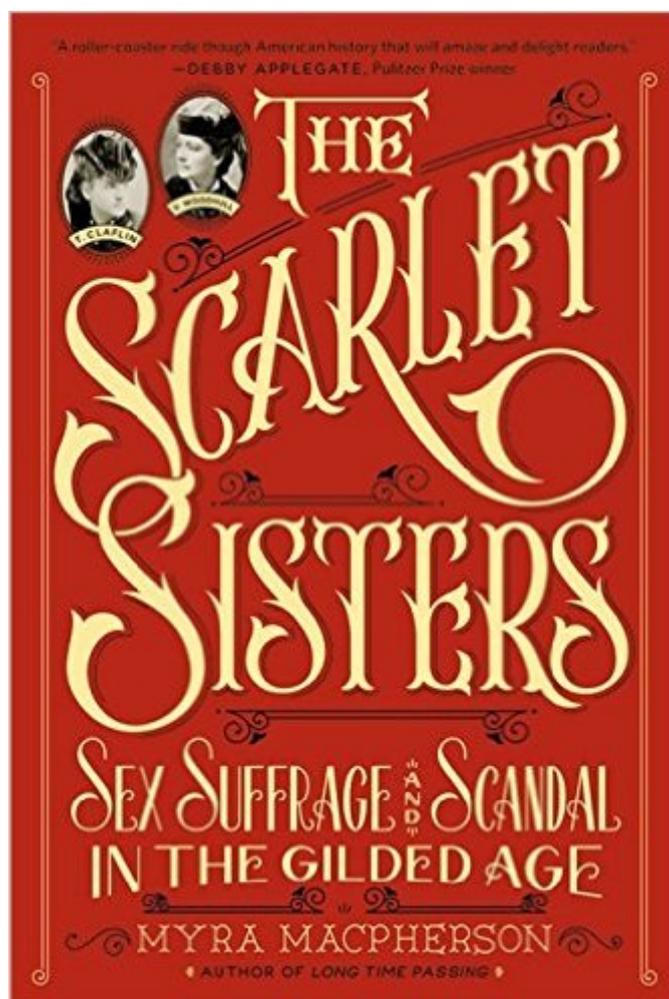


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# The Scarlet Sisters: Sex, Suffrage, And Scandal In The Gilded Age



## Synopsis

A fresh look at the life and times of Victoria Woodhull and Tennie 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 unequalled 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 Tennie'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. Tennie 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 were faced with ridicule and abuse. The undeterred Claflin 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 about how nervous they could be and how they were hurt by slander. There are no clues as to 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). Was their motivation commitment to the cause or were they narcissists who just loved headlines? Maybe they were just plain quarrelsome or rigid. 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)? Were they Beverly Hillbillies? Nouveau riche? Pseudo-intellectuals? Did they enjoy martyrdom?

As Women's History Month draws to a close, here comes a historical tome that highlights some of the early feminists' most prolific and polarizing icons: Victoria Woodhull and her sister, Tennessee Claflin. *THE SCARLET SISTERS*, Myra MacPherson's delightful look at their myriad of endeavors and adventures, offers the type of intrigue and gossipy goodness that will please viewers of *Scandal*. • The Claflin sisters were far more progressive than Olivia Pope and at least twice as powerful. Their mark on history is not negligible, and perhaps this charming telling of

their tales will cement further their reputation for helping change women's roles in polite society. Although growing up dirt poor, the girls projected great intelligence and beauty, traits that their schemer of a father certainly put to good use. A snake oil salesman himself, he used his daughters to help him basically con money off of people, and, although more difficult to document, he may also have pimped out his girls on occasion (he had five daughters all together). Reuben Buck Claflin and his nefarious ways became a part of the sisters' mythology --- although, according to the public testaments of Victoria and Tennie when they had to publicize one of their ventures, his nastiness was translated into pure business sense and his reputation determined to be a successful businessman. He wasn't really, but the sisters were quite good at making something out of nothing on a regular basis. There is requisite attention given here by MacPherson to the fact that Victoria Woodhull was the first female in American history to make an actual bid for the presidency. Her political work creates the basis for Woodhull's iconic status in feminist lore, even though the Mother of All Feminism, Susan B.

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