

The Radical and the Moderate

Anna Howard Shaw: The Work of Woman Suffrage

By Trisha Franzen

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Alice Paul: Claiming Power

By J.D. Zahniser and Amelia R. Fry

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In May 1913, in an unseasonably hot Washington spring, a determined young woman was building a woman suffrage organization whose sole purpose was to pressure Congress to pass a federal amendment giving women the vote. At 28, Alice Paul had concluded that the 23-year-old National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) wasn't effective, because it wasn't political enough at the federal level. The annual ritual of a Senate hearing on the amendment was pointless, she thought. She wanted to try something different, with an organization she could run as she liked—though to make it credible, she wanted it to be an affiliate of the National. With misgivings, the National's president, 66-year-old Anna Howard Shaw, had recently approved the plan, not wanting to lose control over the ambitious Paul. Taking a protective stance, Shaw wrote

“The woman suffrage movement was the work of millions of women, but without Shaw and Paul, with their different ideas about how to achieve success, its history would have looked very different.”

Paul a letter that captures a key difference between the two committed suffrage activists. “Don't stay there too long in the heat,” she wrote. “Don't rush things too hard.”

Paul's sense of urgency, as well as her creative insistence on finding new and controversial ways to increase the pressure on Congress to act, defined her contribution to the suffrage cause and supplied the reasons, a year later, for the painful break between her new organization, the Congressional Union, and the National. By then Shaw, a long-time suffrage leader who had worked hard to broaden suffrage's appeal, had decided that Paul was leading a dangerously militant experiment that would damage the movement's respectability and therefore its ability to generate support for state or federal legislation. For her part, Paul was sure that the National's political timidity was holding back history.

An almost complete history of the suffrage movement is embedded in these two women's stories. Anna Howard Shaw, a preacher from the backwoods of Michigan, joined the cause in the 1880s at the encouragement of the early feminist Lucy Stone and, within a few years, was travelling ceaselessly to lecture for woman suffrage. For more than a decade she was on the road with the long-time president of the national association and her beloved mentor and friend, Susan B. Anthony. Later, she travelled on her own, lecturing both to earn her living and promote the cause. Eventually, as president of the National and its first paid officer, she travelled on the organization's behalf. She held office for eleven years, until 1915. When she died four years after she stepped down, she knew that the suffrage amendment had finally passed both

Reviewed by Louise W. Knight

houses of Congress but not whether enough states would eventually ratify it.

Alice Paul, the Quaker daughter of a suffrage advocate, joined the militant wing of the British suffrage movement in 1908, while studying in London for a graduate degree. After a year and a half of intense and sometimes life-threatening activism, she returned to the United States and, already famous from her suffrage work in England, joined the American suffrage movement. Though as gifted a speaker as Shaw, Paul was more interested in bold, publicity-generating political strategies. By 1917, she had built the Congressional Union into a national organization of 40,000 members and was using all available legal, nonviolent methods to

relentlessly prod President Woodrow Wilson to endorse the federal amendment, including months-long picketing of the White House. This strategy made Wilson so nervous he ordered (or allowed) the women to be jailed as criminals rather than as what they were: political prisoners.

The National's greatest strength was the help it provided suffragists to achieve state laws or state constitutional amendments that made it legal for women to vote. It sent out speakers to lecture in small towns, convened inspiring national conventions, and helped fund suffrage campaign expenses when possible. The Congressional Union—which later became the National Woman's Party (NWP)—organized the women voters in “free” (mostly western) states to vote against their Democratic congressmen if they did not support the amendment, and pressured and confronted President Woodrow Wilson. Paul and the NWP targeted Democrats because, since their party controlled both Congress and the presidency, the power to pass the amendment was in their hands. In time, with both the NWP and the National working hard, more and more women had the vote, and the Democrats in the Congress, feeling the heat, passed the amendment. The woman suffrage movement was the work of millions of women, but without Shaw and Paul, with their different ideas about how to achieve success, its history would have looked very different.

