

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Woman Suffrage History: The Story of the Woman's Party

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Is *Story of the Woman's Party* an historical account, a novel, or a political manifesto? What can this source reveal about historical practice? This article will explore the historiographic, epistemological, and methodological challenges the book poses as an historical source. It will examine three main points: first, the relation between activism and historical practice—that is, how activism informs the writing of history. Second, how such a source can be handled by historians, and what the idea of a critical reading entails. Third, what this work actually helps us understand about the politics of the period: What does it say about the suffrage movement in particular? What does it reveal about politics in general?

- ¹ *Story of the Woman's Party* was first published in 1921, a few months after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave white women the right to vote at the federal level.^[1] Its author Inez Haynes Irwin, a member of the militant suffragist organisation the National Woman's Party (NWP), was described by historian Nancy Cott as “the group's historian” (45). Irwin was a very versatile writer: She was a labor journalist and fiction editor of *The Masses*, a war correspondent in Europe during World War One, and she wrote both fiction and non-fiction—her 1914 novel *Angel Island* is a feminist tale with Swiftian undertones that can be described as proto-science fiction. She also penned the popular “Maida” children series, comprising of fifteen novels in all. In the 1930s, she was the first woman to become president of the Author's Guild of America, and she acted as chairperson of the board of directors of the World Center for Women's Archives. She expressed her feminist activism through her literary and historical endeavors. The choice of the term ‘story’ in the title of her account of the suffrage fight reflects the ambiguity of her historical approach, which is at the same time a record of events, anecdotes, and people, but also a narrative, dramatic work whose complex ambition deserves further scrutiny. As Irwin explained in a letter to Alice Paul, the leader of the NWP, she had changed the name from *The History of the Woman's Party* to *The Story of the Woman's Party* to keep “it such a ‘human’ thing” (Irwin to Paul, 5 Dec. 1920). Irwin's account aims at chronicling the struggle for the vote while establishing the NWP as the only recognised suffrage group. Her work legitimises the NWP's historic role while trying to appeal to future militants: It deals with the immediate past and outlines the future of the organisation.
- ² The ambiguity of this elaborate historical and political enterprise, which is mirrored by the hybrid character of the book, was underscored by the very first reviews: in the *New York Times*, Charles Willis Thompson denounced Irwin's bias and

described it as a “perversion of history” (A13). In *American Political Science Review*, Amy Hewes^[2] noticed that “[t]he volume seem[ed] almost cluttered with the mass of quotations from contemporary letters and diaries, newspapers, court records and campaign speeches” (449). *Story of the Woman’s Party* offers a wealth of material indeed, but represents a problematic historical account, which has nonetheless been used as a source by many from the 1930s (Murphy) until today, as stressed by Gunja SenGupta: “Historians have drawn heavily upon the wealth of anecdotal and other details provided by Irwin and Stevens despite their obvious partisanship” (535). To what extent is this “partisanship” really an issue? Historians do acknowledge Irwin’s bias, highlighting that she offers a truncated view of the suffrage struggle by focusing only on the NWP; yet they do not necessarily go beyond this observation to offer an in-depth analysis of what Irwin’s specific perspective actually entails. For instance, in her 1959 groundbreaking study *Century of Struggle*, Eleanor Flexner underlines that the “books written by participants in the closing years of suffrage campaigning all suffer from serious bias, a defect heightened by the split within the suffrage movement” (Flexner and Fitzpatrick 339) Flexner specifically refers to Inez Irwin’s work alongside others and adds that these books “still have something to teach us” (339), but she does not specify what they “teach us.”

- 3 This article aims at correcting that omission by analysing what Irwin’s activist historical narrative can “teach us.” How does Irwin’s “partisanship” affect the representation of history and the genre of the account? Is *Story of the Woman’s Party* an historical account, a novel, or a political manifesto? What can this source reveal about historical practice? This article will explore the historiographic, epistemological, and methodological challenges the book poses as an historical source. It will examine three main points: first, the relation between activism and historical practice—that is, how activism informs the writing of history. Second, how such a source can be handled by historians, and what the idea of a critical reading entails. Third, what this work actually helps us understand about the politics of the period: What does it say about the suffrage movement in particular? What does it reveal about politics in general?
- 4 The methodology used to answer these questions is twofold: first, I read this work not just as an account of historical events, but as a reconstruction of these events on the one hand, and as discourse upon history and women’s role in it on the other hand. What matters is not just *what* Irwin describes, but *how* she describes it, her representation of the suffrage struggle and her discourse to empower women. Second, by using the archives of the NWP and specifically the correspondence between Inez Irwin and the members of the NWP, I seek to unveil the process behind the writing of this book. This correspondence provides insight into the context of production of this work and its political and historiographic aims. I am convinced that such analysis is necessary to reveal new critical prospects on the history of the suffrage movement and especially on the use, perception, and meaning of the stories it created. I am indebted here to the work of Lisa Tetrault, who showed how suffragists crafted memory for political purpose, and Julie Des Jardins, who studied the remembrance of organized feminism. This posits that

Story of the Woman's Party ought neither to be discarded nor used uncritically: It needs to be analysed as the (re)construction of a woman's perspective and discourse on history and women's experience.

