networks of reformers. "A uniquely gifted leader," she "acted as a catalyst" bringing together legal reformers, political abolitionists, and reform-minded Quakers to pursue their common interest in woman's rights (p. 13).

Dividing the book into three parts, Wellman begins with a well-drawn biographical portrait of Stanton and a sketch of the economic fortunes of her region of New York State. As Elizabeth Cady grew, attended school in Johnstown and Troy, came of age, and then married Henry B. Stanton, the completion of the Erie Canal and the religious upheavals of the Second Great Awakening trans-

formed the region. Some towns (such as Seneca Falls) stumbled while others (such as Waterloo) boomed. Marriage to Henry plunged Elizabeth into a turbulent and exciting reform scene, where she met African-American and white abolitionists, learned about the power of the petition, engaged in debates over strategy and tactics, found life-long mentors (such as Lucretia Mott, who vigorously opposed Henry on key points of abolitionist principle), and came into her own as a reformer. While still a newlywed, she began subscribing in her own name to *The Liberator*, further signaling the personal independence that led her to omit the word "obey" from the marriage ceremony.

In the book's second part, Wellman describes the disparate groups of reformers who came into contact through Stanton and who were well represented at the 1848 convention. Focusing on the 1840s, Wellman convincingly demonstrates that the decade was a crucial one that witnessed a convergence of concern about issues related to gender equality and human rights among religious and legal reformers, and abolitionists. Indeed, a series of concurrent developments in the early 1840s drew a wide range of individuals and groups into discussions about precisely the same matters that the Seneca Falls Convention would address. Wellman is particularly skilled at elucidating the spread of radically egalitarian ideals among the antislavery Quakers in the Genesee Yearly Meeting, who formed the Congregational Friends in 1848 (renamed the Progressive Friends in 1854), and the Seneca Falls Wesleyan Methodists, who created their own church in 1843 "with a hierarchy neither of power nor of color" (p. 129). The Quakers, in particular, committed themselves not only to immediate abolition, but also to defending the rights of the local Seneca Nation, assisting fugitive slaves, and promoting a new "vision of equality between women and men" (p. 104). Simultaneously, the Liberty Party gained strength politically, and legal reformers hammered away at wives' legal disabilities under

coverture and in the absence of equity courts (abolished by New York State in 1828).

These trends and developments come together in the book's final section, as Wellman covers Stanton's 1847 move to Seneca Falls and then her role in the 1848 Convention. Through the legal savvy of her father, Daniel Cady, Elizabeth was now the "sole owner" of the Stanton home, which became "a symbol not only of her independence but also of her isolation, confinement, and overwork" (p. 168). Just as Stanton, mothering three children and adjusting to that isolation, was at a personal crossroads, the nation and the region were at their own turns in the road. As Congress debated the Wilmot Proviso and the Senate ratified the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Henry Stanton helped rally support in Seneca Falls for the new Free Soil Party. "Suddenly," writes Wellman, "the possibility of a great national antislavery party, drawing on dissident Whigs and Democrats as well as former Liberty Party members, seemed very real" (p. 175). During the same event-packed months, the New York State legislature passed a Married Women's Property Act, covering wives' access to the ownership of real property (though not of earned wages). When the woman's rights convention met in July at the Wesleyan Chapel, the events of the day could not have been far from participants' minds. Nor could their common principles. Most were connected to each other through overlapping reform, religious, and familial networks, and through a common devotion to "startling ... doctrines," such as that of human equality. "The resolutions," observed the editor of the *Seneca County Courier*, "are of the kind called radical" (p. 208).

Wellman concludes with an informative chapter tracing the process whereby Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony (the two met in 1851), and their co-workers and successors told and "retold the story of Seneca Falls," thereby creating the "origin myth" that made the Convention pivotal to the story of woman's rights in the nine-

teenth century and "reiterated Stanton's own central role" at the Convention (p. 228). Here, Wellman not only traces the commemorative path that led to a congressional resolution in 1980 authorizing creation of a National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, but she challenges historians to situate that path amid the many alternative interpretive roads not taken. It is a challenge that historians have begun energetically to take up.

Where is that process leading? Most importantly, Wellman's book and other recent works resituate the 1848 Convention within the broad historical contexts that surrounded it. These include, of course, the other woman's rights conventions held on the heels of Seneca Falls and throughout the 1850s, but they also include the intellectual, social, and political ferment of the years that preceded 1848. Antislavery women had met in convention three times in the late 1830s; along with moral reform crusaders and Native American rights advocates, they had conducted national petition campaigns. Moreover, during the early 1840s, a number of state constitutional conventions and state legislative sessions had taken up the question of wives' rights. The 1846 New York State Constitutional convention, alone, had received three petitions related to "equal ... civil and political rights" for women and specifically the right of suffrage (p. 150). As Lori Ginzberg points out, the appearance of such a petition from six obscure women in rural Jefferson County forces historians "to confront our assumptions about the intellectual possibilities" of the era.[3] In addition, as Michael Pierson has shown, the politics of marriage and gender relations were stubbornly intertwined with electoral politics throughout the 1840s and 1850s, as women in the Liberty and Free Soil parties extended abolitionists' critiques of the abuse of enslaved women into their analysis of marriage.[4] And surely Charles Fourier's "associationalist" ideas and women's health reform advocacy cropped up in local newspapers. Clearly, discussions about citizenship, rights, and suffrage were not taking place solely in Quaker

and Wesleyan Methodist households in Seneca Falls and Waterloo. Clearly, too, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not a lone voice in prompting or shaping such conversations.

New work is unlikely to displace either Stanton or the Seneca Falls Convention from their place of prominence in survey texts and History Day projects. Nor should it. The Convention was the first to call itself explicitly a "woman's rights convention" and Stanton was certainly its "catalyst." Nevertheless, historians who follow Wellman's lead in reconsidering and re-situating the Convention and Stanton within the context of the era will undoubtedly pay special attention to the broad national and international developments--the rights revolutions of the 1840s--that produced both. In doing so, they will help to dismantle the "origin story" that Stanton and her successors so diligently put together, and begin to find new ways to tell a more complex and multifaceted tale.

#### Notes

[1]. Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nancy A. Hewitt, "Religion, Reform, and Radicalism in the Antebellum Era," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Hewitt (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Susan M. Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Ann D. Gordon, ed., *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: Volume I: In the School of Antislavery, 1840 to 1860* (New

Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic, 2004); and Lori D. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[2]. Judith Wellman, "The Seneca Falls Convention: A Study in Social Networks," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (1991): pp. 9-37.

[3]. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins*, p. 26.

[4]. Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

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