



The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage, and Scandal in the Gilded Age

Myra MacPherson

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A fresh look at the life and times of Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, two sisters whose radical views on sex, love, politics, and business threatened the white male power structure of the nineteenth century and shocked the world. Here award-winning author Myra MacPherson deconstructs and lays bare the manners and mores of Victorian America, remarkably illuminating the struggle for equality that women are still fighting today.

Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee "Tennie" Claflin—the most fascinating and scandalous sisters in American history—were unequaled for their vastly avant-garde crusade for women's fiscal, political, and sexual independence. They escaped a tawdry childhood to become rich and famous, achieving a stunning list of firsts. In 1870 they became the first women to open a brokerage firm, not to be repeated for nearly a century. Amid high gossip that he was Tennessee's lover, the richest man in America, fabled tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt, bankrolled the sisters. As beautiful as they were audacious, the sisters drew a crowd of more than two thousand Wall Street bankers on opening day. A half century before women could vote, Victoria used her Wall Street fame to become the first woman to run for president, choosing former slave Frederick Douglass as her running mate. She was also the first woman to address a United States congressional committee. Tennessee ran for Congress and shocked the world by becoming the honorary colonel of a black regiment.

They were the first female publishers of a radical weekly, and the first to print Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto in America. As free lovers they railed against Victorian hypocrisy and exposed the alleged adultery of Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous preacher in America, igniting the "Trial of the Century" that rivaled the Civil War for media coverage. Eventually banished from the women's movement while imprisoned for allegedly sending "obscenity" through the mail, the sisters sashayed to London and married two of the richest men in England, dining with royalty while pushing for women's rights well into the twentieth century. Vividly telling their story, Myra MacPherson brings these inspiring and outrageous sisters brilliantly to life.

"If the subject of Gilded Age women brings to mind buccaneers in gently rustling hoop skirts rather than feminist firebrands, Myra MacPherson's fascinating dual biography...may go a long way in changing that."
—Vogue.com

"In this sweeping, engaging new biography, Myra MacPherson chronicles lives that intersected with nearly all of the era's great themes and famous figures."
—Boston Globe

"[In] MacPherson's enchanting dual biography...the epilogue hammers home that even in 2014 men use women's bodies as political bargaining chips."
—The Washington Post

"A lively account of the unlikely lives of the two most symbiotic and scandalous sisters in American History."
—The New Yorker

""MacPherson crusades' for 19th century feminists."

—Vanity Fair

"Are these sisters the most scandalous feminists of all time? MacPherson's new book is about two sisters in the late 1800's but couldn't be more timely."

—Metro

"MacPherson, an award-winning journalist, takes a theatrical approach to these radical proceedings. She provides a cast of characters and unfolds the sisters' story over the course of five irresistible 'acts.' This is a grand tale presented on a grand scale."

—Bookpage

"MacPherson aims her wit and very sharp pen at a side of the suffrage movement rarely seen in history books, epitomized by these two real sisters...she takes us on a raucous romp through secret trysts, their self-published weekly advocating free speech and free love, sensational trials, fortune-telling, Spiritualism and brushes with the most powerful capitalists and revolutionaries of the time. Along the way the sisters set the suffrage movement on fire--albeit briefly--with their modern ideas, fiery rhetoric and passion for women's rights."

—Los Angeles Daily Journal

"Sensational...MacPherson gives a detailed portrait of the roller-coaster, rags-to-riches lives of two backwoods country girls, who, seeking to better their own situation, hoped to do the same for women everywhere..."

—Booklist

""Delightful...I am going to read it again! It is that good. Thanks to 'Vicky and Tennie' for making history-changing so darn interesting."

—BookReporter

"Ordinarily, one would look to the fiction of Twain or Dickens to find a nineteenth-century tale to match the real-life saga of the sisters Claflin-Woodhull. Happily, Myra MacPherson has rediscovered these proto-feminists. Their rebellion against Victorian sexual enslavement and the power of white males captivated and infuriated their contemporaries for good reason, and left a mark that resonates today."