- 5 Before delving into an in-depth analysis of *Story of the Woman's Party*, I will briefly discuss the influence of this work. I will then examine the context in which *Story of the Woman's Party* was written and published, the way it portrays history and Irwin's ambiguous position as a historian. The last part will go beyond the more or less anecdotal facts to provide an analysis of what Irwin is actually saying about the suffrage struggle and how she provides an ambiguous discourse, between empowerment and allegiance.

The Influence of *The Story of the Woman's Party*

- 6 *Story of the Woman's Party* has been an influential source on the representation of the history of the NWP. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, historians expressed a renewed interest in the history of woman suffrage. For example, throughout her 1972–1973 interviews with Alice Paul for the *Oral History Project* at the University of Berkeley, the interviewer Amelia Fry uses Irwin's account as one of her main sources of information. Amelia Fry does a very thorough work of checking facts (65) and she discusses the accuracy of Irwin's account with Alice Paul.^[3] In the introduction to her interview, Fry explains that she has tried to gain access to Paul's papers and other materials at the NWP headquarters' library, but that her request has been declined (iv). The introduction to the whole oral history project also mentions that there were negotiations with the NWP to make the entire *Suffragist* collection available to scholars everywhere (11). Access to some of the NWP's archival material was difficult at the time. In addition, scholars were faced with an unprocessed collection comprising 200,000 items at the Library of Congress. This changed only when between 1979 and 1984, the NWP had its papers processed by the Microfilm Corporation of America. As a consequence, Irwin's account was not used as a secondary source, but as a valuable primary one, or as a basis for further research. I have myself read this book as a researcher, quoted it at length, and enjoyed its exhilarating account of women's struggle for the right to vote. It has been influential in my own understanding of the suffrage movement, but it is equally necessary to deconstruct it.
- 7 Historians have stressed the limitations of Irwin's depiction of the suffrage struggle, while at the same time reproducing, whether consciously or not, some of its discourse. Especially in its portrayal of NWP leader Alice Paul the legacy of Irwin's work has been most enduring (Zahniser and Fry 322). Irwin's representation of Alice Paul is strongly idealised, as illustrated by the following account referring to the December 16, 1915, suffrage hearing before the Judiciary Committee: "it had just dawned on [the Democratic members of the Committee] that the pale, delicate, slender slip of a girl in a gown of violet silk and a long Quakerish white fichu was the power behind all this agitation, that redoubtable Alice Paul who had waged the campaign of 1914 against them" (*SWP* 119). Alice Paul is compared to Theodore Roosevelt (26) and understands political strategy like no one else (29).

Irwin describes how NWP members' relationship to Alice Paul is one of piety, faith, and devotion, a relationship that she herself reproduces by constantly praising Paul. Among contemporary scholars who perpetuate this image, historian Christine Lunardini describes Paul as "idolised and idealised by her suffrage followers," but she also claims that "Paul became the dynamic that propelled American suffragism to its successful end" (9), singling out her influence. Arguably, some of Irwin's definite oversimplifications have had a long-lasting legacy and have tended to obscure a more complex picture of the suffrage movement, especially since, both as an historian and an activist, Irwin provides the NWP's sole perspective on history.

Irwin's Monument to the Cause

- 8 From the very beginning, the writing and publication of *Story of the Woman's Party* were part of a political endeavor to give meaning to events according to women's perspective. Furthermore, it aimed at doing "full justice to the people who have worked in this movement" (Irwin to Paul, 2 Nov. 1920) and celebrating activists' dedication. The account is Irwin's monument to the cause: Commemorating persons and events, praising the dead, it is a written tribute erecting white women's history, a historiographic pillar, a shrine and a record. Irwin expresses her commitment to the organisation by writing its history, which is described by Alice Paul as "a wonderful gift" (Paul to Irwin, 9 Dec. 1920). In an interview conducted by her husband, Irwin admits that she simply wrote *Story of the Woman's Party* because Alice Paul had asked her to (Paul "An Interview"). Humorous as it is, the comment points to the close connection between the writing itself and dedication to the NWP's cause.
- 9 The very crafting and writing of the book reveal a specific historiographic practice, at the crossroads between feminism and activism. It was a collective enterprise, which resulted in a polyphonic form. In a letter to Alice Paul, Irwin called it "*our* book" (Irwin to Paul, 23 Dec. 1920). Indeed, the abundant correspondence between Irwin and the members of the NWP exposes the conception and writing of *Story of the Woman's Party*. After interviewing women in Washington and gathering material, Irwin started writing alone during a trip to Paris, but she worked with Maud Younger, Anita Pollitzer, and other members who also wrote parts of the manuscript, commented upon it, transcribed, proofread, and corrected it, even though Irwin did the bulk of the work (Irwin to Paul, October 27, 1920; Paul to Flanagan, 2 Nov. 1920; Paul to Irwin, 2 Nov. 1920). As male historians typically profited from the support system of a household, Irwin benefited from a system of assistance provided by the NWP, as she puts it in this letter crediting Alice Paul:

