BOOKS

FINISH THE FIGHT!

The halting, imperfect, unfinished work of women's suffrage.

BY CASEY CEP

The crime was striking a match. Never mind that the match broke before it caught, or that the fire was already burning; sixty-three-year-old Louisine Havemeyer was still hauled into court, one of thirty-nine suffragists who were arrested in front of the White House on February 10, 1919. For more than two years, hundreds of women had been protesting there six days a week. They were known as the Silent Sentinels, because they held their tongues while they held their banners. But starting that January they had taken to burning Woodrow Wilson's speeches in tiny urns around Lafayette Park, and a few weeks into that new phase of pyrotechnics they decided to burn him, too.

Havemeyer did not actually throw the effigy of the twenty-eighth President into the fire, but she persisted in trying to light more kindling for the flames after the police told her to stop. It was her first protest of this kind. She had marched in a few parades but, as the wealthy widow of a sugar magnate, she had mostly been a benefactor, raising funds by exhibiting the extensive art collection—Rembrandt, El Greco, Manet—that she kept in her Upper East Side mansion. Her brush with the law scandalized her neighbors on Fifth Avenue, but it qualified her to go on a national railroad tour of women who had been arrested for the cause of women's suffrage.

There were already more than enough jailbirds to fill the so-called Prison Special, not because the American suffragists were particularly radical but because so many of them had been convicted of crimes as frivolous as striking matches. Disparaged as "militants," the women who stood vigil in front of the White House were the first people ever to stage a protest there, and dozens of them were sent to prison. Many more were heckled or spat upon by passersby, had their banners and sashes torn to pieces by mobs, and were knocked down by police.

Seventy years had passed since the Seneca Falls Convention, where hundreds of people had gathered in upstate New York to discuss the rights of women, including the right to vote. Forty years had passed since a federal amendment to the Constitution was introduced to extend the franchise to women. Suffragists had tried and failed to convince the courts that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments already did so. The rest of the country was unconvinced, too, and female suffrage remained a controversial cause in American politics. A hundred years ago, though, the Nineteenth Amendment finally passed both houses of the United States Congress, and then went to the states for ratification. On that centennial, it is worth considering not only what these women were fighting for but why they had to fight so hard, and who, exactly, was fighting against them.

Long before American women gained the right to vote, they lost it. Some of the first suffrage laws passed in this country stripped women of a right they had previously held. New York's voting laws, for instance, originally included mention of "he or she" and "his or her ballot," but, in 1777, the state struck the female pronouns, disenfranchising its women. Massachusetts did the same thing in 1780, and New Hampshire in 1784. After the ratification of the United States Constitution, which required states to write their own election laws, the voting rights of women were revoked everywhere except for New Jersey, where apparently everything was legal—until 1807, when the Garden State got around to ending women's suffrage, too.

It is not clear how often women exercised this right even when they had it. There are few known examples of women voting in the colonies—in fact, there is arguably only one, Lydia Chapin Taft, who voted in a town meeting in Uxbridge, Massachusetts. (Taft, the widow of a legislator who owned a lot of land, was allowed a say chiefly because her husband had been the town's largest taxpayer.) But in New Jersey thousands of women voted during the thirty years when they were allowed to do so—women who owned property and were not married, that is. Married women could not own property, since, under common law, they were themselves considered, essentially, the property of their husbands.

In a sense, though, women voted in America long before there were states, united or otherwise. In a fascinating new anthology, "The Women's Suffrage Movement" (Penguin Classics), the scholar Sally Roesch Wagner extends the time line of suffrage in this part of the world by nearly a thousand years. She begins with the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, when the Onondaga, Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, and Cayuga nations, later joined by the Tuscarora, gathered in the land around the Great Lakes to form an egalitarian society that afforded women political power. Haudenosaunee women helped select the chiefs who together governed

by council, and they had a say in matters of war and peace. Political historians have long described the Haudenosaunee Confederacy as the oldest continuously functioning democracy in the world; Wagner reminds us that those democratic principles extended to women.

