



Francis Parkman at age 59, in 1882. *From Mason Wade, "Francis Parkman: Heroic Historian"*

The Woman Question: Francis Parkman's Arguments against Women's Suffrage

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Introduction

In the United States, a woman's right to vote was won after a long struggle, a running fight that lasted for generations between opponents and proponents of women's suffrage. Like a big wheel slowly turning, American society gradually came around to the idea that voting rights, in the words of the Nineteenth Amendment, should "not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."¹

Some of those opposed to women's suffrage expressed their opinions from positions of great authority. The intellectual case against women's suffrage was expressed succinctly by the famous historian Francis Parkman, Jr., who may be of particular interest to *Chebacco's* readers because he also wrote works of history that powerfully influenced the founders of Acadia National Park. In 1879 and 1880, in the prominent journal *North American Review*, Parkman voiced his objections to women's suffrage and engaged five of the most prominent suffragists in a public debate over a woman's right to vote.

At the time, Parkman was regarded as one of the learned men of the age. He had published his great historical works: *France and England in North America*, *The Oregon Trail*, *Pontiac's Rebellion*, and many others. His histories were remarkable for their ambitious scope, his lively historical imagination, and the wide range of research material gathered from the archives of North America and Europe, all illuminated by his compelling prose. Parkman was also admired for what he achieved in the face of an overwhelming disability—never conclusively diagnosed—that for years left him unable leave his house, to read, or bear sunlight for more than a few minutes at a time. Much of his work was accomplished by having his notes and source documents read to him as he wrote in the dark on a specially designed tablet that guided his handwriting.

Parkman captivated his readers with his literary skills, taking them on flights of imagination over the cold waves of the Atlantic, through the forested gloom of a raw continent, and past the booming cannon as French-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant powers battled for supremacy in the New World. In Parkman's histories, Europeans conquered a wild landscape and with it, a savage

people. Parkman believed unabashedly in the superiority of European culture. He wrote that the arrival of Champlain “announced that the savage prologue of the American drama was drawing to a close, and that the civilization of Europe was advancing on the scene.”²

Parkman’s influence is readily seen in the history of Acadia National Park. The park’s first superintendent, George B. Dorr, learned the history of the region from Parkman’s accounts of the French explorers who visited the shores of Mount Desert Island. A few years after the park’s founding, Dorr wrote a magazine article titled “A Glorious Tribute to France,” in which he explained the park’s French origins. He quoted Parkman’s account of a time when “Plumed helmets gleamed in the shade of its forests, priestly vestments in its dens and fastnesses of ancient barbarism.” For Dorr, Parkman’s histories evoked “the departed shades” of “black-robed priests, mingled with wild forms of savage warriors, knit in close fellowship on the same stern errand.” To Parkman, and to the park’s founders, the Down East coast of Maine was part of “the domain which France conquered for civilization.” Largely due to Parkman’s influence, the French name “Acadia” was eventually given to the park. New names were also given to Mount Desert Island’s mountains and prominent places, providing the landscape with nomenclature reflective of French influence: Cadillac, Champlain, Sieur de Mont, and Saint Sauveur.³

In 1919, Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University, suggested to Dorr that one of the park’s mountains should be named for Parkman. Dorr obligingly petitioned the government to name the mountain “In honor to Francis Parkman, the historian alike of the ancient French dominion in America and of these Indians in relation to it.” Dorr noted that the famous historian “used to cruise these waters, studying the coast with reference to his writings, was the older friend of President Eliot, who particularly desires this commemoration; and has described in books that will live the discovery and early occupation of this region, and these Indians’ life and ways.”⁴ Today, from Parkman Mountain’s heights, hikers overlook the forest and sea routes travelled by the Indians, missionaries, explorers, and soldiers that Parkman described in his histories.