I cant [sic] tell you how much you helped me during my stay at Headquarters and how grateful I am to you. You could not have possibly have [sic] done more or done the enormous amount you did in a more immediate, quiet and nerve-soothing way. Working with you was a Paradise of calm and quiet, explicit expression, instant help and constant appreciation. Your criticisms—or suggestions rather—were so few and so simple compared with what I expected to get that I scarcely feel that you criticised at all. (Irwin to Paul, 5 Dec. 1920)

Irwin goes on to thank all the women in the staff who helped her:

I cant [sic] tell you how helpful the girls were—Miss Wold, Miss Kalb—Miss Hogden, Miss Lose and all the file of night stenographers [...]. When it comes to Anita Pollitzer—well of course I never could have finished the book if it hadn't been for Anita—she carries about with her some elixir of vitalising energy. Catherine Flanagan too who read the whole thing at Scituate and gave me much valuable enriching color. (Irwin to Paul, 5 Dec. 1920)

- 10 Irwin mostly used NWP sources, such as the newspaper the *Suffragist* and material prepared by the organisation for her. She also quotes other news sources, such as *McCall's Magazine* or the *Washington Times* as well as works published by suffragists, for example, *Maud Younger's* article "Revelations of a Woman Lobbyist" or Doris Stevens's *Jailed for Freedom*. Irwin's account offers a wealth of material as she gathered many different sources, an endeavor which evokes the popular 19th-century practice of scrapbooking, which consists of collecting and reorganising different sources to save and file information in order to constitute one's memory and history thanks to personal, "homemade" archives (Garvey 4, 20). For example, the second chapter opens with a poem, and is followed by interviews and excerpts from magazines. *Story of the Woman's Party* is a polyphonic piece and a repository of material culture. One striking example lies in the reproduction of banners used for picketing the White House, which are replicated on the page in capital letters (204). Irwin also directly asked the leaders of the NWP a "bevy of questions," who had to "look up facts, or to consider carefully [their] statement" (Wold to Irwin, 28 Oct. 1920). Irwin's history is thus the official voice of the organisation, as leaders subsequently corrected some of her accounts when they were deemed not "quite satisfactory" (Wold to Irwin, 30 Oct. 1920).
- 11 The publication of *Story of the Woman's Party* was scheduled in time for the celebration of *Susan B. Anthony's* 101st birthday in Washington on February 15, 1921, thus framing its reception within a larger perspective on women's history. The events organized that week included the dedication in the Capitol of *Adelaide Johnson's marble sculpture* representing Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott entitled "Portrait Monument" (Weber), a suffrage exhibit to be presented and permanently archived at the Smithsonian Institution, and the convention of the NWP. Inez Irwin was scheduled to speak about her book on the first morning of the convention, February 16, and listed in the program as the

historian of the NWP (Paul to Irwin, December 24, 1920). This was a very crucial moment for the organisation, as its future depended on the success of the convention. Alice Paul indeed explained to Irwin that the purpose of the convention was to determine whether the NWP should disband or take up a new agenda. Furthermore, as revealed by records of the NWP and the correspondence between activists, the organisation was on the verge of financial collapse, as campaigning for the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment had drained its resources. In this tense context, the publication of Irwin's account served many purposes: It would record the official history of the NWP, celebrate women's achievements, and by advertising the success of the organisation, rekindle women's fighting spirit. It could also be expected to bring some revenue by motivating women to join and pay membership dues to the organisation. The upcoming publication of the book was reported in newspapers, and the tone used by journalists is a reminder of the suffragists' dramatic actions undertaken in the 1910s. For example, the *New York Tribune* printed:

The volume will be an authoritative account of the fight for the Constitutional amendment, with much inside history showing the women as past masters of political strategy. It contains character sketches of the leading women in the movement and is profusely illustrated from photographs. ("How the Vote" A71)

- 12 This description of the account as "authoritative" highlights the construction of Irwin's legitimacy as observer, participant, and historian. Women's centrality in the account is not just a commentary on the importance of aesthetics in the movement and their role as new political strategies (Southard), but also a reference to Irwin as a witness to these events. Irwin's legitimacy is construed by her being an expert on the topic who has the power to command the representation of the suffrage struggle with convincing force. But the notion of authority also confirms that Irwin's account was intended to become the sole reference on the suffrage fight, pointing to the displacement of suffragists' conflicts over political strategies and gender ideology into the field of historiography.