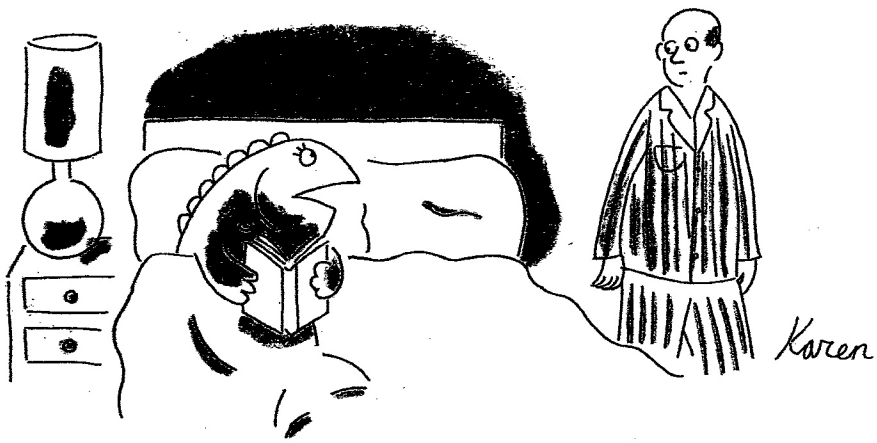
Regrettably, "The Women's Suffrage Movement" does not include any Haudenosaunee voices, historical or contemporary, but Wagner does show how the comparative equality of these neighboring societies influenced the first generation of modern suffragists. Lucretia Mott stayed in a Seneca community while doing relief work with the Quakers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed the Oneida Nation around Seneca Falls, and Matilda Joslyn Gage not only encountered members of the Mohawk Nation but was an honorary member of its Wolf Clan. These early activists saw firsthand that Haudenosaunee women could own property, initiate divorces, and, perhaps most shocking, vote.

It is especially grievous that this indigenous influence has been so thoroughly forgotten, because suffragists mentioned the Haudenosaunee in their own writings and speeches. Some of these appear in Wagner's anthology—including, most strikingly, an 1875 article by Gage for the New York *Evening Post,* called "The Remnant of the Five Nations," and an 1891 address by Stanton before the National Council of Women, called "The Matriarchate, or Mother-Age." The deliberative and participatory democracy of the Haudenosaunee was among the inspirations for the Founding Fathers when they wrote the Constitution; that living model also led the suffragists to believe that one day their cause could prevail. The modern world was indebted to the Matriarchate, Gage wrote, "for its first conception of inherent rights, natural equality of condition and the establishment of a civilized government upon this basis." End Note

On the strength of selections like these, together with the words of black activists, including Sarah Forten and Fannie Williams, Wagner frames "The Women's Suffrage Movement" as a revision of the history of suffrage as it was written by wealthy white women such as those Louisine Havemeyer knew. Susan Ware's "Why They Marched: Untold Stories of the Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote" (Harvard) accomplishes a similar goal with a different method. While Wagner uses primary sources—sermons, legislative documents, party platforms, poems, eulogies, diary entries, and letters—to recover lost contributions to the women's-suffrage movement, Ware's book is a work of material-culture studies, which attempts to enliven the past by looking at the things that survive it. Ware pairs biographies of suffragists with objects like saddlebags, tree plaques, jewelry, political cartoons, parade programs, and statues.