Now we have two new biographies of these leaders, both highly attentive to the viewpoints of their subjects, to help us see the movement's history freshly. Trisha Franzen's *Anna Howard Shaw* is a full-life treatment, while J.D. Zahniser and Amelia

R. Fry's *Alice Paul* takes the younger woman's story only to 1920 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Both are the first deeply researched biographies of their subjects. Indeed, Franzen, a professor of women's studies at Albion College, Shaw's alma mater, has apparently written the first biography of any kind about her subject—although Shaw's speeches have been studied by two rhetoric scholars, Wil A. Linkugel and Martha Watson, in *Anna Howard Shaw: Suffrage Orator and Social Reformer* (1991).

There are four previous books about Paul. Historian Christine Lunardini wrote a short biography for the high school and college classroom, and journalist Mary Walton wrote a partial biography that focuses almost completely on Paul's fight in the US for the vote. The other books are scholarly studies, one by Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910-1928* (2000) (in 1923 Paul was the creator of the Equal Rights Amendment); and the other by Katherine Adams and Michael Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (2007), which is about Paul's rhetorical strategies.

The co-authorship of the new Paul biography has a story behind it. Fry, an expert in oral history, first became interested in Paul in the 1970s, when she conducted several interviews with her for the Oral History Project at the Bancroft Library, at the University of California, Berkeley (the recordings are available online). In 2005, when Fry became terminally ill, she asked Zahniser, a trained historian, independent scholar, and the compiler of four reference books dealing with women, to complete the book. Apparently Zahniser wrote a fresh manuscript, since Fry's published essays read quite differently than any part of the biography that bears both their names.

Drawn to Anna Howard Shaw's neglected story because of her important role in the suffrage movement, Franzen soon became fascinated with the “great strengths and serious flaws” of the woman herself, and with the way that Shaw, a never married, immigrant, self-made, working woman, became a national leader in an elite-led movement. Franzen tells the second story particularly well, with an acute sensitivity to Shaw's ever-present need to earn a living.

Franzen's fascination with Shaw becomes our own as we read. As is often the case, the leader's greatest strength was also her greatest flaw. She was a fighter whose method of leadership was to state firmly what was to be done and then not budge an inch, regardless of the consequences. This approach saved her life when she was 27 and traveling through northern Michigan wilderness all night with a surly wagon driver. When he



Anna Howard Shaw attending Albion College, 1874

threatened to rape her, she pulled out her gun and told him if he stopped the wagon or spoke again, she would shoot him. He believed her. But the same approach created problems when she was president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. She brooked no criticism, squelched debate, and over time, lost many friends. This aspect of her character, however, does not quite come into focus in Franzen's telling. The details are there, but they are insufficiently interpreted. Franzen does not always step back at key points to help us see Shaw objectively, from the outside, though she frequently quotes those who disapproved of her.

Indeed, Franzen's strength as a biographer is in her mastery of the details—the who, what, when, where, and how of Shaw's life. She attends to the tangible things—money, travel, houses, people, degrees earned, annual meetings, parades, automobiles, and trains. But as Franzen motors us crisply through Shaw's comings and goings, motivation and interpretation sometimes fall by the wayside. The larger context of suffrage history receives only passing nods. Franzen is thorough in the attention she pays to the concepts of race, class, and gender—the terms themselves appear often, giving the text a slightly sociological aspect—and some of her best insights relate to the benefits and limitations of Shaw's class status.

One of the great missed opportunities in Franzen's book is to capture more vividly and examine more thoughtfully Shaw's much-admired



Alice Paul

gifts as a lecturer, since these formed the basis of her influence as a leader. Franzen apparently decided that the subject had no place in her biography. Instead, Franzen summarizes a few speeches, notes the devotion of Shaw's audiences, and leaves it at that.