Irwin as an Activist-Historian

- 13 In this specific context, the "spirit of sympathy in the narration" (Rohe, "Achieving" 255) shows Inez Irwin's political and emotional commitment to the cause and the organization she joined, the NWP. This commitment fostered the writing of the book, its reception, and its use as an historical source. It determined the cross between militancy and historical practice, and as it was central to Irwin's life, it made her both an emancipated subject and an activist author. As she later recalled in her unpublished autobiography "Adventures of Yesterday":

This struggle, which engaged all my youth and much of my maturity, is a part of my life on which I look back with a sense of satisfaction, so soul-warming that I find no adjective to describe it. What women I met! What fights I joined! How many speeches I made! How many words I wrote! But best of all—what women I met! How I pity any generation of women who cannot know that satisfaction! (qtd. in Trigg 57)

- 14 This quotation highlights a process of continuity, an intimate connection between writing and activism. It also underlines how central relationships between women were, both for Irwin herself (as exemplified through her lifelong friendship with Maud Wood Park, whom she had met at Radcliffe) and within the political struggle. Irwin's partisanship is self-evident and central to her historical project, as she is intent on giving the NWP's side of the story. Her tone is very enthusiastic and she constantly praises the militants' triumphal actions. Laudatory terms and adjectives abound throughout the book. *Story of the Woman's Party* is an attempt at celebrating and inspiring women members of the NWP and crafting canonical stories thanks to "picturesque" anecdotes. This adjective saturates Irwin's account, to describe events, actions, and people: a Chicago reception is "unusually picturesque" (SWP 113), a parade is characterised by "two picturesque features" (116), and Maud Younger is described as "one of the most picturesque of the many picturesque figures among the native daughters of California" (106). The power of these stories lies in their enthusiasm, their symbolism and their capacity to be reproduced and told.
- 15 In the book itself, Irwin shapes the validity of her account by engaging the reader in a relationship based on transparency and dialogue. Irwin is an omnipresent voice that comments, repeats, addresses the readers, and also influences their comprehension. Her work possesses a strong self-reflexive and meta-textual quality, by offering a running commentary on itself as a text, a discourse, and a representation of historical events, as illustrated by the following excerpts: "There is only space for glimpses of this picturesque single pilgrimage" (114); "Before going on with the work for 1916, it is perhaps expedient to mention here one of two interesting events" (124); "Here, perhaps, is the place to tell of a curious incident that happened during Alice Paul's jail term. For this to strike the reader with the force it deserves, he must remember" (261). Irwin's conversational tone is intentional in that it engages the reader (266), and implies two elements: First, she describes history as a constructed, organised discursive process resulting from choices. Second, she views the reader as an ally or supporter of the cause. Furthermore, Irwin presents events in a way that makes the reader sympathise with the suffragists. For instance, she devotes multiple pages to women's campaign efforts, to sum up in one sentence the government's inaction in counterpoint, which fosters an effect of frustration and waste (117).

Making Women the Center of History

- 16 By simplifying forms of causality, Irwin justifies strategic choices and makes women the driving force of history. Recalling the demonstration to the Capitol on

May 9, 1914, which included “a mass-meeting at the Belasco Theatre,” she comments on its impact: “The effect of this lengthened—and therefore accumulative—nation-wide demonstration was *immediately* felt at the Capitol” (*SWP* 68, emphasis mine). As the *New York Times* review noticed, “It is generally supposed that the suffrage movement passed from success to success, with, of course, occasional drawbacks and intermissions” (Thompson). Therefore, the book asserts determinism and inevitability: Victory is certain, the events follow one another at a rapid pace. Furthermore, the actions undertaken by the NWP are constantly presented as unique: “Perhaps at no time in the history of the world has there ever been projected a demonstration so full of a beautiful symbolism,” Irwin comments (*SWP* 401). Irwin’s tone and style mirror this exceptionalism through the constant use of superlatives, as when the campaigns are “the biggest, the most important” (177). According to Irwin, women are driving the history of suffrage: actions and people, rather than mere ideas, form the dynamics of history.

- 17 This vision is problematic as it minimizes the legacy of the 19th-century women’s movement (except for the towering figure of Susan B. Anthony) and enhances presentism. The representation of NWP militants as pioneers comes to symbolize this tendency, as if they were trailblazers, and not the heirs of a preexisting movement. The account frames the success of the suffrage movement within a teleological understanding of history as being the march of progress and inevitable achievement of American democracy. It tells of the triumph of suffrage in a progressive, linear way, but it also reverses political roles. From the margins, the women become the central protagonists, to the point that the male politicians end up following their actions. For example, Irwin writes of the August 1916 NWP convention: “In Washington, Senators and Representatives read avidly the newspaper accounts of this convention” (*SWP* 175). Some passages read as theatrical scenes and are striking for their depiction of men looking at women and being completely subjugated or surprised. As if women could see themselves through men’s eyes thanks to a complex web of perspectives. This draws attention to the female bodies in the construction of politics and the nation, a process that becomes part and parcel of the suffragists’ political strategy (“to keep people watching the suffragists,” 32). The Congressional Union (CU) and later the NWP are the key agents of change and innovation.