Like a curator, Ware chooses her objects carefully and annotates them with purpose. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony's attempt to vote and her subsequent arrest got the lion's share of publicity, but Ware uses a *carte de visite* of the black activist Sojourner Truth to tell the story of how she, too, tried to vote in the Presidential election that year. A cookbook published as a fund-raiser by the Washington Equal Suffrage Association leads Ware to the story of one of its contributors, Cora Smith Eaton King, a physician and avid climber, who, with a recreational group called the Mountaineers, planted a "Votes for Women" banner at the summit of Mt. Rainier. Ware prefaces a reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist writings with a photograph of Gilman's death mask, whose ghostly visage haunts a discussion of her lesser-known anti-immigrant and pro-eugenics politics. Alongside a front page of the *Woman's Exponent*, one of the first women's-media outlets west of the Mississippi—it was published, in Salt Lake City, from 1872 until 1914—Ware recounts the life of a contributor, Emmeline Wells, who advocated on behalf of women's rights and the Mormon doctrine of plural marriage. ("Polygamy gives women more time for thought, for mental culture, more freedom of action, a broader field of labor," she wrote.) A ballot box from Illinois appears with an account of the pioneering black women's Alpha Suffrage Club, whose founder, the investigative journalist Ida Wells-Barnett, forcibly integrated the Woman Suffrage Procession—the original Women's March—in 1913, after her white colleagues tried to segregate their protest of Woodrow Wilson's Inauguration. "Either I go with you or not at all," Wells-Barnett declared. "I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race."

Some of the other stories Ware tells are more familiar, and several of the Founding Mothers are presented almost as uncritically as in earlier histories. Still, her cast of characters usefully illustrates the geographic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic range of the suffrage movement. Ultimately, though, the diversity of the voting-rights advocates is less shocking than the diversity of voting rights themselves. One of the last, and most telling, objects in "Why They Marched" is a handbill titled "Seeing Is Believing!," which features three maps of the United States. The first is from 1869, when Wyoming was the only state that allowed women to vote. The second is from 1909, when, after four decades, just three other states had enfranchised women: Colorado, Idaho, and Utah. The last, from 1919, shows a com-



"As long as you're up, can you get me fifty gallons of water?"

plicated patchwork of the various voting rights held by women around the country. By then, fifteen states had passed constitutional amendments allowing full female suffrage; others had partial suffrage, allowing women to vote in school or local elections. The handbill demonstrates the steady advance of women's suffrage while also complicating the standard portrait of it: the right to vote is less a switch than a dial, one that can be turned up or dimmed down.

Three words appear beneath the last of those maps: "FINISH THE FIGHT!" The handbill was printed the year that the Susan B. Anthony Amendment was passed by both houses of Congress and sent to the forty-eight state capitals for consideration. The slogan was an exhortation not only for women who lacked the right to vote, but also for those who already had it, since ratification depended on a national coalition, drawing resources from suffrage strongholds and dispatching them to the expanding flanks of the movement. By the summer of 1920, suffragists had won thirty-five of the thirty-six states they needed in order to achieve the two-thirds majority required for amending the Constitution. They decided against trying in Vermont or Connecticut, where recalcitrant governors were refusing to call special sessions, or trying again in Virginia, Delaware, or Maryland, where the amendment had already been rejected, and they had given up entirely on much of the South. That left them with only one option: Tennessee.

What happened in the Volunteer State is the subject of "The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote" (Viking), by the journalist Elaine Weiss. Once the battle came down to a single state, activists and lobbyists from around the country descended on Nashville, where they met old enemies, and older arguments. Weiss renders the conflict so suspensefully that it is easy to see why Steven Spielberg's Amblin Television has already bought the rights to the book. (Amblin is developing a series, with Hillary Clinton serving as an executive producer.) The book grippingly recounts the twists and reversals that took place in the weeks leading up to the suffrage victory, but it is even more thrilling in its presentation of ideas—both those of the suffragists and those of the people who opposed them. These opponents invoked women's supposed emotional instability and intellectual deficiencies, the danger to society of anything that distracted them from their domestic duties as wives and mothers, and the threat to the moral order should they sully themselves with politics. Some argued that most women did not even want the right to vote, others that the expanded electorate would be an expensive burden on municipalities. Still others raised the paradoxical objections that women would vote the way their husbands did, thus doubling their votes, or not vote the way their husbands did, thus cancelling them out, making the whole thing a waste of time.

