
Review of *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898*, by Lisa Tetrault

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Lisa Tetrault's *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement 1848-1898* thoroughly examines the "legend" of Seneca Falls, which most historians would argue marked the beginning of the Suffrage Movement. Challenging this conception, Tetrault contends that, while the 1848 meeting was significant, it should not be viewed as solely responsible for launching the Suffrage Movement. She writes, "The 1848 meeting, so far as we know, was the first meeting explicitly called to demand women's rights in the United States... This does not, however, mean the meeting *began* the movement" (5). Building upon her theme, Tetrault argues that suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton carefully constructed the Seneca Fall myth to secure their historical legacy as leaders of the movement. "They [Anthony and Stanton] were savvy politicians, who increasingly understood-consciously or not-how vital an origins story could be to the operations of activism," she explains (8).

Throughout the book, Tetrault effectively weaves together primary and secondary sources. Books, manuscripts, newspaper articles, and periodicals give the reader insight into the debates within the movement. For example, Tetrault particularly utilizes Anthony's *History of Women Suffrage* to illuminate the suffragists' stance on Reconstruction and the Fifteenth Amendment. Also, Tetrault incorporates the autobiographies of Fredrick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, which include dialogue between the two leaders.

Tetrault's work is an excellent contribution to historical debate surrounding the origins of the women's rights movement, and gender studies as a whole. First, Tetrault examines the white supremacist / racist attitudes that existed within the suffragist movement. She looks at the establishment and the failure of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), which was established following the Civil War. At the time, AERA's main focus was to help black males gain the right to vote. Nonetheless, as Tetrault points out, this caused a rift within the AERA. Stanton, a self-proclaimed "abolitionist," was a staunch opponent of the Fifteenth Amendment, arguing that black men should not have the ballot before white women. "I say, no; I would not trust him [black men] with all my rights; degraded, oppressed himself, he would be...despotic," insisted Stanton (19). According to Tetrault, the debate over who would have the right to vote first "wracked the AERA from its inception" (19). As a result of this conflict, Anthony and Stanton decided to start their own organization, the National Women Suffrage Association (NWSA), in 1869.

Another important and fascinating aspect of Tetrault's book is how different groups of people (i.e. white men, blacks, and women) reconstruct their own history. According to Tetrault, suffragists began to construct their history in 1870, when Paulina Wright Davis launched the Second Decade Convention in 1870, to commemorate the Suffragist Movement. Nonetheless, Davis did not mark Seneca Falls as the birthplace of the Suffragist Movement, instead she argued that the 1850 Worcester Convention marked the birth of the movement. It was also during this time, as Tetrault demonstrates, that Anthony and Stanton began to construct their Seneca Falls history. She writes,

“No longer did Stanton and Anthony insist that the 1850 Worcester Convention had begun the movement. They now relocated and antedated the movement’s birthplace and time” (46). Tetrault notes during the post-Civil War period, suffragist organizations sprung up throughout the country. For example, there were suffragist groups throughout the Midwest (i.e. Missouri Suffrage Association and the Northern Iowa Women Suffrage Association). In addition, black women began forming their own organizations throughout the South and the Washington, D.C., area. Tetrault insists, even with the formation of these different organizations, Anthony and Stanton still were viewed as the leaders of the movement. Nonetheless, Anthony believed that the movement needed to be unified through centralized leadership. Commemorating events according to the strategy set out by Anthony and Stanton helped unify the movement. More significantly, as Tetrault points out, these events became useful in establishing Seneca Falls as the birthplace of the movement as well. Importantly, Anthony and Stanton began to work on their *History of the Women Suffrage* in 1876, which Tetrault argues solidified 1848 as the origins story. She writes, “Stanton, Anthony, and Gage had no choice but to select some origin point. They chose to present that point as the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls” (120).

Tetrault’s work provides readers with a compelling and eye-opening narrative. To a certain extent, Tetrault’s book fits into the same school as Zagarri’s *Revolutionary Backlash: Women in Politics in Early America* (2009) and Ginzberg’s *Untidy Origins: A History of Women’s Rights in Antebellum New York* (2005), which both challenge the Seneca Falls origin story. However, Tetrault’s book not only problematizes the origin story, it demonstrates the great lengths Anthony and Stanton went through to create this myth, which has been the dominant historical interpretation of the Women’s Rights Movement. In writing this book, she is challenging reader/historian to look beyond the Seneca Falls interpretation.