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‘The Woman’s Hour’ Review: Friends and Foes of the 19th Amendment

Rabble rousers, politicians and earnest reformers assembled in Nashville in the heat of July 1920 to decide the fate of women’s suffrage.

By Fergus M. Bordewich

Two years ago, more than 73 million women cast votes for the president of the United States, and for decades women have consistently outnumbered male voters in national elections. It is almost impossible now to imagine the country without women voters or candidates. But today’s reality was no more than a gleam in the eye of the suffragists who descended on Nashville, Tenn., in July 1920 for the climactic battle of the decades-long struggle to win the vote for women.

They composed a talented and indefatigable brigade, and the campaign they waged ranks among the most politically skillful in American history. Among them were Democrats and Republicans, radicals and conservatives, rabble rousers and club women, the flamboyant and the staid. There were bound together—though not always amicably—to lobby the Tennessee legislature to ratify the 19th Amendment.

President Woodrow Wilson had endorsed the amendment, and Congress had approved it in June 1919. Thirty-six states were needed to ratify it. Thirty-five had done so, but several had flatly rejected it, and in other states the legislation had stalled. The amendment now depended on Tennessee.

In “The Woman’s Hour,” a gripping account of those fraught and steamy days in Nashville, Elaine Weiss delivers political history at its best. A Baltimore-based historian and journalist, she writes with verve and color that captures the feverish excitement of a moment when, whatever the outcome, every woman and man packed into Tennessee’s imposing statehouse knew that history was about to be made. With a skill reminiscent of Robert Caro, she turns the potentially dry stuff of legislative give-and-take into a drama of courage and cowardice, showing the pain of compromise and the power of substantive debate in an age when rhetoric was still an art and political discourse still aimed to persuade.

The roots of what was often called the “ Susan B. Anthony Amendment,” after its leading advocate, lay more than 70 years in the past, at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which issued the first declaration of equal rights for women in the United States. In 1878, the amendment was first introduced in Congress by a California senator whom Anthony had befriended when their train was trapped in a snowdrift in the Rockies. By the early 20th century, tireless effort by Anthony, who died in 1906, and by Carrie Chapman Catt, her successor as leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, began to bear fruit. Ratification of the 19th Amendment would grant full voting rights to women. But its passage was far from assured.

Both major parties hoped to capitalize on the “women’s vote” in the presidential election of November 1920, which pitted Republican Warren Harding against Democrat James Cox. Although each man endorsed the amendment, neither was willing to fight hard for it for fear of alienating the powerful anti-suffrage movement. Some people opposed enfranchisement on religious and social grounds; others resented what they considered federal coercion. In addition, certain industries—liquor and textiles, for example—feared that, with the power of the vote, female reformers would cripple their back-room style of business and enact profit-sapping labor laws. The ratification contest also had international implications, at least for Democrats who believed that the bloc vote of women would lead to congressional approval of Wilson’s cherished League of Nations.

Much of the action in Nashville took place in the luxurious Hotel Hermitage, “the place to meet, talk and argue, cajole or confront friends and foes,” Ms. Weiss writes. She paints a teeming human landscape of “Suffs” and “Antis” swirling over the opulent Persian carpets in the “rosy glow” of the painted glass skylights. But she builds her narrative mainly around three figures: Iowa-raised, 61-year-old Catt, a gifted orator and strategist; Sue Shelton White, the native Tennessean representing the more militant National Women’s Party, which scorned genteel suffragists’ insistence on ladylike “graciousness”; and the head of the Anti forces, Josephine Pearson, a former teacher in Christian schools who was steeped in Lost Cause nostalgia and regarded suffrage as an assault on states’ rights.

Both sides played hardball. Suffs dogged the members of the state legislature, following them wherever they went and inviting them for rides in the country, games of cards, “anything,” Ms. Weiss says, “to keep them out of the clutches of Anti workers, corporate lobbyists, or a bender in the Jack Daniel’s suite.” The Antis harangued them with warnings that a vote for suffrage was, as one pamphlet put it, “a Vote for Organized Female Nagging Forever” and would lead to another period of what innumerable Antis claimed would be “reconstruction horrors.” Warned one Anti speaker: “The wreckers are at our homes. The Bolshevists are at your door and seeking the centralization of power.”

Although unadulterated racism poisoned the anti-suffrage movement, it also tainted many of the suffragists, who twisted and squirmed to avoid what even Catt sometimes referred to as “the nigger question.” She had long acquiesced to the demands of Southern feminists who insisted that states must be allowed to implement suffrage as they saw fit—that is, excluding blacks—though she and the movement’s national leadership, ahead of the Tennessee campaign, had decided to reject such

demands. While black suffragists attended the debates in Nashville, they were rarely if ever invited to share a seat in the lobby of the Hermitage, much less a podium, with their white sisters.

In the statehouse, the debate seesawed back and forth. Bribes were offered. Coats were turned. Threats were made. The outcome was in doubt until the last moment. To describe the pivotal surprise that anchors Ms. Weiss's bravura climax would spoil it. Suffice it to say that she delivers the high drama of the moment with brio. As the final roll was called, she writes: "There was a long moment of silence, silence and shock. Then an explosion, a roar never before heard in the old statehouse. The chamber shook with screams and cries, with thumping and whooping. . . . Those who could dance in the jammed chamber did, and there was weeping among both men and women. The winners frantically waved hundreds of tiny yellow flags and threw yellow flowers down onto the heads of the legislators on the floor." Yellow was the Suff's emblematic color.

The triumph of the suffragettes was complete, but the huge national "women's vote" proved to be a phantom. Only one-third of eligible women voted in the 1920 election. Most of the women who did vote, at least in the early years, tended to vote like their husbands. Wilson's League of Nations failed to win congressional support. And politics became no cleaner. In South Carolina in November 1920, the Ku Klux Klan helped to keep black women from the polls. In Ocoee, Fla., some 50 black men and women were killed in Election Day mob violence. For many years black women who attempted to vote were harassed and threatened along with their fathers, husbands and brothers.

Yet if women's suffrage failed to achieve its most idealistic hopes, it wholly succeeded in its fundamental goal: to unlock American democracy for millions of the disenfranchised. Today the thousands of women in elected office from town boards to the U.S. Senate owe their jobs in no small part to what took place in Nashville nearly a century ago. Too long neglected by historians, the campaigners who swarmed Tennessee's statehouse have been splendidly served by Ms. Weiss's engrossing narrative.

—Mr. Bordewich is the author of *"The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government."*