There are many fascinating aspects of Shaw's life that Franzen introduces, but skirts rather than delves into, most obviously, Shaw's sexuality and gender identity. No one reading the book can miss the clues scattered throughout that, taken together, raise the question of where Shaw fell on the feminine-masculine spectrum. We learn that the youthful Shaw wore a cropped haircut (captured in a photograph on the book's cover); that she loved doing things that, traditionally, only men did—she preferred digging ditches or shoveling coal to sewing, for example; and that her college nickname was Annie-boy. In terms of her sexuality, we learn that she considered her love for Susan B. Anthony her great "passion," and that she had a thirty-year partnership with Lucy Anthony, Susan B. Anthony's niece, who described Shaw as her "precious love." There was also an apparent dalliance with a female "professor Potter."

Franzen, a scholar in the field of lesbian history, does an excellent job of providing this information, and in the Introduction she calls Shaw "gender variant" and declares she had a "butch" persona. But in the main text she does not develop these points. While she notes that there was "no hint of romance" in any of Shaw's friendships with men, she avoids noting the large amounts of romance in Shaw's relations with women and avoids interpreting the fascinating facts she has provided.

In the Epilogue and a related footnote, she again takes up the topic of Shaw's sexual orientation—in the process providing more intriguing details—only to carefully set it aside because she "found nothing that could clearly be categorized as a sexual reference among all Shaw's writings." Claiming that female-female intimacy in Shaw's day was of a sort unfamiliar in ours, Franzen proposes (without undertaking it) a "larger reconceptualization of women's, lesbians' and/or women-identified women's relationships."

Only another biographer—certainly not a reviewer—can sort all of this out. But as a reader, I wanted to know more about Shaw's remarkable friendship with Susan B. Anthony (I learned more by reading the two chapters about that friendship in Shaw's thoroughly anecdotal and fascinating memoir, *The Story of a Pioneer* [1915]); and about

Shaw's life-long partnership with Lucy Anthony, which mostly receives only glancing references, although in one place Franzen refers to them as "a couple." Perhaps the sources were inadequate to the latter task, but that is not made clear. Regardless of whether sexual contact was involved, Shaw's intimate emotional life was part of who she was and deserves an honest, if brief, assessment in a life biography. How else can women know the richness of their own pasts?

Alice Paul: *Claiming Power* delivers on its subtitle. In the groundbreaking chapters about her suffrage work in England (the first in-depth examination of those years), we are often—indeed perhaps too often—alerted that Paul would soon apply to her American work the methods of political activism she was learning from the British suffragette leaders Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christobel. These were all about using the political power women did have: the ability to call public attention to their unjust lack of the vote and to hold politicians publicly accountable for their failure to grant it. Paul did not use all of the Pankhursts' methods. As a Quaker, she believed in the principle of nonviolence, at least when it came to her own country, and she did not propose that her Congressional Union followers break windows or physically assault anyone. But she mastered the essential Pankhurst lessons and applied them brilliantly, as Zahniser and Fry skillfully show. One finishes their book with a newfound respect for the too-often dismissed Paul. While many of the older suffragists, including Shaw, felt her to be the enemy, readers today can more objectively admire her remarkable skills as an organizer of effective political action and recognize the central role she and the CU/National Woman's Party played in securing the suffrage amendment.

Like Shaw's, Alice Paul's emotional life and its role in her activism is a puzzle. Reading the biography, we gradually realize that Paul, who never married, had strong friendships with two women who were crucial to the work of the radical wing of the suffrage movement and completely shared Paul's vision and courage: Dora Lewis and Lucy Burns. There are hints in the book that Paul's relationship with the much older Lewis was deeply and physically affectionate. Burns was Paul's stalwart and devoted partner in assertive political theater and sophisticated organizing from the days when the two Americans were supporters of Emmeline Pankhurst's contro-



A poster depicting the force-feeding of Alice Paul in her prison hunger strike, 1909.

versial and sometimes violent suffrage campaign in England.