In his lifetime, Parkman was widely considered a literary and historical genius, and his work was admired and largely unchallenged for many decades after his death in 1893. In June 1954, Samuel Eliot Morison sat at his desk in his summer cottage, “Good Hope,” in Northeast Harbor, and wrote an introduction for the “Francis Parkman Reader,” a collection of passages from Parkman’s writings. After months of immersion in the famed author’s

works, Morison concluded that Parkman was “one of the greatest—if not the greatest—historians that the New World has produced.”⁵ Morison, Dorr, and the professional community of American historians saw in Parkman a historian whose works were still vital and widely read for years beyond those of his contemporaries. Morison wrote, “In Parkman’s prose the forests ever murmur, the rapids perpetually foam and roar; the people have parts and passions.” Parkman, Morison said, is “forever young.”⁶ In 1957, the Society of American Historians established the Francis Parkman Prize that is still awarded to the author of the year’s best work of history.

Yet unqualified accolades for Parkman mostly preceded the 1960s, when a new generation of historians began to challenge the historical establishment and adopt the perspectives of women and minorities. In their eyes, Parkman was no longer young, but instead represented an old world dominated by wealthy white men. Revisionist historians like Howard Zinn challenged the whole canon of American history, with its dominant Anglo-Protestant-male perspective. Zinn wrote that he preferred to “tell the story of the discovery of America from the view point of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves . . . of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish . . . of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills.”⁷

In 1985, Francis Jennings, perhaps Parkman’s harshest critic, objected to a reprinting of Parkman’s works by a popular press. Not only did Parkman frequently get his facts wrong, wrote Jennings, “his biases are poison.”⁸ In 1988 Jennings wrote: “He fabricated documents, misquoted others, and pretended to use his great collection of sources to support an ideology of divisiveness and hate based on racism, bigotry, misogyny, authoritarianism, chauvinism, and upper-class arrogance.”⁹

According to the University of Maine’s Stephen Hornsby, Parkman’s historical interpretation had been readily adopted by the gilded age capitalists who developed Mount Desert Island into a summer resort. The affluent strata of society in this era, Hornsby wrote, “increasingly saw itself as a class, even a caste, and sought to insulate itself from the rest of American society.” Mount Desert Island provided the cool summer breezes, and rough-hewn natural setting that made it the perfect summer escape. These conditions, wrote Hornsby, “combined with racial purity proved irresistible to an elite fleeing the city and its immigrant population.”¹⁰

The feminist historian Kim Townsend also challenged Parkman's place in the male-dominated canon of American history. Parkman, Townsend wrote, manufactured an image of himself as a man's man, who conquered his own infirmities, and regarded himself with pride as a Boston Brahmin, an aristocrat privileged by birth and training to occupy the highest places in society. He made his historical heroes in that same image, as if they were superior to all the lower castes—the immigrant hordes, Indians, and women, who required the leadership of Anglo-Protestant males. According to Townsend, Parkman “was a man who simply and crudely believed in the desirability, the necessity of being a man.” Townsend assessed the effect of Parkman's invalidism and the care he received from his daughters and female servants. Women, wrote Townsend, “ministered to his physical needs, but in order for him to preserve his conception of himself as a man he had to suppress any evidence of their power, imagine them as frail so that he could be the very opposite.”¹¹ Parkman's personal image, and the historical characters he crafted in that image, required a lowering of the status of the women compared to men. To maintain a man's stature, wrote Townsend, Parkman's women “had to be supportive, diverting, pure—feminine, so that he could be masculine.”¹²

Parkman's “The Woman Question”