A Fragmentary History

- 18 Irwin downplays dissent and abides by a tacit rule: The complex reasons for the split between the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the CU are summed up in one paragraph (*SWP* 48–49).^[4] She minimizes actual political conflict with other women’s organisations, following Paul’s mantra to waste “no time on side issues, on petty hostilities, on rivalries with other organisations” (28). However diligent and meticulous Irwin was, she lacked the time and resources to write what would have been a more complete account: Time was pressing, and Irwin also had to earn a living by publishing other works. Therefore, the sources of some quotations remain unknown, there are lacunae, approximations, and information missing. Irwin includes private conversations,

confessions among politicians, without revealing her sources (183). Since she could not delay the proofs and did not get clear answers on some of her questions, she included sentences that were “vague and general enough to mean nothing or anything” (Irwin to Paul, undated). Alice Paul forbade that new material be brought to Irwin, as there was no time to include it given that Irwin had to send the manuscript to her editor by the beginning of December 1920, so that it would be published before February 15th, 1921. In her correspondence, Irwin expressed her frustration at not being able to develop some of her points, which translated in her account as a commentary on the impossibility for further development: “It is a poignant regret to the present author that she cannot go further into conditions at the district jail and at Occoquan in regard to the other prisoners there. But that is another story and must be told by those whose work is penal investigation” (*SWP* 299). Irwin had already gone over by 50,000 words and was relieved Harcourt did not ask her to shorten her account (Irwin to Paul, December 5, 1920). In terms of methodology, Irwin asserts some facts without demonstrating them, as when she states that the “defeat of Shafroth is universally ascribed to the Woman’s Party” (*SWP* 392).^[5]

- 19 While using this text as source, a scholar has to compare, verify, or fill in the gaps. The text bears the trace of tensions and even stresses them, for example when Irwin notes that Paul and Burns do not agree on where and when they met. Irwin allows activists’ voices and points of view to be heard. She is interested in how people experience history and talk about it, and in the psychology of historical protagonists. As a consequence, *Story of the Woman’s Party* contains a sum of general truths, which may lead to a loss of context and detail: Irwin is trying to assert political rules and an ethics of action according to which every action is necessary and makes sense in women’s perspective. Furthermore, in making the NWP the central force in history, Irwin sometimes fails to provide the reader with a wider context, which might suggest that the book was written for a readership familiar with the period and the movement (i.e. for a former activist or a reader of the 1920s). For example, when on February 3, 1913, the Democratic Caucus in the House of Representatives adopts a resolution claiming that suffrage is a state issue, Irwin does not put this decision in perspective to race and the Democratic stronghold in the South. This echoes the book’s focus on white women’s plight, which entails selective memory and a definitely white point of view on history and liberalism.

Mixing Genres

- 20 Newspaper reviewers presented Inez Irwin as “an analyst and portrayer of American womanhood in fiction” (“Women’s ‘Unrest’”). The fact that Irwin was a famous novelist influenced the reception of her work. In an advertisement announcing the publication of *Story of the Woman’s Party*, the book was described as “[t]he detailed and authorized story of how the Woman’s Party won the ballot. It is told by one of our leading novelists, who gives intimate character sketches of the actors in the drama” (“New Books”). The very last term echoes the theatricality of the work and points to the ambiguity of its genre: is it a novel, a biography, a

documentary? Is it literature or history? The lives of the movement's protagonists are narrated as though they were fictional, which was not lost on contemporaneous readers: Indeed in the November 1921 edition of the literary magazine *Bookman*, Alice Rohe^[6] noted in her review of *Story of the Woman's Party* how Irwin had found in Alice Paul the perfect heroic figure:

Moreover, the novelist's art has made her work not simply the history of events but of living human beings, with one vivid figure dominating the whole.

In Alice Paul, founder of the Woman's Party, the writer had a heroine whose accomplishments and experiences offer all the elements of romance, danger, obstacles overcome, and achievements. ("Achieving" 255)

The militants' devotion to their leader Alice Paul is at once narrated in the account and reproduced by Irwin's tone and style. The book is an ode to Alice Paul, as illustrated by the opening description, which is reminiscent of a blazon:

Alice Paul is a slender, frail-looking young woman, delicately colored and delicately made. The head, the neck, the long slim arms and the little hands look as though they were cut out of alabaster. The dense shadowy hair, scooping with deeper accessions of shadow into great waves, dipping low on her forehead and massing into a great dusky bunch in her neck, might be carved from bronze. It looks too heavy for her head. (*SWP* 14)

²¹ Various reviews pointed out the mixing of genres. In the *New York Times*, the reviewer ponders on the genre of the book:

The word "story" is a little overdone, and some of the "stories" are flatfooted annals, or histories at best. But this moves with the swing of a story: it might be a novel. Yet Mrs. Irwin does not make the mistake of trying to write it as if it were a novel. Perhaps it might be truer to say that she writes history, only she writes it with all the interest of an excellently interesting novel.
(Thompson)

The reviewer adds that the book also includes a biography, that of Alice Paul. Alice Paul is viewed as a literary character, but she is also hailed for her deep understanding of political issues. Amy Hewes praises the "brilliant statesmanship of the young Quakeress" (448). In *Story of the Woman's Party*, Irwin draws the portraits of iconic women, charismatic leadership, and organised, efficient bureaucracy. Her writing style celebrates women's achievements by telling picaresque adventures and mixing genres. In her review, Alice Rohe describes *Story of the Woman's Party* as "ultra-feminist" ("Says Women"), underlining Irwin's commitment to women's rights, which gives the impression that the account is in fact a political manifesto.