—Carl Bernstein, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author of *A Woman in Charge: The Life of Hillary Rodham Clinton*, and coauthor of *All the President's Men* (with Bob Woodward)

"Victoria Woodhull is one of the great unsung characters of American history--a beauty, a radical activist, a con artist, and a true revolutionary who pushed every boundary and every button that the century offered. *THE SCARLET SISTERS* is a roller-coaster ride through American history that will amaze and delight readers."

—Debby Applegate, Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*

"*THE SCARLET SISTERS* has everything--from history and intrigue, to sex and money. Myra MacPherson has written this book with the care and professionalism of the great reporter she is but also with the wit, wisdom, and flair of the great novelist she definitely could be. A fabulous delight of a read."

—Jim Lehrer, former host of PBS NewsHour, playwright, and author of *Top Down: A Novel of the Kennedy Assassination*

"Read the epilogue first, to understand immediately why THE SCARLET SISTERS resonates so richly in today's political world. Myra MacPherson's rich understanding of the threads connecting these colorful pioneers to our contentious twenty-first century issues is wonderfully instructive."

—Lynn Sherr, author of *Failure Is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony in Her Own Words* and the forthcoming *Sally Ride: America's First Woman in Space*

"If the Scarlet Sisters hadn't existed, feminism would have had to invent them. Myra MacPherson writes the story of these fearless and path-breaking nineteenth-century radicals with her trademark energy and wit. This sisterhood is indeed powerful."

—Ellen Goodman, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and coauthor of *I Know Just What You Mean: The Power of Friendship in Women's Lives* (with Patricia O'Brien)

"Myra MacPherson's THE SCARLET SISTERS vividly and entertainingly brings to life a long lost chapter of American history that will surprise anyone who thinks that feminism is a twentieth century invention. It's both a great tale, and a great read."

—Jane Mayer, staff writer for the *New Yorker* and author of *The Dark Side*

"Myra MacPherson is a treasure among American historians. In [her] riveting, often uproarious chronicle, the Sisters' crusades against benighted convention were but the onset of a righteous firestorm that continues to arc into our times."

—Ron Powers, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, novelist, and author of *Mark Twain: A Life*

"Woodhull and Claflin deserve credit for crashing the glass front doors of Wall Street, Washington, and bedrooms across the country a century and a half ago. These too long neglected amazing pioneers of the Gilded Age are brought to life in Myra MacPherson's energetic, well researched, and enthralling book."

—Kenneth D. Ackerman, author of *The Gold Ring: Jim Fisk, Jay Gould, and Black Friday, 1869*

The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage, and Scandal in the Gilded Age Details

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Myra MacPherson

From Reader Review The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage, and Scandal in the Gilded Age for online ebook

Jamie Jones Hullinger says

So crazy that it is all true. These sisters were way ahead of their time. However it did lull a bit in the middle because the sisters clearly refused to learn from past mistakes. It is frustrating that they did not really stand for much of anything when one thinks about it. They were merely opportunists. Nonetheless I give them props for finding success the only way that a woman could at that time.

B. Barron says

I loved it. I was a little disappointed in their later lives, especially in Victoria; but overall they were a force of nature and ill behaved.

Just the way I like.

Tocotin says

Victoria Woodhull, aka “Mrs. Satan”, and her sister Tennie Claflin were fascinating and brilliant. I’m not American, and I’ve barely started reading about feminist history, so I didn’t know about either of these women – therefore, I’m very glad to have found and read this book. I was even more interested in Tennie than in her sister – Tennie Claflin was *the first and only American white woman to be elected colonel of a black regiment* . Only imagine!

They fought against hypocrisy, against classism, sexism, social injustice, and men. Although Victoria did have some unsavory views on race, they were not nearly as vicious as the majority of public opinion (when Tennie was made colonel of a black regiment, *The New York Times* ridiculed her mercilessly, using vile and racist language). They were also advocates of eugenics, but it is at least understandable given their personal history.