In October 1879, Francis Parkman set out the case against women's suffrage in a nineteen-page essay in the *North American Review*. He began by predicting that future historians would describe the nineteenth century as “the riddle of history,” beset with contradictory currents of ancient and modern thought battling for supremacy in the fields of science, religion, politics, and education. But Parkman believed that the proper roles of men and women had already been determined ages ago, and should not be up for debate. Sex, wrote Parkman, has been the primary preoccupation of man for millennia, and after all that time there was “little doubt about the nature, capacities, and position of women.” Men and women are fundamentally different and are suitable for different roles in society. Men are strong and hard, women are soft and weak. “The one is made for conflict. . . . His greater stature and firmer muscles are matched with a sterner spirit, less tender sensibilities, and susceptible nerves, a ruder hardihood, and, in nearly all strongly masculine natures, a certain remnant of primitive ferocity. Yet women are not without redeeming grace, he wrote: “The susceptibilities that unfit the typical woman for rude conflict are jointed to high and priceless qualities, without which life

would be a curse." Parkman stated, "The supreme law of sex has decreed that the boys shall be boys and that the girls shall be girls." To Parkman, the shrill voices demanding for women's suffrage were attempting to counteract the laws of "God and Nature," through "political and social quackery."¹³

In fact, Parkman wrote, most women did not support women's suffrage. "It has been claimed as a right that women should vote. It is no right, but a wrong, that a small number of women should impose on all the rest political duties which there is no call for their assuming, which they do not want to assume, and which, if duly discharged, would be a cruel and intolerable burden." Parkman warned that women's suffrage would overturn the proper order of the family: "High civilization, ancient or modern, has hitherto rested on the family . . . the head of the family has been the political representative of the rest. To give the suffrage to women would be to reject the principle that has thus far formed the basis of civilized government."¹⁴

Then the eminent historian turned to the lessons of the past, citing the unhappy reigns of female rulers in ancient Lycia and Athens and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, Russia, and Austria. He noted the successful rule of England's Queen Elizabeth, but attributed her success to the "throng of matchless statesmen, soldiers, philosophers, and poets" who surrounded her.¹⁵ Parkman's reading of history taught him that women in power acted out of "motives of love, predilection, jealousy, or schemes of alliance." To act on those motives, they "used their own charms, or those of other women, as means of gaining political advantages, and this without scruple, and sometimes without shame. Instead of purifying politics, they corrupted them." He viewed the character of Lady Macbeth as the epitome of female misrule, who "pines and dies under the tortures of the mind, while the sterner nature [her husband] lives on, to perish at last by the sword, fighting with fierce desperation against the retributive doom."¹⁶

Parkman pointed to the danger of giving "the most impulsive and excitable half of humanity . . . an equal voice in the making of laws." He noted the French Revolution, in which "female mobs were fiercer and more destructive than those of men. To give women the suffrage is to expose the most excitable part of the human race to the influence of political passions with no means of defense against possible consequences." After all, he said, "Women, as a whole, have less sense of political responsibility than men."¹⁷ Further, he noted, "The coarse and contentious among women would be drawn to politics by a sort of elective affinity." Such a woman, he said, would use her feminine charms to

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I.

THE WOMAN QUESTION.

THE nineteenth century will be the riddle of history. With its universal activity and universal restlessness, currents and counter-currents, progress and reaction; now assailing old faiths, and now

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I.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WOMAN QUESTION.

JULIA WARD HOWE.

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.

LUCY STONE.

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON.

WENDELL PHILLIPS.

JULIA WARD HOWE.

THE woman question, from the man's point of view, is very apt to be only the man question, after all. And the man, according to Mr. Parkman, questions thus: "Do we wish our women to vote? and, if we do not, what arguments can we find against their voting?"

THE WOMAN QUESTION AGAIN.

FIVE chiefs of the woman-suffrage movement have joined forces to answer the article on "The Woman Question" in the "North American" for October. Their answer evades most of the points presented by us, repeats a series of well-known fallacies, and rests on a general base of argument which we had affirmed to be unsound and which the critics do not try to vindicate. We shall not follow them in detail, for the task of refuting their special errors is as needless as it would be easy. We will only classify some of their principal failings, and then touch in particular on such of the rest as may suggest a moral or serve as a text for observations on the subject in hand.