Back in the United States, the two friends shared the leadership of the Congressional Union (Burns was second in command) and the most physically demanding side of suffrage work: picketing the White House for long hours and in all kinds of weather, often going to jail, where, during their hunger strikes, they endured forced feeding. The chapters on the picketing and subsequent jailings are tours de force; Zahniser and Fry are the first to delve so deeply into that history. Among other tidbits we learn that the phrase “iron-jawed angels” to describe the suffrage campaigners was the creation of an antifeminist—which perhaps explains why I have never liked it. (It became the title of a 2003 TV movie starring Hilary Swank as Paul and Frances O’Connor as Burns.) From their correspondence, quoted by Zahniser and Fry, we catch glimpses of the trust between the two women and their likemindedness, but mostly we learn about Burns’s work in the Congressional Union office, and her comings and goings. While the importance of their partnership is acknowledged, its nature is underinterpreted, despite the fact that it was essential to Paul’s political success.

In contrast, Zahniser and Fry highlight as possible romantic interests several men in Paul’s life and even go so far as to surmise, while admitting there is a complete lack of evidence, that a certain Mr. Parker may have proposed to her. Evidently they—or most likely, Zahniser—find it acceptable to guess about heterosexual relationships but not about other kinds. Fry could have chosen to surmise about neither but instead interpret fully the meaning of the evidence at hand—but that, it seems, she was reluctant to do.

Race is another complicated issue that the authors of these books take up. Mindful that historians have criticized both Shaw and Paul for racist actions, the authors face the music forthrightly; however, their conclusions are murky



Anna Howard Shaw

and seem a bit protective. For Shaw, the issue was how to respond to the refusal of white southern women suffragists to endorse the federal amendment. Across the entire South, white suffragists and white (male) politicians feared that if the amendment became law, it would establish the precedent of federal control over voting, and thus end state power to keep black men disenfranchised. Franzen argues in the Epilogue (which, along with the Introduction, contains some of the best writing and most interesting interpretative insights of the whole book) that Shaw was “always deeply committed to universal and full suffrage,” and in the main text, she discusses how Shaw strategized over time to move obstreperous white southerners off the NAWSA board. But in the Introduction she admits that Shaw “struggled to actualize her beliefs” and “failed to confront reactionary politics and strategies while she was a vice president of NAWSA.” Shaw supported the Shafroth Amendment, which restricted voter-qualification decisions to the states, and thus was favored by southern white suffragists. Franzen mentions Shaw’s support but never makes the connection to racist suffrage politics. This is a significant failure in interpretation.

For Paul, who also wooed white southern women’s support in ways that harmed southern black women’s chances for the vote, the most famous race-related question is whether, as some have claimed, she compelled African American women to march at the back of the suffrage parade that took place in Washington the day before President Wilson’s first inauguration. Zahniser and Fry’s chapter on the event is full of fascinating details. Regarding the race question, they tell us that before the parade, Paul waffled, feeling concerned that “the majority of the white marchers would refuse to participate” if “many Negroes” were marching too. She decided not to encourage

black suffragists to march, but to quietly allow them do so, while avoiding publicity about whether or not they were welcome. Zahniser and Fry also report that it was the Illinois delegation’s chair, and not Alice Paul, who asked the sole black woman in the Illinois delegation, the brave antilynching journalist Ida B. Wells Barnett, to leave. But what about the other state delegations? Did they have black women members? Zahniser and Fry don’t say. Historians, though not Fry and Zahniser, have sometimes assumed what happened to Barnett was typical, not unique—but we need the evidence to support that claim. The authors indicate that at least part of the parade was integrated: in a section separate from the state delegations, white and black college women graduates marched together.

Work on the complicated and vast history of the suffrage movement first flourished in the 1990s. Synthesis was bravely and skillfully attempted. In more recent years, historians have settled down to the hard work of narrower studies, writing the stories of suffrage in various states or regions, of African American women and the vote, and biographies of individual suffragists. Happily, we can now add the biographies of Shaw and Paul to that list. Both books have much offer to historians of the movement as well as to anyone interested in one of the largest and most remarkable political action campaigns in the nation’s history. 

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