And here’s what is my biggest gripe – there was not enough about who Victoria and Tennie were, not as public figures, but as private persons. Most of the book is based on their battles with newspapers, law, and public opinion, and the majority of sources presented in the book come from newspaper polemics and biographies of the sisters written by their contemporaries. There are some letters, but they are cited only sparsely. I had no clear picture of the Claflin family, of the sisters’ lives, or of the brilliant marriages they somehow were able to make. I wanted particularly to know more about those – how did they meet their husbands? How did it all happen? I don’t mean I want to know salacious details, for example, I don’t really care what was the relationship between Tennie and Vanderbilt, or whether Tennie was trafficked by her family or not (it is very probable that she was) and then saved by Victoria and her husband. It’s that the whole picture felt somehow fragmented to me.

But all in all, an extremely interesting book.

Emmy says

Ugh...I just could not get through this book. In fact, I think I just skimmed 75% of it, because I had to read it for a book group, but just...couldn't.

I struggled a lot with the characters here. Basically everyone struck me as a terrible person, from Victoria and Tennie to respected members of the suffrage movement, including Susan B. Anthony (petty) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a racist). The only person I liked in this book was Frederick Douglass, and he was barely even there!

The biggest complaint I had was that I could not figure out the sisters. I don't know if they were supposed to be good or bad. Did they really believe in what they were espousing, or was this just another snake-oil show like they used to perform as children? After all, it seemed that they were constantly changing sides, moving from Vanderbilt to Marx, and free love to almost puritanical propriety.

I felt bad for them, especially towards the end, but I can't help but feel that they were probably responsible for much of what happened.

THE GROUP'S REVIEW:

The group generally enjoyed the topic, but felt that the book was poorly written and edited, and lacked direction. It was a fascinating story that would have been much better if it had been handled better. They were also impressed by how much they felt it relates to situations going on today. So, all in all, not a bad topic, but a mediocre book.

Nikki says

I found *The Scarlet Sisters* to be a highly interesting read. I do not recall ever having heard of the Claflin sisters prior to encountering this book, which I feel is rather a shame considering the ideas these two had. Victoria and Tennie were truly well ahead of their time, more than 150 years ahead easily. Many ideas they put forth about women's rights in particular are *still* being fought for today. This puts their forward thinking and courage in the spotlight but also highlights how ridiculously behind we are in the equality of genders. Overall an informative read, although at times I found it repetitive and unnecessarily long-winded. I, in large part, found the Beecher chapters to be the most dull, but only because not a lot was added to the story and I was dissatisfied with the result of the trial. Overall an interesting read, especially for those interested in feminism, women's rights and suffrage.

An obscure third party had nominated a woman, Victoria Woodhull, with the famed former slave Frederick Douglass as her running mate [in 1872]. Intro

Tennie stunned audiences when she said that women who married for money were "legalized prostitutes," no better, and in most cases ethically worse, than streetwalkers. The sisters championed sex education for adolescents, called for testing for sexual diseases in clients as well as prostitutes, and advocated for contraception [...] 144 years after they began electrifying the country, their ideas remain controversial. Intro

...mania of Spiritualism that transfixed the country from the 1850s through the 1870s. Spiritualists became national celebrities and claimed two million members in a country with a population (in 1855) of only twenty-seven million. Their number would grow, by some estimates, to four million. p15

Mary Todd Lincoln would later, in darkened White House parlors, beg mediums to contact her dead son, Willy. p16

In just twenty years, from the 1840s to the 1860s, machinery and other inventions transformed Manhattan from a nearly medieval hellhole of no sewers, open-hearth cooking, and outdoor privies into homes with running water, stoves, iceboxes, and central heating. p18

The concept of magnetic healing began in the 1770s, when the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer—whose name was the origin of the word mesmerized—articulated a "form of psychic healing that included both magnetic healing and hypnotism." p19

Before Vanderbilt gobbled up multiple railroads to combine them into one system, a passenger could make seventeen changes before getting from New York to Chicago. p32

Everyone in New York complained of gridlock, and accidents occurred regularly—200 horses died daily in traffic accidents... p42

The first L train (elevated steam locomotive) was not operational until 1871... p42

The sisters inflamed them with their frank language on everything from prostitution, sex (in or out of marriage), corruption on Wall Street, defense of the eight-hour workday, coed sex education, vegetarianism, and Spiritualism. p52

Willard Hotel, known to every politician as an unofficial branch of government. Grant contemptuously coined the term lobbyists after trying to run the gauntlet of favor-seekers who clogged the hotel's lobby from one end to the other. p60

An estimated twenty thousand prostitutes worked in New York City in 1868... p95

While other misogynists could well compete for the honor, the Victorian gynecologist was the woman's worst friend. p103

They castrated women who showed signs of neurosis or insanity, husbands being the judges of such conditions, with gynecologists concurring that hysterectomies would do the trick.

