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SUSAN B. ANTHONY: PERSPECTIVE ON A PIONEER

ARTHUR J. MAY *

WILLIAM JAMES was endowed with one of the most penetrating and original minds ever to flower in the New World. In a famous essay, that is perennially interesting and perennially provocative, "The Moral Equivalent of War," this eminent Harvard philosopher remarked that "History is a bath of blood."

That judgment, however acceptable at the time in which it was written, must make Harvard historians of today squirm in their chairs. For that narrow concept of the scope and content of history, the implicit assumption that wars and diplomacy, the antics and amours of kings and queens comprise the data out of the past that is important and instructive, has given way to the larger and richer and democratic notion that history is totalitarian, properly embracing all the manifold doings of man—and of woman. So broad is this view of history,—the new history, it is sometimes labelled within the craft, although in actuality it is as old as Voltaire,—so broad is it, that it appears flat, and many a practitioner of the historian's art has glanced back, wistfully, it may be, to the era when history was past politics and present politics was history, in Freeman's classic language.

All the varied doings of man—and woman—how neglected indeed that half of society has been by chroniclers! Aside from saints of Mother Church, venerated by generation upon generation, and a handful of political celebrities such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth of

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SUSAN B. ANTHONY
At the age of 36, from a daguerreotype

England, Maria Theresa of Austria, and Catherine the Large of Russia, the well-read layman would be hard put to it to recall female characters who affected the course of western society prior to the epochal Revolution in France.

The point is that diverse influences, hardened convictions and ingrained prejudices relegated womankind—"an inferior vessel," as the phrase ran—to a distinctly subordinate place in the human pageant. Woman was born free; she was everywhere in chains, tied fast by every pride and prejudice. In point of fact, even in comparatively free America, the Hitlerean trinity for women, "Kirche, Kuche, und Kinder" was the universally accepted rule. No married woman had legal right to any money she earned; nor indeed could she own anything. No woman could vote or hold public office. These were only the more conspicuous discriminations against women in the United States, a country which knowing Europeans were accustomed to refer to as "the woman's paradise."

But fresh and dynamic currents were unloosed by the French Revolution. The egalitarian principle which was of the very core of the revolutionary gospel was bound to be appealed to on behalf of the liberation of women; and it was. This tide of the future was destined, some would say predestined, to encircle the globe, and, taken up by enlightened minds and spread by enlightened propaganda, was to produce one of the master social revolutions of recorded time in the western world; and to penetrate as well, to the hidebound, hyperconservative societies of India, China, Turkey, and even Japan.

But the ideology of revolutionary France was by no means the only creative force of the nineteenth century of Christian time. Alongside of it marched that vast economic transformation known as the industrial revolution, a misnomer, no doubt. The age of machinofacture had dawned, women in growing proportions left the seclusion of the home to take employment in factory and shop and office. And the enormous strides in productive techniques

that have been made under the compulsions of war, are an evidence of the fact that the world is as yet only in the early morning of machine production— that, whether for woe or weal.

It is in these two huge secular trends, the idea of equality, which was caught up and merged in the complex philosophy of democracy, and the radical changes in material culture, that the deeper sources of the emancipation of women are to be sought. If a third contributory current were to be singled out it would be the broader provision of educational opportunities for girls and the eagerness with which they were seized upon. The better part of higher education is emancipation.

Many a profound intellect has pondered on the insoluble problem, or so this morning it appears to me, as to whether the times make the man—or woman—or the great humans mold and determine the character of the age in which they happen to live. It is unnecessary for our purposes to enter into that labyrinthine debate. The record shows explicitly that in the van of the movement to secure wider freedoms for their kind, three American women stand out: Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Stanton Cady, and Susan Brownell Anthony.

It is fitting that the city of Rochester should be the focus of a commemorative memorial to Miss Anthony, for though she belonged to America, to the western world, indeed, she called Rochester home for more than half a century of her abundant and fruitful career. It is fitting, too, that this church should be the scene of the celebration, for here she was wont to worship in an atmosphere congenial to her Quaker upbringing and to the inquiring, catholic quality of her mind and spirit.

