

NONFICTION

The Scandalous Life of America's First Female Presidential Candidate

Born dirt poor, Victoria Woodhull rose to heights of wealth and fame in the Gilded Age, reinventing herself along the way. A sprightly new biography recounts her unlikely story.



By Jennifer Szalai

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THE IMPROBABLE VICTORIA WOODHULL: Suffrage, Free Love, and the First Woman to Run for President, by Eden Collinworth

By the time she found herself testifying in a London courtroom in 1894, the 54-year-old Victoria Woodhull was used to being underestimated. She had grown up dirt poor — quite literally — in Homer, Ohio, living in a wooden shack whose lack of an outhouse meant that to relieve herself she had to dig holes in the ground. As a woman in 19th-century America, she had few professional opportunities to choose from, and she certainly didn't have the right to vote.

Yet none of that stopped her from becoming the first woman to found a Wall Street brokerage and the first woman to run for president. At the 1894 trial, she accused the barrister (inevitably a man) who was cross-examining her of presuming that she had an “overheated imagination”: “You think this because I am a woman, and you are not disposed to entertain the notion that women can be rational human beings.”

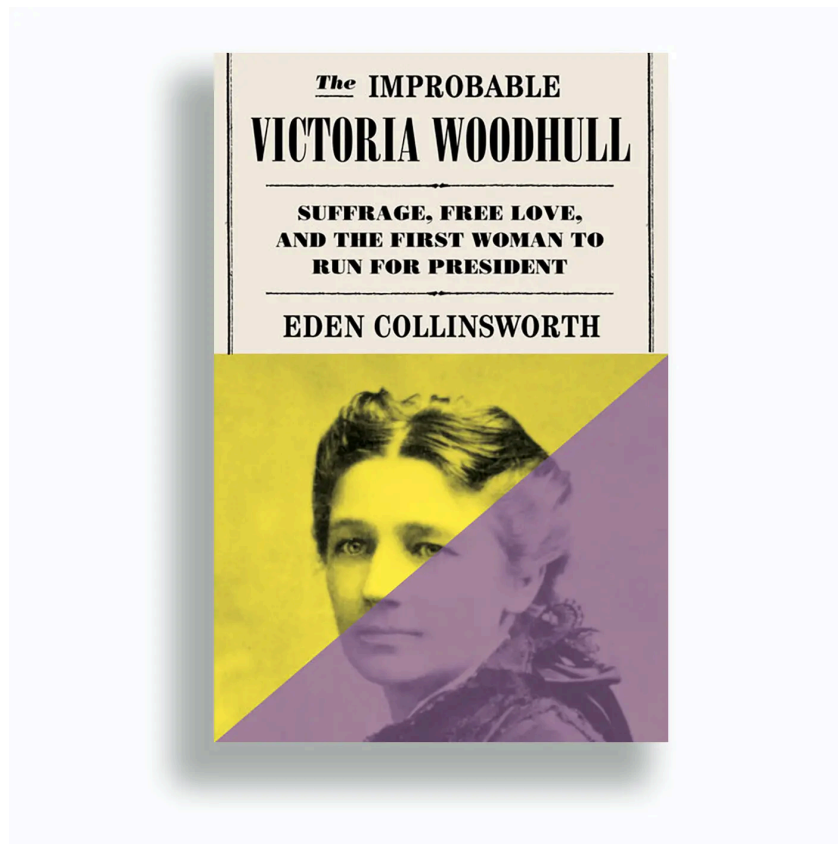
The Improbable Victoria Woodhull

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There was undoubtedly some truth to this. But as Eden Collinworth suggests in her lush and playful new book, Woodhull was especially adept at oscillating between truth and lies. “The Improbable Victoria Woodhull” traces the extraordinary trajectory of what Collinworth delicately calls a “controversial life.” Woodhull became a stockbroker and politician after many years as a spiritual adviser and clairvoyant. She traveled the United States giving lectures on taboo subjects like free love and birth control. When she left the United States for England in 1877, she had long been a fixture of fascination and derision in the American papers.