An opposite, if impermanent, solution for the purported female disease of "hysteria" called for doctors and midwives to massage the female genitalia manually, arousing a woman to "paroxysm." p103

By the 1870s, gynecologists had also begun "to practice surgical treatment of the psychological disorders of women," including "the excision of the clitoris (clitoridectomy) and female castration (removal of the ovaries) to cure 'insanity'." By far the most common of the two was the removal of ovaries, a surgical procedure that began in 1872. p104

The director of the American Medical Association and other leaders in the field approved and performed such surgeries as well as Sims, believing that "women's entire psychology was governed by her sex organs."

Another excuse for surgery was to cure "oversexed" women, which meant women who had confessed to masturbation. p105

An 1886 study gauged that 90 percent of sterile women were married to men who had had gonorrhea. p110

One 1901 study contended that an astounding eighty out of every one hundred men in New York had been infected at one time or another with gonorrhea, which was by then viewed as the most prevalent disease in the adult male population. An estimated 5 to 18 percent of all males have syphilitic infections. p110

Cocaine was also legal, and everywhere. Cocaine toothache drops for children were popular, required no prescription, and were sold in all drugstores. The rise in cocaine use began in 1850 and quickly snowballed. It was famously found in the original Coca-Cola recipe, and by the turn of the century it was being snorted, which led to serious nasal conditions. Opium, mercury, and lead-based medicines were used everywhere. Implementation of the Pure Food and Drug Act in January 1907, requiring disclosure of a medicine's contents, was the first attempt to control cocaine use. p110

Woodhull explained, "I never objected to the accumulation of wealth...but I always shall, until it is remedied, object to a certain few holding all the wealth, while the producing multitudes barely escape starvation. p139

The twenty-first century financial disaster eerily echoed the causes of the 1873 crash- ungoverned and rampant real estate speculation, easy mortgages and lending, and bank failures. Corruption at the top had caused credit to dry up and banks to go under. An epidemic of foreclosure followed, farms failed, factories closed, and thousands upon thousands of unemployed and homeless roamed the streets. p212

"Put a woman on trial for anything- it is considered as a legitimate part of the defense to make the most searching inquiry into her sexual morality, and the decision generally turns upon the proof advanced in this regard." These words are not a contemporary comment on the disparaging treatment of victims of domestic violence or rape- one of the reasons 54 percent of rapes go unreported today- but rather, Tennie Claflin speaking out in 1871. p313

Victoria and Tennessee grew up in an era of relaxed views on abortion. Not until their adulthood and the 1873 rise of Comstockery did abortion become a serious crime. p314

"...We are still the country that does the least for families." In fact, Schroeder said, the United States is one of only three countries, out of 177 nations, that do not mandate paid parental leave. The other two? Papua New Guinea and Swaziland. p316

More men than women have asked what seems to them to be the crucial question: were they [the sisters] prostitutes? As Tennie always said, look at the double standards. "You never hear a man called a prostitute...even the President of the United States [Grant?], a governor of a state and a pastor of the most popular church [Beecher], president of the most reliable bank, or of the grandest railroad corporation [Vanderbilt], may constantly practice all the debaucheries known to sensualism...and he, by virtue of his sex, stands protected and respected." When a woman is involved in a sexual situation "newspapers make it their special business to herald her shame...utterly forgetting that there was a man in the scrape." p320

May says

Before I heard of this book, Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennie Claflin weren't known to me. But reading about their lives and struggles, and their prescient cries for progressive social justice was thrilling.

MacPherson doesn't lack for subject matter, these two women were firecrackers. And I appreciated her focus on truth and mentioning other sources that used conjectures and hearsay as fact. When MacPherson conjectures about motive, or an incident that can't be cited in personal notes or a diary, she says so explicitly.

