

Victoria Woodhull

Women's Rights Advocate 1838-1927

by David Rosen

Victoria Woodhull was the nation's leading advocate for ending traditional, patriarchal marriage during the post-Civil War era. Thomas Nast, the great 19th century illustrator, dubbed her "Mrs. Satan."

Together with her sister, Tennessee ("Tennie") Claflin, they published the *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* that generated a national stir with its frank discussions of forbidden topics like women's suffrage, prostitution, sex education and short skirts. The publication was the first to release an English version of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. In 1872 Woodhull ran for president on behalf of the Equal Rights Party; the party drafted the absent Frederick Douglass for vice president.

One of America's great post-Civil War free-speech match-ups pitted Woodhull and Claflin against Anthony Comstock, the country's leading moral crusader. The showdown occurred when they published stories involving out-of-wedlock affairs involving stockbroker Luther Challis and the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher.

Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was one of America's leading theologians and bishop of



Brooklyn's Plymouth Congregational Church. In 1872, the *Weekly* exposed the details of an affair between the good pastor and one of his parishioners, Mrs. Elizabeth Tilton. Comstock had the sisters arrested and they were in jail on election night! They were busted not because of Rev. Beecher's hypocrisy, but because information about his dastardly deeds was available for everyone to read. Both New York and federal authorities charged them with circulating obscene materials.

At their trial, the sisters were acquitted when the judge noted that the original Comstock law did not cover newspapers. After more than a year of legal wrangling in which the sisters were repeatedly imprisoned, Woodhull and Claflin were set free, their lives ruined and the obscenity loophole closed.

Victoria Claflin was born in Homer, OH, in 1838, and, according to her biographer, Barbara Goldsmith, "[h]er father was an itinerant con man and a thief; her mother was illegitimate, illiterate and a religious fanatic." He father reportedly often beat her and, at age 14, eloped with an alcoholic doctor, Canning Woodhull, who fathered her two children. In '64, she divorced Woodhull and, two years later, married James Harvey Blood.

During much of this period she worked as a spiritualist and fortuneteller. Woodhull's mother was a follower of

the Austrian mystic Franz Mesmer, for whom the term "mesmerize" derives. She practiced homeopathy and "magnetic healer," the use of therapeutic magnets to halt bleeding, soothe inflammation, purge infection and promote general healing. She also adhered to the teaching of Sylvester Graham, who invented the graham cracker.

In 1868, Woodhull and her family moved to New York. During this period, she advocated for what she called "Free Love" which was defined by female equality, that women should marry for love and fairer divorce laws. As she declared:

"Sexual freedom means the abolition of prostitution both in and out of marriage, means the emancipation of woman and her coming into control of her own body, means the end of her pecuniary dependence upon man ... [it] means the abrogation of forced pregnancy, of anti-natal murder of undesired children and the birth of love children only."

In public lectures, she urged women to refuse the then-dominant notion that demand female sexual desire was immoral. "What! Vulgar!" she proclaimed. "The instinct that creates immortal souls vulgar ... be honest ... it is not the possession of strong powers that is to be deprecated. They are that necessary part of human character."

In New York, she and Tennie became spiritual advisors for railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt. In turn, Vanderbilt underwrote the sisters' venture, Woodhull, Claflin & Company in 1870, making them the first women stockbrokers on Wall Street. That same year, she founded the *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*.

The battle with Comstock broke Woodhull, spiritually and financially. In '78, she divorced Blood and, with her children, moved with to England. She married John Biddulph Martin, a

wealthy banker and was active in the women's suffrage movement. In the '90s, she, like other modernists – including Margaret Sanger, John D. Rockefeller II and Andrew Carnegie – were enamored by the new "science" of eugencies.

In 1891, Woodhull published, "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," arguing that each "human failure adds a considerable item to the burden, already large, put upon the healthy useful citizens," and advocating for "the care and culture of offspring by new and better methods." She believed that the poor along with the mentally and physically disabled threatened the well-being of the greater society.

And this from a woman who, in her 1872 presidential platform, argued femently: "It is not great wealth in a few individuals that proves a country is prosperous, but great general wealth evenly distributed among the people It is the struggling masses who are the foundation [of the U.S.]; and if the foundation be rotten or insecure, the rest of the structure must eventually crumble."

She died in 1927 in London.

For more information:

Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998).

Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, & the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Knopf, 1998).