An Emancipation Manual: The Political and Militant Scope of the Book

- ²² *Story of the Woman's Party* tells the history of women's suffering for their political rights. At the same time, it is also a guidebook for women's emancipation. Freedom is the necessary condition for commitment to the cause, and it is also portrayed as the ultimate goal of political action. The postulation of progress, of new achievements in women's lives, is part and parcel of Irwin's historical endeavors. In fact, Irwin proselytises to recruit new followers.
- ²³ Two quotations preface the book: "But with such women consecrating their lives, failure is impossible" and "Most of those who worked with me in the early years have gone. I am here for a little time only and my place will be filled as theirs was filled. The fight must not cease; you must see that it does not stop." These quotes, both by Susan B. Anthony, serve to place the NWP as the legitimate heir to the matriarch's legacy, while showing that the struggle must live on. Indeed, *Story of the Woman's Party* was published at a key moment when the future of the women's rights movement seemed uncertain. Whereas some women hoped to pursue the feminist struggle to obtain full equality with men, others, like Lucy Burns, felt exhausted and refused to fight anymore (Lunardini 150–54). Irwin's work is a motivational book intended to keep women involved: The struggle is definitely not over, and Anthony's words are not to be read simply as a comment on the time when she said them at the beginning of the 20th century, nor merely as an echo of the NWP's work in the 1910s, but as a program for the 1920s. What drove Irwin to write her book was not a celebration of the victory of the Nineteenth Amendment, which was uncertain at the time she started her work, but it was the fear that certain activists would cease their involvement in women's causes. This can explain what seems like a paradoxical conception of time and memory: the past is viewed as past, but is also postulated as a possibility of repetition. Thus, this book is addressed to new generations of women, and its reading is part of political training.

A Feminist Education

- ²⁴ Militants' political experience, their choice of spectacular and dramatic actions, their questioning of social and cultural norms of women's expected roles, their arrests, their trials are depicted as extravagant and exciting adventures that help construct a feminist culture. Filled with feminist heroines struggling against masculine oppression, suffrage history is a hagiographic history, telling the stories of faultless martyrs and saints.^[7] Alice Paul is thus described as "the martyr-type, who dies for a principle" (*SWP* 292). This echoes the idea of women's moral superiority, an argument suffragists constantly put forward to justify women's participation in politics. But hagiography might also be considered as the only possibility for women to be included in national history. The construction of "ready-made" icons for quick historical consumption and circulation is indeed a characteristic approach of popular history written by nonprofessional historians. Furthermore, there is a structural issue connected to activism, as it is impossible to tell the story of all the participants in a movement. When Irwin mentions the work of organisers, she writes: "Their story is one of those sealed chapters in the history of feminism, the whole of which will never be known" (126) and again "How hard,

and how long, and how intensively these girl organisers worked will never be known because, in the very nature of things, there could be no adequate record of their efforts” (177).

- 25 The book presents heroines who might be appealing to younger generations: The NWP militant is young (very often described as a “girl”),^[8] beautiful, an idealist rebel, able to cope with police brutality and hunger-strike in prison. Sports and athletics, for example, are a central theme of the book: Paul is said to have devoted herself to athletics and been able to climb fences, whereas Lucy Burns is described as “rounded and muscular” (*SWP* 11, 16).^[9] Suffragists stay up all night dancing, travel the next day to deliver speeches in many different towns, and spend all day in the cold at the White House’s gates; their bodies are constantly on the move and occupy space; whereas by opposition the militants of the allegedly more moderate NAWSA are presented as conservative matrons, frozen in time and space.^[10] Inez Milholland is the figure embodying all these features of youth, beauty, and vigor. When she died for the cause on a speaking tour in the West, suffragists organised the first ever ceremony for a woman in Statuary Hall in the Capitol on Christmas Day 1916. She became an icon, a martyr, a literary heroine representing modern womanhood. Inez Milholland’s idolisation underlies a policy of recruitment and a politics of memory.
- 26 The tone and style of *Story of the Woman’s Party* also contribute to a favorable representation of women’s experience within the movement: The account is often funny and derides men in positions of power, making them seem ridiculous by deconstructing their authority. The account is exhilarating and exciting, describing suffragists’ dramatic adventures with an abundance of detail. Politics is presented as thrilling, full of suspense, with constantly new developments. Irwin’s enthusiasm is emphasised in the different book reviews, which use the adjective “colorful” to describe her flamboyant style. Amy Hewes also praises Irwin’s appreciation for “the *camaraderie* which characterised the work of the groups of women” (449). Indeed, activism brings solidarity, friendship, and support. Irwin’s book also helps historians establish a cartography of women’s networks, as she often gives lists of activists, which her way of paying tribute to all of them. Even though Paul is depicted as a demanding leader, she is also benevolent and pushes women to gain confidence in themselves: “She believed we could do it and so she made us believe it” (*SWP* 23). The headquarters in Washington, described as “gay, interested and interesting,” intellectually and politically stimulating, are a safe space for women (126). Depicted as a home for all the activists, it is a place where women find solace, companionship, and are empowered. Irwin also celebrates women’s many talents. She highlights women’s wit and their rhetorical aptitudes, as illustrated in the following words by Anne Martin, “We do not ask you here to tell us what we can do for your Parties, but what your Parties can do for us” (161). The cartoonist Nina Allender is praised as a “woman speaking to women, about women, in the language of women” (48). Irwin also shows how important relationships between women are and she deconstructs clichés about how women relate to each other: They do not necessarily gossip or waste time on small talk and persiflage (20). As Alice Paul asserts, “Our fight is not against women” (127).