It is fitting, finally, that a member of the faculty of the University of Rochester, should be invited to address you on this occasion, for it was due in no small measure to Miss Anthony's unflagging energy and that of friends whom she enlisted in the project, that the College for Women

was added to the intellectual resources of this community. That institution from small beginnings has grown and flourished—until today it is the almost unique custodian and purveyor of the cultural and liberalizing disciplines in the University. If ever a distinguishing name is assigned to the College for Women, it should, of course, be Susan B. Anthony.

As matters stand, her contribution to the University's life is recalled in Anthony Gymnasium, though pressure of numbers and newer concepts of the physical training which women students require have long since outmoded the existing facilities,—and that building served, too, in less spacious days, as the focal point of the social activities of women learners.

There is peculiar appropriateness in all of that. Boundless physical vitality was surely one of the key traits of Miss Anthony. To say that Rochester was her home is only a manner of speaking; it was her base of operations, her headquarters whence she issued instructions to her colleagues or herself sallied forth to convince and convert. Whether it was on behalf of temperance in the use of alcoholic beverages, or the crusade to strike the heaviest shackles off the Negro, or to promote the fuller freedom of women, the Cause above all causes, Miss Anthony seemed always to be on the move, organizing, writing, goading on co-workers, lecturing, lecturing, lecturing, shocking audiences to think and beseeching public officials to act, all over the United States. Susan B. Anthony knew that the business of a leader was to lead. She was a physical phenomemon, no doubt about that; at the age of sixty-four she clambered up the side of Mt. Vesuvius.

Born in the year of the Missouri Compromise—1820—Miss Anthony's activities ceased only with life itself at the matriarchal age of 86,—and compromise had small place in her vocabulary. Born in a well-to-do Quaker household, she heeded throughout her long life the urge of the

inner light, the mystical experience which the Society of Friends cherish and which outsiders have sometimes been known to envy and covet—the inner light, loyalty to principle, an acute sense of mission, and a lively feeling of social responsibility. No personal unpopularity, no ridicule, no obloquy, no threats of physical violence could quench the spirit fired by those moral resources.

It is perhaps pardonable to permit professional teachers to exaggerate the impact which they make upon the social whole. The more candid among us appreciate that by far the larger part of one's education derives from the home—that's one reason why we relish teaching women, for we are teaching (or that is our hope) a family. Miss Anthony's girlhood home was—emphatically so—an educational institution, in which the tough-minded father acted as encourager of originality and stimulator to independence, the sponsor even of unorthodox ideas and projects, however conventional, even old-fashioned, some of them appear to us nowadays. The intelligence and cordiality of the Anthony family made them delightful hosts, and they in turn profited from the stimulating conversation of their guests.

Susan B. Anthony's life record testifies vividly to the sovereign importance of the home in the educational process. And to her father she was attached with an affection that to him must have been most rewarding. His death in the midst of the War between the States was a terrific emotional shock, but with characteristic zest she turned, with her sister Mary, to the cultivation of the family farm on the fringes of the Rochester of that day.

Earlier she had tried her hand at teaching. She learned of the satisfactions and the sacrifices and the sorrows which are the lot of the teacher. She was infuriated, and properly so, that a man who preceded her in one school should have been paid the princely sum of ten dollars a week, while the authorities decided that she should be content with a quarter of that amount.

It was that kind of thing and the innumerable discriminations against women, wholly because of their sex and ancient tradition, which diverted her from the schoolhouse to a classroom that became as big as America and, in the end, international in proportions.

In Miss Anthony's own language the supreme objective of her zeal was nothing short of "perfect equality of rights for women—civil and political." To that end she worked for an amendment to the federal Constitution which would admit women to the polling booth on equal terms with men; and that amendment, called the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, was incorporated, as you know, in the fundamental law in time to allow women to vote in the national election of 1920—centennial year of Miss Anthony's birth.

Her indefatigable campaigning to secure the franchise right for women, as a sign and symbol of equality between the sexes, was studded with dramatic incidents, on which her biographers have dwelt in admiring detail.