Victoria and Tennie had such a tumultuous life, campaigning for so many causes that they made friends and enemies with a wide variety of people. The only major criticism I have of MacPherson's writing is that her storytelling was a little unwieldy at times. I had trouble understanding the succession of some events because they involved so many people, or things that occurred years ago in the sisters' lives came back to bite them later. So I see how it would be hard to put everything together and come up with a coherent story, and I applaud MacPherson for her success, but at times I found it confusing. I think because the last non-fiction books I've read recently are by Erik Larson who is amazing at telling a story and evoking a mood that makes it seem like fiction but it is all true.

Finally, I really enjoyed the epilogue. Not many non-fiction authors today will write about their own opinion concerning their subject matter. But a woman's right to her own body is a battle we are still fighting. And writing about women who fought the same battle 150 years ago makes it absurd that it's still a contentious issue today. This type of balanced, honest, and forward-thinking biography about women who made history is what we need more of in our society.

Bruce says

This book is both enlightening and disheartening. Enlightening in its treatment of two women who were reviled by many of the men of the Gilded Age because of their beliefs and actions. Disheartening because it shows we have not come all that far in the treatment of women. Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennie Claflin were used by their parents in various criminal schemes and their family continued to be a thorn in their sides for the rest of their lives. Be that as it may, the sisters made a name for themselves, singularly and together, in their advocacy for women's rights. In an age where women were chattel they argued for equality, in the marriage/divorce laws, in working conditions, et. al. Hypocrisy was rampant and the sisters argued for equal treatment in sexual relations. At a time when Anthony Comstock was getting the legislatures to pass laws controlling women, they argued women should have the right to control their bodies both in and out of marriage.

Most disheartening is the epilogue. After nearly 150 years women have gained few more rights and now conservative groups are trying to return us to the days of Anthony Comstock with its less than subtle misogyny.

LillyBooks says

I really liked the subject matter of this book, the story of two sisters who crusaded for women's rights in the 1860s/1870s. As I had never heard of the two women, I found almost all of the information new and enlightening. But I wasn't wowed by the writing style, which seemed more like a list of facts dates and facts

than a compelling story. This resulted in some parts of their lives seeming to drag on too long. But, on the whole, I would recommend the book as an important and interesting read.

Richard Gartee says

A non-fiction book to blow the contemporary ideas of women leaders. Two sisters, whom prior to reading this I was unaware of, broke too many glass ceilings to count. Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin came from poverty, rose to power, went broke, got rich, all the while promoting a variety of liberal and women's causes. Will Hillary Clinton be the first woman to run for President? No, Victoria Woodhull did it in 1872. The first woman to testify before congress, the first women to open and operate their own Wall Street brokerage firm. Think the Hippies discovered Free Love in the sixties? Nope, 90 years before Victoria and Tennessee were packing Carnage Hall with lectures advocating it. Is Humanism new? Nope, in the early 1900's Victoria created and published the Humanism magazine. In restrictive Victorian times, these women advocated, equal rights, equal pay, voting rights, sex education in schools, birth control... the list goes on. The author appears to have thoroughly researched their lives, documents, letters and papers to craft a substantive work of non-fiction. She doesn't hide their, at times shameless, self-promotion, in pursuit of radical causes. (Does anyone remember Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin?)

A good eye-opening read.

Jeff says

In May of 1872, the world watched in utter incredulity as a woman took to a stage in New York City and announced her candidacy to run for the President of the United States in the 1872 election, the first woman to ever do so. She named Frederick Douglass, the famous runaway slave turned abolitionist, as her running mate for VP. The contender: Victoria Woodhull – a woman long forgotten today, but so infamously known in the Gilded Age that William Randolph Hurst probably made thousands on newspaper sales from her life alone. Academics have (re)told Woodhull's story to exhaustion, but what lacked was a popular, accessible history for the masses. "The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage, and Scandal in the Gilded Age" by Myra MacPherson, I am happy to report, accomplishes exactly that.