²⁷ *Story of the National Woman's Party* celebrates women's accomplishments in an exhilarating tone, yet it also points to the violence women are getting exposed to while participating in politics in a patriarchal society. Some of the anecdotes depict women's feelings of resentment and humiliation. For instance, Irwin recounts an episode when a Senator tells Maud Younger that everything would be fine if only women would stop nagging and Younger explains that she mustered all of her courage so as not to cry (355). Certain episodes allude to the threat of sexual violence, especially while the suffragists were imprisoned. Some women report men breaking into their cell while they were asleep (272, 279). For example, Mrs. Henry Butterworth explains that when she was arrested, she was placed in an area of the jail where there were only men: "They told her she was alone with the men, and that they could do what they pleased with her" (283). Patriarchal patterns of violence towards women are thus exposed. For instance, the pickets are attacked by boys, which shows how violence toward women is normalized and transmitted to younger generations (386). Irwin does not necessarily comment, theorize, or analyze these episodes, but they serve as illustrations of the way patriarchy functions and the dangers to which women who try to debunk it are exposed. But one thing that is made clear: If women do not take their destiny into their own hands, nothing happens. The relationship with Woodrow Wilson epitomises this, as "the President's action during the six years' siege was the attitude of all politicians. That is to say, for a long time he made general statements of a vaguely encouraging nature to the Suffragists, but for a long time he actually did nothing" (33). Thus, the account presents two coexisting dialectic forces in history: one that is linear and progressive, another one that is circular, repetitive, and reactionary.

²⁸ Irwin's account of the suffrage fight also serves a pedagogical function: It teaches women how to organise, as it gives a detailed account of how women built organizations and planned campaigns. It even explains militant and political vocabulary (11, 127). This book is about women's individual and collective empowerment through organising. That is why solidarity is central. Irwin's account describes feminist education, both for men and women. In fact, what drives her understanding of history and her narrative of the suffrage struggle is the concept of conversion. Stories of conversion abound, such as the following, told by an activist:

"I shall watch it, but it will not mean anything to me," said a visitor to me on Saturday, but that night she said: "I leaned out of my window, and held my screen up with one hand, and let the sun beat in my face for the forty minutes that you were passing, and I wept. To think of your being part of it—and caring like that—and the men there on the sidewalk holding back, *by what right, what you ask!*" (68)

Another story is related as follows:

That day, a newly elected Congressman drove about Washington, showing the city to his wife. He had always been a Suffragist. She had always been an anti-Suffragist. The sudden sight of the thousand women marching in the rain not only converted her, but it produced such an effect on her she burst into tears. (212)

- 29 Thanks to a complex interplay of mirror-effects, echoes, and *mise en abyme*, the reader is also expected to convert through mimetics. Suffragism becomes a religion: The picket line is described by a congressman as “religious” (221), the cause is “a crusade” (222). In narrating these histories of conversion, the book highlights the force of the NWP’s political strategies and choices. It shows the success of the party’s rhetoric of persuasion, which, interestingly enough, is not based on a 19th-century legacy of debate or discussion, but on action. The rhetoric of persuasion is no longer rational, but visual and emotional; it is based on demonstrations, on spectacles, and on embodying ideas. For Irwin and her feminist acolytes, there is no need for rhetorical or logical predication.
- 30 *Story of the Woman’s Party* was used to galvanise potential activists, and it is both a source of inspiration and a guide for action. The book has a prescriptive aim and forms the basis for a militant feminist library: It aims at raising women’s consciousness, forming their political culture, and fostering activism, but first and foremost, it anticipates its own circulation. The conclusion is an ode to the ideal of camaraderie, to freedom, to the faces turned to the next morning. The book postulates a better future for women.