Then, nearly two decades later, Woodhull sued the British Museum for libel because it carried a pamphlet featuring news items about her from the United States that she maintained were damaging to her reputation.



Woodhull is such an extravagantly memorable character that she regularly shows up in books about the Gilded Age. Mary Gabriel published an excellent biography, “Notorious Victoria,” in 1998. Collinworth, an author and former media executive, uses the 1894 libel trial as a framing device, drawing a stark contrast between Woodhull’s bumptious life in the United States and her painstaking bid for respectability in England. The trial also gives Collinworth the opportunity for a clever conceit. Many of the book’s details are presented as they would have been gleaned by a man named Mr. Garnett, who, as the keeper of printed books at the British Museum, was named a defendant in the lawsuit.

The diligent and old-fashioned Garnett allows Collinworth to add another dimension to her portrait of Woodhull. He was, in nearly all respects, the buttoned-up opposite of the daring woman who sued him. A caption for a photograph of the balding Garnett in profile notes “a forehead that seemed to depict the process of reason itself.” In the book, he starts out by thinking that Woodhull must be truly “deranged” and suspects her temerity might have something to do with the fact

that she “came from a bizarre, try-anything country.” But by the end of Collinsworth’s account, Garnett’s snap judgment has yielded to greater understanding.

Woodhull was born Victoria Claflin in 1838, the seventh of 10 children. Her father, Buck, was a one-eyed con man; her mother, Roxanna, was a mentally unstable woman who talked to ghosts. Buck put 12-year-old Victoria and her younger sister, Tennie, to work by taking them on the road, billing them as “AMAZING CHILD CLAIRVOYANTS.”

Two years later, Victoria married a physician named Canning Woodhull. She was 14; he was 28, and he also happened to be a terrible drunk. She had two children with him: a son, Byron, who was born impaired and would need care for the rest of his life; and a daughter, Zulu Maud. Victoria and Tennie struck out on their own, eventually moving to New York, but they brought their Ohio family with them. Spiritualism was both a source of notoriety and a calling card. The shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt hired Victoria as his spiritual adviser and Tennie as his “healer” (she soon became his lover).

Vanderbilt helped the sisters open their brokerage firm; the riches it earned laid the foundation for Victoria’s presidential run. (Her first run, that is — she campaigned for the job twice more.) Finding herself on the brunt end of Anthony Comstock and his anti-obscenity campaign (for salacious stories published in a newspaper the sisters owned), she spent Election Day in the Ludlow Street Jail.

Collinsworth recounts the twists and turns of Woodhull’s story with wit and aplomb, while occasionally widening the lens to provide the necessary context. The Civil War, Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, World War I: Woodhull, who died in 1927, lived through an era of numerous upheavals. She promoted free love and suffrage; she was also, Collinsworth says, a proto-eugenicist who blamed her son’s impairments on the pregnancy that was forced on her by her alcoholic husband: “Because I knew no better than to surrender my maternal functions to a drunken man, I am cursed to this living death.”

The book shows how Woodhull, a consummate survivor, learned how to handle “her conflicting tides of loyalty with brutal detachment.” Once in England, she planned to marry a respectable bachelor from a British banking family, and started dissembling about her past. She blamed the men in her life for sullyng her reputation. She distributed a pamphlet offering a “fact-depleted biographical narrative” that laundered her scandalous career.

Collinworth, not prepared to call her protagonist “callous,” decides that a better word is “pragmatic.” But so much “pragmatism” made it hard for Woodhull to keep her story straight: “She had altered her own story so often and to such a degree that it was impossible for her to find a way to convey a coherent narrative.” Yet Collinworth, a skillful storyteller, wrangles all of Woodhull’s truth and lies into a coherent portrait. This book captures her in all her contradictions.

Given Woodhull’s penchant for disinformation, it’s somewhat surprising to learn that the lawsuit she brought against the British Museum ended in a draw: The jury found that the material was libelous, but also that the defendants were not “plausibly guilty.” Woodhull won 1 pound in damages yet still had to pay the British Museum’s legal costs of £508. It was an improbable verdict for an improbable life. As Woodhull put it on the stand: “The only thing that matters in this trial is what can be believed.”

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