As state after state allowed women to vote, the suffragists acquired more anecdotes and data that they could share in order to assuage the concerns of those who were not yet decided, and even change the minds of some who were. But, while the sexist arguments that they faced often united suffragists around their cause, arguments about race divided them. Some of the very suffragists who worked to dispel ideas about their intellectual inferiority as women advanced similar ideas about the ostensibly lesser intelligence of people of color, and argued openly that only *white* women should be allowed to vote. A few, acting on grudges that had lingered for decades following the exclusion of women from the Reconstruction amendments, even posited that they deserved the right more than the black men who had already been enfranchised.

Devoted abolitionists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had advocated for universal suffrage, and they were outraged when the Fourteenth Amendment specified that only men qualified for its protections. "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman," Anthony had said. Anna Howard Shaw, one of the first female Methodist ministers, who followed Anthony as the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), complained, "You have put the ballot in the hands of your black men, thus making them the political superiors of your white women. Never before in the history of the world have men made former slaves the political masters of their former mistresses."

Other suffragists expressed pragmatic concerns that any federal enfranchisement would be seen by Southern states as an effort to undermine Jim Crow, the appallingly successful new strategy for preventing black men from exercising their rights. Suffs, as the women called themselves, had long disagreed about whether to pursue a national or a state-by-state strategy, in part because of the racism of some of their own white members, who opposed voting rights for African-Americans—not to mention Native Americans and, later, Asian-Americans—and so wanted individual states to determine for themselves who would, or, rather, would not, have the right to vote.

But the friction was also because, in states like Tennessee, even those who believed in racial equality were not always willing to defend it at the cost of gender equality. Alice Paul, who led the National Woman's Party and helped organize the Silent Sentinels at the White House, reassured the New York *World* that, because of Jim Crow, "Negro men cannot vote in South Carolina, and therefore Negro women could not if women were to vote in the nation." Meanwhile, Carrie Catt, who took over NAWSA after Anthony and Shaw, was not above citing census data to show that the population of white women in the South was larger than that of black women and men combined, claiming that "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women's suffrage."

These internecine conflicts marginalized the black men and women who were fighting for women's suffrage, and kept the Suffs fighting one another when they needed to be fighting Antis—a powerful force whose numbers included many women. In Tennessee, the opposition was led by Josephine Pearson, who was drafted by her dying mother and emboldened by the certainty that her heavenly Father wanted women to focus on causes more noble than politics. More surprising, perhaps, were some of her fellow-travellers. The muckraker Ida Tarbell rejected her mother's suffragist politics and, despite her own successful career as a journalist, argued that women belonged in the home—neither trousers nor ballots, she claimed, would ever make them equal to

men. The founder of Barnard College, Annie Nathan Meyer, a sister of the suffragist Maud Nathan, believed it was disingenuous to suggest that women could ever purify the political realm with their votes; in trying to do so, Meyer insisted, they forfeited their apolitical powers of persuasion. Plenty of seemingly progressive women were not activists for women's suffrage—including, initially, Eleanor Roosevelt, who did not vote in the first election for which she was eligible. Others disdained it entirely, like the anarchist Emma Goldman, who thought that all voting was a tool used by the powerful to distract the weak.

In Tennessee, women on both sides of the debate lined the halls of the capitol building, took over suites in the nearby Hotel Hermitage, and marched across the state to hound legislators, targeting even unlikely candidates to secure their support in advance of primary elections, which could alter the composition of the legislature before the ratification vote was held. Meanwhile, the railroad, liquor, and manufacturing lobbies went from sponsoring anti-suffrage activism to paying bribes to legislators as they grew increasingly afraid that enfranchised women would vote in favor of prohibition, labor reforms, and other progressive ideas.