From the outset, I want to emphasize what an undertaking MacPherson took to write this book. Every page masterfully expels meticulous research on the late nineteenth century – a confusing and mindboggling era, but nonetheless important. MacPherson connects historical and political theory with contemporary anecdotes, making this read the utmost accessible for any reader.

"The Scarlet Sisters" primarily places the experiences of two women – Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennessee Claflin – into the greater American story. The book chronicles the lives of these pioneers, from their unlawful beginnings as spiritualists, to the unprecedented creation of their brokerage firm on Wall Street, to the publication of their radical newsletter, to their jarring entry into American politics (Woodhull for President; Claflin for Congress), and to their later years. This book will appeal to the average reader because the lives of Woodhull and Claflin, to be sure, compare to the best drama you've ever seen on TV, or otherwise.

The epilogue is required reading for everyone, even those who lack interest in learning about these gals. MacPherson poses an important question for us to ponder: What has changed? In other words, yes, we've

come light years from the experiences of Gilded Age women, but, manifold themes of the time remind us of how far we need to go until we have gender equality – or at the very least – agency over our own bodies (male and female).

My only critique of this book is its length. Biographers have a way with turning bodies of research, fashioned for 200 pages, into 400+-paged tomes. I think a lot of cuts can occur in the beginning. We get it; their father was a drunk, no need to spend pages and pages reinforcing that idea. Notwithstanding, everything else deserves accolade. You will find this book in the “Women’s Studies” section at Barns and Nobel. Truly, Woodhull and Clafin would be distressed to discover their book in such a locale.

Louise says

It is hard to imagine these sisters and their incredible lives. You follow them from a childhood that is painfully hard to read about (how did they ever live through it?) to their celebrity and later in life (perhaps) successful marriages. They advocated causes that were far from the norms of the day. They had what today we call “baggage” and lots of it.

If you bemoan the recent Supreme Court decision on birth control, you can take comfort that things were worse in the Gilded Age when, despite the mortality rate for newborns and their mothers, most people would have agreed with the court. Men laughed at women having the right to vote and most women did not want it. Suffragettes faced ridicule and abuse. The undeterred Chaflin sisters took their stand.

The story is remarkable; and while the book is good, it should have been remarkable too. While the author recounts the events of these two long lives, and records what they said and wrote in speeches, interviews and letters, there is almost nothing personal about them.

There is more on their clothes than their personalities and character. As close as it gets is how nervous they could be and that they were hurt by slander. Were they so naive as to think there were no consequences to speaking out for "free love" (when they really mean the right to divorce)? Was their motivation commitment to the cause or were they they narcissists who thrived on headlines and celebrity? Maybe they were just plain quarrelsome or rigid. Among the cause oriented people were they patrons or pseudo-intellectuals? There are no clues as their actual relationship since what survives is Victorian era prose. Victoria did not answer Tennie's pleas for a visit when she was ill (or perhaps abused by her wealthy husband). How did they respond to their role in British society? Were they Beverly Hillbillies? Nouveau riche? Did they enjoy martyrdom?

The sisters transcended a family that seems ever present, ready willing and able the bite the hand feeding them. The family situation is significant, but unclear. Do these parents and siblings merely love a good argument? Or do they mean harm? Are they too intoxicated to know what they are doing and saying? Were the sisters successful in presenting their father to British society as a "noble father"?

In the Epilogue, there is more narrative about the state of women's issues today than about the sisters. It reads as the right to vote, the ability to divorce, have access to education, etc. have made no impact. There no conclusions about the legacy of the two sisters, citing some who feel they advanced women's issues and others feel the rifts they created in the movement held the women's cause back.

It sounds like I'm down on the book, but I'm not. It is at its best when it is describing the anti-feminist (or is the better term, anti-woman) nature of the times. While there are areas of too much attention (i.e. the Beecher trial) and gaps (especially the various domestic situations such Victoria's living with past and present husbands, and the later in life marriages/society situations) the author narrates and documents the sisters' public lives. There is some very good research.

As a pre-teen I read a biography of the woman who ran for President. My 7th grade history teacher assured me that it never happened.

