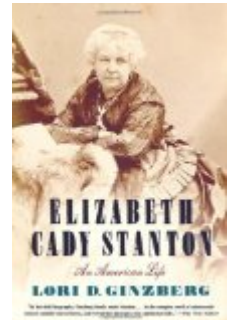


Lori D. Ginzberg. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. 272 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-9493-6.



Reviewed by Sally McMillen

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Commissioned by Brian Luskey (West Virginia University)

In this compelling, well-written biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, historian Lori D. Ginzberg reveals a woman who loomed larger than life, a woman of enormous complexity, brilliance, determination, and an elevated sense of self. Here, in addition to acquiring an understanding of this early feminist, we also gain deeper insight into the nineteenth-century women's rights movement and why it was so protracted and defined by dramatic, often unpredictable outcomes. Stanton seemed to be at the heart of many of its most controversial moments, at times inspiring and at other times annoying both supporters and friends.

This readable, brief account is written with confidence and solid analysis. Because so few sources covering Stanton's early years and personal life are extant, Ginzberg sometimes speculates about what might have been, but does so judiciously--how, for instance, Stanton might have felt about the family's slave, Peter; how she and husband Henry got along or did not get along; and how Stanton related to her seven children, some of whom undoubtedly disappointed her. Born into

a family of privilege in upstate New York, Stanton never shed the elitist ideas that so often affected her outlook and writings.

Ginzberg spends some time examining Stanton's growing discontent with women's oppression and her path to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. Though never a major participant in the antislavery movement, Stanton found its messages inspiring. Often home alone due to husband Henry's commitment to politics and abolition, Stanton felt she understood how domestic and maternal responsibilities entrapped women. At the same time, she often expressed joy in rearing her rambunctious children, approaching those duties with verve and confidence--and always on her terms. Yet her energy and bright mind demanded more, which became especially apparent when the family moved to Seneca Falls, New York, in 1847. A year later, she found that outlet by helping to organize the nation's first major women's rights convention. The women's movement had begun, but interestingly, without Stanton's presence for several years. She did not attend a

single annual national women's rights convention until 1860. But she kept her mind active and her commitment alive by writing letters to attendees, insisting that women end their dependence on and subordination to men. After meeting Susan B. Anthony in 1851, she found a courier for her bold ideas.

Enjoying the limelight, Stanton was fearless in publicly expressing her radical opinions. That bothered her not a whit. She was outspokenly racist when, during the post-Civil War years, Congress moved ahead and gave black men citizenship and the right to vote. Stanton was furious, believing that educated white women should have access to the ballot box before uneducated former male slaves and immigrants could vote. Ginzberg reveals Stanton's distaste for orthodox religion, which she saw as a major cause of female subordination. In 1895, she created her own version of the Bible, appropriately named *The Woman's Bible*, comprised of two volumes that emphasized women's triumphs and eliminated scripture that depicted their subjugation. Even fellow suffragists were startled by the publication, and they voted Stanton out of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, the very organization she had helped to found.

In many ways, Stanton was a woman ahead of her time. She saw suffrage as a means to end women's oppression: if women gained political power, men would have to consider women's needs as well as their own. Unlike many female reformers, Stanton pursued a broad agenda. She felt that any law that confined women to a secondary status virtually kept them in a cage, beholden to men and lacking the ability to act on their own. Her most profound belief, and one that she articulated so beautifully in "Solitude of Self," an essay she delivered to Congress, was the importance of self-sovereignty—that women needed to be able to survive and stand on their own.

The most obvious comparison of Ginzberg's biography is to Elisabeth Griffith's *In Her Own*

Right, published more than two decades ago in 1984. While few new facts appear here, Ginzberg is more critical of her subject. She obviously admires this gutsy woman, but she takes her to task for her elitist, racist views expressed openly during the early years of Reconstruction. No doubt Stanton's statements are more jarring to readers today than they were to many Americans in the nineteenth century. Ginzberg gives less attention to Stanton's role in dividing the women's movement when she and Anthony hastily formed the National Woman's Suffrage Association in 1869. Invariably believing she was right, Stanton broke away from those who disagreed with her but then gave little thought to picking up the pieces. That duty she left to Anthony, her partner in reform.

There is no doubt that Stanton filled every room she entered. Nor did she suffer fools gladly. At the end of her life, wanting to narrate a correct picture of herself, she wrote her memoir, a frustrating volume for any historian since Stanton had a poor memory for dates and details and ignored controversies and negative moments from her past. She, Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage also compiled a history of the women's movement, which, as Ginzberg points out, was heavily influenced by its three editors. The volumes included the documents and women they most admired and initially excluded people and events in their rival organization, the American Woman's Suffrage Association.

Stanton would probably delight in this depiction of herself, despite the book's honest revelations. Ginzberg's biography should find a wide audience. It will appeal to students but also to readers who relish biographies and women's history. Stanton, a brilliant, annoying, delightful, and charming woman, was at the heart of a transcendent movement. American women owe her so much.

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