For instance, Miss Anthony sensationally defied convention and law (as a stubborn and prejudiced court was to decree), though in accordance with the opinion of her friend and adviser Judge Henry R. Selden—sometime member of New York's highest tribunal, the Court of Appeals—defied tradition, by voting in the presidential election of 1872 along with more than a dozen of her most ardent followers. For that courageous act—how many women of your acquaintance would have the temerity to commit a comparable deed at a remove of seventy-three years?—she was tried, declared guilty, and fined one hundred dollars. The unpaid judgment against Miss Anthony must long since have yellowed and mouldered in the Court House at Canandaigua, New York.

That episode, given wide and generally unsympathetic publicity in the press, marked one of the highlights in Miss Anthony's career and as well a kind of turning point in the Women Suffrage movement. For a generation the Cause

lost a good deal of the momentum that had been generated in the decade preceding. In the aftermath of the War between the States, there came a slump in idealism (a not uncommon occurrence), which stifled progressive reforms.

Another memorable event was the meeting between Miss Anthony and stately Queen Victoria in 1899; the former, spokesman *par excellence* of the right of women to vote, the other, her senior by a single year, adamantly opposed to the very suggestion that women should express their preferences in affairs of state by means of the ballot. By a curious paradox a woman was considered qualified to reign over the destinies of Britain and her globe-wide empire, and yet no woman might share in the election of public officials.

Without intending to transgress the ritual of the British royal house, Miss Anthony at her presentation to the Queen-Empress omitted even so much as a curtsy—could it have been the unconscious influence of the Quaker heritage reaching back into the seventeenth century? Instead, she simply greeted Victoria with a “Oh, how *do* you do?”—with the accent on the first “do.”

A few days later on being introduced to the Empress of Germany, Augusta, wife of William II, she displayed the same simple directness that she had shown in the presence of Victoria. After commenting on the marvelous material progress that Germany had made in the recent past, likening it indeed to the phenomenal advance of the United States, Miss Anthony boldly recommended to the Empress that she urge the authorities to extend the franchise right to women.

If that were done, Germany would rank, she said, in the forefront of the enlightened countries. Perhaps the ardent American did not know that the Social Democratic party of Germany had taken women suffrage as one of its goals, and that alone was sufficient to make the idea anathema to the ruling elements of the Empire. As matters turned out, the resounding downfall of the Hohenzollern

régime at the end of the first World War of the twentieth century and the establishment of a Republic enabled German women to go to the polls before the privilege was put into practice in the United States.

I have intimated that Miss Anthony violated the canons of convention which were standard in her century, and that invited all manner of wild accusations. She believed, for instance, that a visit to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show on Sunday was more worthwhile than listening to an arrogant, dogmatic sermon, and had no hesitancy in saying so. Small wonder that Buffalo Bill supplied his seventy-three year old champion with complimentary tickets; small wonder, too, that certain clergymen thought her a Jezebel.

So concentrated was she on "the true and the good" in life that she neglected the beautiful. Her forte was militancy, and she was not distinguished for tact or the niceties of diplomacy; rather she was a controversialist, given to extremism in statement. Vigorous expression of strongly-held opinion is bound to offend somebody.

And how did she appear to contemporaries? In maturity she was described as "tall, spare as an athlete," and as "active, serious and sarcastic rather than humorous, introspective, analytic and toward herself singularly detached."¹ By the 1890's "her hair was gleaming silver . . . her strong face was lined and seamed, and behind her gold-rimmed spectacles the keen blue-gray eyes looked a little tired," a biographer tells us. Still she was "as upright as a forest pine." At life's close she was more beautiful than in youth, "pale, fragile as a wraith."

Of the lovable personal characteristics of this blazer of trails, several members of this congregation could speak out of their own experience. Ever the tireless and resourceful promoter of the Cause, Miss Anthony found time to cultivate those warm human relationships, which some of us regard as the essence of living. The benefactions of

¹ Rheta L. Dorr, *Susan B. Anthony* (New York, 1928).

which she was the recipient and which largely provided for her simple wants in the last years of her life are but one testimonial of the esteem and affection in which she was held by those who knew her best. Her wealth consisted not in the multitude of her possessions but in the fewness of her wants. Popular appreciation of the woman and her work was demonstrated in one way at the World's Fair at Chicago in 1893 where she was the object of very enthusiastic ovations.