Kinksrock says

I picked up this book after I saw the author on tv, talking about how one of the two "scarlet sisters", Victoria Woodhull, was actually the first woman to run for president. That's a dubious distinction. Woodhull's argument was that, even though she could not vote, she was a citizen and could run for president. However, she was not even the legal age to run for president yet, so the whole thing was kind of a farce.

Nonetheless, these women are fascinating characters who came from a background of con artists, and used their skills of manipulation and oratory to become big names in the women's rights movement (especially the idea of "free love", which was primarily about the right to divorce), much to the chagrin of the better known figures, such as Susan B. Anthony. They became associated with many of the famous and infamous of the Gilded Age, and their stories encompass many rises and falls, lawsuits, scandals, and hypocrisy. I doubt anyone would want to put these sisters on our currency (an honor bestowed on Anthony), but they are interesting to read about.

Megan says

Fascinating subject matter -- I really wanted this to be great! It got rave reviews from some pretty impressive people, including Jim Lehrer and Carl Bernstein. The story definitely grabbed my attention -- the lives and times of two sisters who challenged the beliefs of the world and paved the way for some major social and political changes, refusing to let the hypocrites of their day continue on with business as usual. But with so many characters, events, and years to cover, this story needed a much more coherent framework than Myra MacPherson offered. She jumps around in time and among so many different narratives that I found it difficult to keep track of what was happening. In addition, some of her prose was so convoluted that I found myself rereading passages several times, in some cases only to discover that she had not written sentences by any stretch of the grammatical imagination.

The really glaring weirdness of the work, though, is the over use of quotation without attribution -- one has to wade through almost 50 pages of notes in order to find the origin of quoted text, and I'll be honest: I didn't. I found it disconcerting to have so much quoted text make up the body of the work without any grounding context. No introductions to long, rambling sentiments expressed by others. No way to reasonably keep track (while reading) of which quotes had a trustworthy provenance.

Because of the convoluted story telling, it is hard to feel that you ever become intimate with the subjects of the work, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin. The difficulty may be that, as is expressed in the work,

it is hard to judge who they really were and what they really believed. But rather than a definitive work on these two intriguing sisters, MacPherson's tome is more of a giant combination of conflicting quotes and speculation. It is hard to believe that this author has really added any wealth of understanding to these two controversial figures from history. And that is a shame, because what she did write made me hungry to learn more. After 323 pages, I feel I have had only a paltry appetizer and I am hungering for a main course that is not forthcoming.

Yasmin says

Another excellent read! The Scarlet Sisters are a fascinating pair who were very much advanced in their environment and if they had been able to have continued would have further advanced the causes of suffrage, feminism and equality among the classes. Having come from a poor background where they were forced by their father into being con artists and for at least Tennie prostitution they managed to rise up from these ashes and fight for the advancement of women. In a short space of time they were able to accomplish much, however, there were always detractors even among other women in the same cause. Having been thrown into jail for three or four times it isn't any wonder that both sisters suffered collapses and not only in mental and physical health, but unfortunately in their hard core beliefs. Many admirers of these women and their cause felt let down in the toning down the sisters engaged in as time had slogged by, not fully appreciating what they had endured in jail, indeed I think anyone who went behind bars where they did and for as long as they did can understand how the spirit can lag! Even so these two women come across as very courageous and use whatever means to achieve what they want, which is pretty much what men in the past did, except they had more money at their disposal for bribes. The sisters didn't have enough for bribes so they used other means to get what they wanted, I should at this stage add that no animals or children were hurt in the making of their climb in the society ladder. Although the sisters enthusiasm for eugenics and only "fit and sound" people should produce children is rather frightening! However, it could be said that it was a form of pre-planning and they didn't say kill anyone "unfit" which is an enormous relief. By and large a thoroughly enjoyable read and highly recommended.

Joe Drape says

In the gilded age, sisters Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin were a cross between the Kardashians and Hillary Clinton. They opened a brokerage firm, conquered Wall Street and - 100 years before women could vote - Victoria became the first woman to run for president. She chose former slave Frederick Douglass as her running mate. The sisters were smart, beautiful and free living. This lost episode of history unfurls as a page turner.