The Power of Story-Telling

- 31 *Story of the Woman’s Party* is a politically and socially engaged work which serves many functions: remembering people and events, giving a voice to women and telling history from their point of view, providing political analysis on women’s terms, crafting, preserving, and transmitting ready-made memories and anecdotes, promoting feminism. This is a work of empowerment, celebrating female political icons to encourage readers to emancipate, and calling on them to join the movement. As such, it is an exhilarating account of women’s work in the struggle for the right to vote, telling it from activists’ perspective and in their own voices. It shows that what happened to women, and the way they experienced it, matters. It also highlights that narrating and sharing women’s stories is in itself part and parcel of the process of empowerment.
- 32 In this respect, the history of publication of different editions of Irwin’s work is relevant: in addition to the original *Story of the Woman’s Party* (New York: Harcourt, 1921), other editions were published, such as *Up Hill with Banners Flying* (Penobscott: Traversity, 1964) or *Story of Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party* (Fairfax: Denlinger’s, 1977), published after Alice Paul’s death in July 1977. The slight shifts or changes in the title and the dates of publication point to a reactivation of collective memory in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, the cover of the 1977 edition includes pictures of women marching for ERA down Pennsylvania Avenue and celebrating the signing by President Carter of a

proclamation designating August 26 as Women's Equality Day. The caption of one of these pictures on the back cover reads: "The modern feminists, dressed in white, completed a women's suffrage parade halted in 1913 by violence." These elements underline the echoes and the continuity between the 1910s and the 1970s movements.

33 However, Irwin's work also highlights the tensions over authority and control. Issues of power and the struggle to claim a central role within the public sphere have been transformed into an epistemological issue—a contest for memory and narrative. Controlling the stories and the history of suffrage means controlling the future of women's political movements. Indeed, the 'idealised' version of the suffrage struggle has had a long-lasting influence. For instance, the triumphalist view of the Nineteenth Amendment has framed women's struggle within a narrative of progress, which eclipses other powerful dynamics. That is why the writing of these histories has to be approached in their context of production. Further historiographic exploration of the influence of Irwin and the NWP's representation of its own history is needed, as problematic and painstaking a task as it may appear.

Read [Hélène Quanquin's Response](#) to "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Woman Suffrage History."

Notes

[1] The author wishes to thank the French Association for American Studies (AFEAS) and the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress for funding archival research that has been crucial for the completion of this piece.

[2] Amy Hewes (1877–1970) was a professor of economics and sociology at Mount Holyoke. She received her PhD from the University of Chicago in 1903. Her research focused on working conditions, labor, social policies, and women in the public sphere. She investigated women's working conditions in munitions plant in Bridgeport during World War One.

[3] Fry and Paul discuss whether Crystal Eastman was in the early committee; Fry underlines that she had gathered that information from Irwin, but says it might be wrong, and Paul answers that it might be true! In a 1974 interview, an 89-year old Alice Paul denies the truthfulness of some of Irwin's anecdotes (see Paul "[I Was Arrested](#)").

[4] Irwin makes some cutting remarks, though. When she relates Woodrow Wilson's speech at the 1916 NAWSA Convention, she simply comments: "This speech is, of course, often exquisitely phrased. However, it promised nothing. The Woman's Party was not deceived by it" (*SWP* 174). These remarks imply that the NAWSA was incapable of reading between political lines, as opposed to the NWP.

[5] The Shafroth-Palmer suffrage amendment would have required states to hold referendum on woman suffrage if more than 8 percent of the legal voters in a state requested such a vote. It was one of the reasons for the split between the NAWSA

and the group that would become the NWP.

[6] Alice Rohe (1876-1957) was a journalist and a photographer. She was the first woman to head an important American press bureau abroad in Italy during the Great War. She wrote for many newspapers and magazines, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Evening World*, *National Geographic*, and *Cosmopolitan*. She was a champion of women's rights and suffrage in the 1910s.

[7] In her preface to her account of the NWP's struggle for the vote, Doris Stevens underlines that the campaign for suffrage can be told as "a tragic and harrowing tale of martyrdom" (vii).

[8] "And perhaps it is one of the chief glories of the Woman's Party that these organizers came to them younger and younger, until at the end they were fresh, beautiful girls in their teens and early twenties" (*SWP* 126).

[9] Inez Irwin specifically asked Alice Paul if she had been a tennis champion, to which Alice Paul replied that she had never been a champion, but had won third place in a tournament at Swarthmore; she added that she was a member of the basketball and hockey teams (Alice Paul to Inez Irwin, November 2, 1920).

[10] This highly problematic representation has had a lasting influence on the perception of the movement. The NWP is described as youthful and innovative, whereas the NAWSA appears as more conservative. There might be a generational conflict underneath the glaze of ideology; however the NWP did include older members, and the NAWSA's members were not all old and conservative. This aspect should be further analyzed as the result of a construction and a discourse, not necessarily as historical accuracy. Furthermore, it does bring to the fore the relations between generations of activists, a question that remains central for feminism today.

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