Arguably the only people who enjoyed the summer of 1920 in Nashville were the florists, because the Antis sported red roses while the Suffs wore yellow ones, and soon there was hardly a lapel in the city without a flower. Personal convictions rarely accounted for a legislator's vote, and the politics of suffrage did not map evenly onto parties: the Republican minority, with its legacy of enfranchisement, promised the most reliable voting bloc in the legislature, but it was a Democratic governor, Albert Roberts, who called the special session and later announced his support for women's voting rights. If women did get the right to vote, both parties wanted credit—or, at least, the votes of the newly enfranchised women. Some Republicans opposed letting a Democratic state cast the deciding vote for ratification, while many Southern Democrats worried about shifting the racial balance of the electorate with twenty-seven million new voters before the Presidential election that fall. As ever, the debate over enfranchisement was not only or even mostly philosophical; it was primarily political, as both parties tried to calculate their own potential share of the new voting pool.

Constitutional challenges and a legal campaign nearly kept Governor Roberts from summoning the legislators back to the capitol, and there was even more chaos once the chambers were called to order. Weiss's book reaches a crescendo in the chapters devoted to the crazed weeks in August when the governor's closest ally, House Speaker Seth Walker, defected and announced that he would lead the opposition; fabricated emergencies arrived by telephone and telegram as partisans tried to prevent legislators from voting by luring them away; and the newly named Republican Presidential nominee, Warren Harding, muddied his already muddy position on suffrage with a letter giving cover for any cowards within his party. The Senate finally passed the resolution on Friday the thirteenth, but the House continued to stall, hoping to allow time for more defections to the side of the Antis. That strategy backfired: on the eighth day of the session, during a vote on another motion to table, the Anti representative Banks Turner switched his vote, allowing the amendment to go to the floor, and, once it was there, the freshman member of Congress Harry Burn switched his vote, too. (In a literal sense, we have our foremothers to thank for the vote: in the pocket beneath the anti-suffrage red rose that Harry wore into the chamber was a letter from his mother, Phoebe, pleading, "Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt.")

Suffrage passed the Tennessee House of Representatives on August 18, 1920, with forty-six nays and fifty ayes, including, perplexingly, an eleventh-hour flip-flop from Speaker Walker, who still opposed suffrage but knew he could only attach a measure to reconsider if he was on the winning side. So well-paced is Weiss's book that, by the time she reveals that final vote tally, readers can be forgiven for having forgotten they knew all along that the Nineteenth Amendment was going to be ratified.

Apart from inaccuracy, one of the greatest flaws in any historical account is a sense of inevitability. That impression arises only when dissent has been so flattened, arguments so distorted, and the past so tamed that it fits sedately into the terms of the present. The idea that women were always going to get the right to vote in the United States ignores the reality that they only got that right in Switzerland in 1971 and in Saudi Arabia in 2015. It also fails to explain why the right was granted to American women in 1920, as opposed to 1919 or 1918, or, perhaps more pointedly, 1776. Worse, the feeling of inevitability also conveys a sense of irreversibility, as if history always advances, and never stalls, or regresses.

"The Woman's Hour" animates the past so fully that its facts feel anything but fated. Every victory appears both momentous and contingent, not only because Weiss takes the opposition to suffrage as seriously as the suffragists themselves but because she lets the suffragists' own conflicts unfurl as messily as they did at the time, leaving readers to feel that things might well have turned out differently, and reminding us that they still could. Not every struck match will light, and, even when a fire finally catches, as it did for Louisine Havemeyer and the Silent Sentinels, it can just as easily dim into darkness, or be snuffed out.

The women of New Jersey knew that that could happen in the United States, because it already had—and it is still happening, as women of color in states such as Georgia and North Carolina understand all too well. These new histories suggest that the struggle for women's suffrage does not just extend further into the past than we thought; it also extends to the present, and the future. The uncertainty of the suffrage victory foreshadows the precariousness of voting rights today, when even those who supposedly have the right are often prevented from exercising it. Disenfranchisement can take many forms, and its most insidious manifestations are regrettably common: purging voter rolls, passing voter-identification requirements, understaffing or closing polling places, gerrymandering voting districts. Under the circumstances, perhaps the best way to celebrate the anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment is to remember all those who cannot vote, not only those who can. ♦