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***The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898.*** By Lisa Tetrault. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. 296. Cloth, \$34.95.)

This excellent book is a more significant study than perhaps the title lets on. Tetrault's goal is not to demonstrate that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—the famed founders of the women's movement—had feet of clay. They did, but that is hardly the story. Nor is Tetrault particularly intent upon telling the “real” story about the celebrated meeting at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. She does a bit of that, too, but she has bigger fish to fry. *The Myth of Seneca Falls* is really a study of the science of constructing history, and the significance that accompanied the construction of one iconic narrative. Along the way, Tetrault gives the reader a superb counter-narrative, built upon detailed research and sweeping analysis.

Students of American women's history are familiar with the crucial institutional story that ran from the 1840s through the end of the century. It is a tale of massive personalities (Stanton, Anthony, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Victoria Woodhull, George Francis Train, Frederick Douglass, and many others) and—in some cases—prodigious egos. It is also a history of competing organizations, dueling agendas, and a baffling series of meetings and resolutions. There is much inside baseball to be played here. Fascinating folks pursued huge goals and did not always play well together along the way. The meeting at Seneca Falls commonly anchors this narrative, presumably because that gathering makes for an excellent story and yielded the very teachable Declaration of Sentiments. Oh, and there is a nice table that survives from the occasion. Sure, we insiders now know that there were earlier gatherings and the people who met at Seneca Falls were not working within a vacuum. We also know that Susan B. Anthony was not actually there, although that would come as a surprise to many. Tetrault's slim volume explains how and why it is that we have come to believe what we believe. And it is not simply a matter of fawning hagiography.

The crucial story really begins in the complex political world shortly after the Civil War. As intertwined questions of suffrage and citizenship came to dominate political discourse, advocates for racial and gender

equality—historically allies—broke ranks over priorities and strategies. Stanton and Anthony were particularly adamant in resisting efforts to pursue black manhood suffrage at the expense of woman suffrage, and they embraced a national organizational strategy through the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). In those postwar decades the women's movement divided along multiple axes. Lucy Stone and her Boston-based colleagues in the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) differed with their counterparts in the NWSA on both strategy and personality. Meanwhile, increasingly, state-based organizations and individual actors pursued their own goals and paths, with or without national organization support. It is a complex narrative that Tetrault unravels brilliantly.

On top of this extremely valuable, and wonderfully documented, story of people and events, Tetrault unfolds her central story: the history of Susan B. Anthony as historian. In the postwar moment when various individuals were writing memoirs, veterans were engaged in documenting the “war of the rebellion,” and the American Historical Association was in its earliest days, Anthony—accompanied by Stanton and (for a time) Matilda Joslyn Gage—set about constructing a usable history of the women's rights movement. The activist-as-historian's goal was for the past to properly serve the present and the future. That goal pretty much required three things. First, the narrative had to keep suffrage at its center. This made the Declaration of Sentiments signed at Seneca Falls, with its celebrated suffrage plank, a useful starting point. Second, the leaders of the NWSA must be cast as central players. Stanton's crucial role was easy enough to establish, and although Anthony had not yet met Stanton in 1848 and was not part of the Seneca Falls meetings, eventually many came to believe that she surely must have been there. Third, there had to be a single narrative that celebrated a single national organization: the NWSA. Thus, the “myth of Seneca Falls” was less about making things up, and more about giving those three days an overwhelming primacy that far exceeded their original significance.

The construction of this narrative began with various anniversary celebrations and the occasional written recollection. Naysayers who sought to elevate other grand moments faced stiff resistance. This process of historical construction reached its pinnacle in the magisterial multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage*, in which its three authors sought to “forge a new Civil War memory paradigm” (114). Tetrault does an important service in stressing that the authors—Stanton, Anthony, and Gage—began their task as archival historians, except in their case they collected their archive from disparate sources, eventually assembling a massive set of original documents. They solicited contributions from activists across the country,

but the editors did not relinquish their narrative control, and a blue-pen-cil-wielding Stanton took pains to shape the text in her own vision.

The *History of Woman Suffrage* elevates Seneca Falls to its central role as the real beginning of everything, with all the individuals and events that came before 1848 described as “preceding causes.” The celebrated Lucy Stone, whose AWSA and *Woman’s Journal* had sparred with the NWSA for contentious years, declined to participate in the project, concluding that the movement had not reached a moment to privilege reflection over activism. Readers of the *History* would receive little inkling that the national movement suffered serious fissures. They also would get little hint that much of the important action actually emerged from fairly anonymous activists at the state and local level. The four-volume *History* constructs a version of the past that brilliantly presents a historic memory celebrating a national woman’s movement, organized and run by Stanton and Anthony, and most crucially dedicated to a particular suffrage agenda stressing the voting rights of white women. When all was said and done, Susan B. Anthony, the historian-activist, had won the battle for memory. And she even ended up owning the Seneca Falls table.

*J. Matthew Gallman*

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