At the time of her death Miss Anthony was probably the best known and most revered woman in America. Rochester bore witness to its respect when on the morning of her funeral—a miserable blustering March day—the bell on the Courthouse tolled continuously. And who can guess at the enduring influence of Miss Anthony upon the women of Rochester in making them so valuable and so vital a force in this civic-minded community? The answer would, no doubt, apply equally to other cities, in which the League of Women Voters, an offshoot of a tree that Miss Anthony planted, has struck deep root. The greatness of Miss Anthony and the nobility of her life are readily understood, though it is unnecessary to endorse the assertion of a distinguished senator from New York, who in a flight of chamber oratory, likened her and her accomplishments to Abraham Lincoln.

From our present vantage ground how have the labors of Miss Anthony, crowned as they were by the grant of suffrage to women a quarter century ago, stood the test of time? It may be confidently asserted that both the friends and foes of votes for women have seen their fondest expectations disappointed.

Doleful prophecies of the misogynist that the nation would fall under the rule of tough-textured Amazons have gone the way of many another dark foreboding. On the other side, it is possible to hear laments, some learned, some popular, that the enfranchisement of women has not yielded the harvest which advocates had optimistically

promised; that, in spite of the remarkable growth in the number, usefulness, and activity of women in the great and lesser affairs of state. Surveying the national scene in 1940, Miss Frances Perkins, first of her sex to attain cabinet rank in the United States, pointed out that three women had been federal judges, two had served as ministers at foreign courts, two had been governors, and twenty-eight, members of Congress.

If there be national traits, then one American trait is the unfailing optimism that innovations will bring forth far-reaching results swiftly; there is gasoline—super-gasoline—in the blood of the American people. Yet the fact that an American Paradise has not been forthwith ushered in with woman suffrage should be no cause for remorse; a quarter of a century is the merest tick on the huge clock of time. On a larger and longer view the advance in equality between the sexes has been prodigious. As if to consolidate the gains that have been won, or at least to applaud women's contribution to the war effort, both of our major political parties in their 1944 platforms, using language almost identical, favored an amendment to the Constitution on equality of rights. Incidentally, the original sponsor of the amendment in the Congress was David R. Anthony, a Kansas nephew of Miss Anthony.

And if we may peer into the future, we can readily perceive a larger and wider scope for women's activity. Their counsels will be sought with growing eagerness on our perplexing social questions in an ever more urban civilization; in that field women have special competence to propose, to plan, and to fulfill.

On another level the voice and the will of womankind will be exercised with greater effectiveness: that is, in combatting and one day vanquishing the ogre of war as the final method for the settlement of disputes between nations. Whether society—global society—will discover and apply moral equivalents of war, which Professor James so persuasively argues are indispensable, we cannot now tell;

but it is as plain as a pikestaff that some form of international institutionalism must precede effective efforts to deal with the specific and complicated sources from which wars emerge. Security precedes all else.

The road to the goal promises to be rough and tortuous. A new world order will not, cannot, emerge all at once like Minerva from the brow of Jove. But may we not, each in his or her own way, derive comfort and inspiration from the struggle which Miss Anthony waged for a Cause which for her was of the utmost immediate significance? Her tenacity of purpose, her infinite patience, her indomitable courage impart lessons that every intelligence can grasp.

We best honor our heroines—and our heroes—, as I think, not by fatuous adulation nor by slavish adherence to their particular opinions, but rather by applying to the challenges of our day, the qualities of mind and imagination and character that they employed in meeting their problems.

With a thought of a Harvard philosopher I began; another of that school, Professor A. N. Whitehead, reminds us that “successful progress creeps forward by stages.” And, in Miss Anthony’s last speech occurs the phrase: “Failure is impossible.” That proved an accurate forecast with regard to woman suffrage, and it may well serve as a motto for our age, as we go forward in the twin tasks of bettering our social environment and helping to establish a constructive and durable peace among the nations.