

More Than Just a Battle for the Ballot

Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Woman Suffrage in Utah, 1870-1896. Edited by Carol Cornwall Madsen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997).

Reviewed by Janet Ellingson, Adjunct Assistant Professor of History, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

AMONG THE GREAT POLITICAL BATTLES in American history is the heroic struggle of women to gain a voice in government and to overthrow the state and federal barriers which prevented the exercise of women's rights. Women were enfranchised nationwide in 1920 with the adoption of the 19th Amendment. The familiar images from that battle include determined women leading street rallies, picketing the White House, initiating hunger strikes, and defiantly going to jail. In Utah, however, no such events occurred. The territorial legislature extended the franchise to women in 1870, virtually without any female petitions. Eight years after Congress disenfranchised all Utah women as a punitive element of the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act, delegates to Utah's constitutional convention included female suffrage in the state's constitution. Utah's Republicans and Democrats alike had female suffrage in their political platforms and the final vote on the measure was overwhelmingly positive.

Even though the vote came to Utah women with little opposition, *Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Woman*

Suffrage in Utah, 1870-1896, a collection of sixteen previously published essays, strives to give Utah women a determining role by making them fellow soldiers in the national battle. The cover illustration introduces this purpose with duplicate images of Susan B. Anthony, the president of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In an 1895 photograph Anthony is seated among unidentified western women; her image is repeated below the evocative title. Editor Carol Cornwall Madsen's introductory essay continues the connection with a summary of the nationwide fight for gender equality within legal and political systems that had no place for women. Madsen concludes that "gaining the vote, if nothing else, gave women an enduring symbol of the persistent determination of a few to win a constitutional right for all" (25).

Continuing this theme, Madsen included Emmeline B. Wells's and Susa Young Gates's histories of female political activity in Utah first published in the multi-volume national history, *The History of Woman Suffrage*. Wells attributes female suffrage to the aggressive female lobbying following the federal government's disenfranchisement of polygamists in 1882. Lola Van Wagenen, in "In Their Own Behalf: The Politicization of Mormon Women and the 1870 Franchise," argues that LDS women were politically prepared for the suffrage battle be-

cause of their involvement in LDS Female Relief Society in Nauvoo, Illinois. Even though some LDS women were politically active, their activity came rather late, and was primarily focused on repeal of anti-polygamy legislation. The first meeting at which the women first debated female suffrage occurred on 19 February 1870, a week after the territorial legislature passed the suffrage bill. Lisa Bryner Bohman, in "A Fresh Perspective: The Woman Suffrage Associations of Beaver and Farmington, Utah," recognizes the difficulty suffrage associations had in recruiting and motivating women to participate in any political activities. The women of Beaver and Farmington seemed to enjoy more the sociability of the meetings and the opportunities perhaps of associating with the communities' elite women.

The determination to see Utah's female suffrage experience within the narrative of the national suffrage movement obfuscates the answers to two essential questions Kathryn MacKay raises in her foreword: why did female suffrage exist in the western territories and states decades prior to 1920; and why did it come at such an early date to the Mormons, a people governed by a theocratic male hierarchy? The answer is not found in the concerted efforts of nineteenth-century Utah women. Nor was it because Mormons were especially enlightened on the subject.

In her 1920s history Susa Young Gates repeats George C. Cannon's thesis that the vote came to Mormon women as a natural extension of their voice in ecclesiastical affairs. Thomas Alexander restates this untenable thesis in his 1970 centennial essay, "An Experiment in Progressive Legislation: The Granting of Woman Suffrage

in Utah in 1870." As Alexander writes history, Mormons extended the vote to women in 1870 because they were "simply in advance of the rest of the nation and because of their experience and beliefs, the Mormons were willing to move in where others feared to tread" (113). Mormons believed in "the perfectibility of man, the need for equality in the community, and the high place of women in Mormon society" (113). Alexander apparently equates casting a ballot in a congressional election with the perfunctory show of approval by a raised hand in LDS conferences. Even within Mormonism's wildly democratic days of the early 1830s, only men who had been ordained to church offices were counted among the "official" members. Women freely attended public conferences, but they did not attend the meetings at which elders debated and decided matters of policy and church appointments. After the formation of priesthood quorums in 1835, quorum leaders excluded even ordained men from ecclesiastical power, thus effectively ending what at least had been a male democracy. Jill Mulvey Derr nicely counters Alexander's simplistic view of gender equality in "Eliza R. Snow and the Woman Question."

A more satisfactory explanation for female suffrage comes from Beverly Beeton, who in her essay, "Women Suffrage in Territorial Utah," identifies the debates over female suffrage as political debates that turned on whether the female vote would advance or hinder a specific political cause. In Utah female suffrage had everything to do with polygamy. First proposed by eastern politicians who hoped that Utah women would use the ballot to end polygamy, territorial legislators passed the measure with an as-

surance that just the opposite would occur. Within the territory, dissident Mormons were the first to publicly support female suffrage. Mormon leaders did not initiate the measure and Mormon woman had little to say until after its passage, when Eliza R. Snow sent a letter of appreciation to Governor Stephen Mann, who had signed the bill into law. Beeton also presents evidence to counter the popular notion that female suffrage was part of Brigham Young's plan to dilute the growing power of non-Mormons in Utah. Dilution was unnecessary. Between 1870 and 1896 "the Mormon men alone outnumbered the non-Mormon men four to one" (129).

As did most nineteenth-century middle-class men and women, Mormons embraced the Anglo-American ideology of female moral authority. Women were the natural agents of social improvement; therefore, their access to the ballot would facilitate a middle-class political agenda that included restrictions on liquor consumption, child labor laws, mandatory education, and immigration reform. This ideology is evident in Jean Bickmore White's essays "Gentle Persuaders: Utah's First Women Legislators" and "Woman's Place Is in the Constitution: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Utah in 1895." In the latter essay, White examines the debates on female suf-

frage that occurred during the constitutional convention. Although suffrage supporters used moral arguments, the opposition did not. In spite of the strong support for the issue among the delegates, Brigham H. Roberts forcefully opposed female suffrage because he believed it would undermine congressional approval of the state's proposed constitution.

Rather than see female suffrage as the result of Mormons' enlightened view of gender equality and morality, or that Utah women were ardent and persuasive suffragettes, we should recognize that women in Utah voted because the political forces that prevented female suffrage nationwide did not exist in the West. Utah had no powerful liquor lobby that feared voting women would enact severe restrictions on the distribution and consumption of liquor. Prohibition and female suffrage came into the federal constitution virtually hand in hand. This is not an historical coincidence. When the liquor lobby died, so too did the opposition to female suffrage. In this respect, the history of female suffrage in Utah has a great deal to offer the analysis of why women fought fiercely for the vote in eastern states. Historians of Utah women will contribute little to the national history, however, if they continue to see Utah's experience as just a battle for the ballot.

Quilts as Women's History

Quilts and Women of the Mormon Migrations: Treasures of Transition. By Mary Bywater Cross (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996).

Gathered in Time: Utah Quilts and Their Makers, Settlement to 1950. Edited by Kate Covington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997).