The arguments for and against women's suffrage were carried in the prominent journal *North American Review*.

corrupt the political process and her delicacy to unfair advantage. "A woman," he wrote, "has the inalienable right of attacking without being attacked in turn. She may strike, but must not be struck, either literally or figuratively." Women armed with such immunity are given a "tongue more terrible than the sword."¹⁸ Parkman also believed that the ill effects of women in politics would be at their worst among urban, immigrant, and Roman Catholic populations. He wrote, "Those who wish the Roman Catholic Church to subvert our school system, control legislations, and become a mighty political force, can not do better than labor day and night for female suffrage. . . . The [priests'] . . . power is great over the women, who would repair to the polls at the word of command with edifying docility and zeal."¹⁹

The Rebuttal

Parkman's essay was answered in the next issue of *North American Review*, published in November 1879. In "The Other Side of the Woman Question," five proponents of women's suffrage were given space in the magazine to refute Parkman's arguments. The champions were some of the most prominent leaders of the movement: Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Wendell Phillips, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.²⁰

To Parkman's argument that men and women are fundamentally different and suited for different roles in society, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that the differences between men and women were a reason for suffrage, rather than one against it—because such differences should be represented at the polls. Wendell Phillips asserted, "One of two things is true: either woman is like man—and if she is, then a ballot based on brains belongs to her as well as to him; or she is different, and then man does not know how to vote for her as well as she herself does."²¹

Parkman's opponents pointed out that a man's greater muscular strength is not needed to mark a ballot and put it in a box. Stanton dismissed the "trite objection" that military service should be required for suffrage, citing the "large class of men who vote but never fight."²² Higginson pointed out that many women provided valuable service in the Civil War, yet were not allowed to vote, while male bounty jumpers and deserters were welcome at the polls.²³

To Parkman's contention that most women did not support women's suffrage, the suffragists countered that thrusting voting rights upon women would provide an education in the exercise of responsibility. Lucy Stone noted

the progress of women's rights in the previous fifty years: "The right to be heard in their own defense; the right to higher education; the right to the medical profession; the right to the pulpit; the right to the bar; and the right to the wide fields of industrial activity." A woman no longer lost her own property to her husband upon marriage and could keep her own earnings from her work outside the home, and her personal contracts were valid. Stone wrote, "Unjust and detestable legal inequalities remain, but their foundations are taken out and they must also vanish." The denial of a woman's right to the ballot, said Stone, would be the next injustice to fall.²⁴

Stone turned to the "golden rule of political justice," the principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence that governments derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed." Are not women governed? Stone asked. So how else shall they exercise citizenship, except through suffrage? "The right of the citizen to participate in making the laws is the sole foundation of political morality," she claimed. "Deny this, and you justify despotism. On the principle of limited suffrage, aristocracy is blameless and republican institutions are impossible. Men who deny political rights to women can show no title to their own."²⁵

As for the fear that suffrage would overturn the proper order of the family, especially the role of the male as head and spokesperson, Julia Ward Howe responded, "The white man reasoned on this wise against the political enfranchisement of the black man. . . . The slaveholder was formerly supposed, by a legal fiction, to represent his slaves. By similar fiction, men are held to represent women at the polls. The slaveholders represented their own interests, and men, in voting, do the same." Julia Ward Howe wrote, "Why should one sex assume to legislate for both? Because it has always done so? That is no reason. All the innovations which have blest mankind might have been excluded from use on the same ground."²⁶

To the eminent historian's accounts of female misrule and his charge that women would debase and corrupt politics, Lucy Stone said, "Up to this time, the formation and administration of government have been mainly in the hands of men. What has been the result of this total separation of feminine qualities from the sphere of government? The nations of the earth have been engaged in almost ceaseless warfare. Bloodshed and murder, waste of life and treasure, have covered the whole field of masculine administration and sovereignty." According to Stone, "An undue sense of his own superiority, a contempt for the intellect of women, a lower moral standard for men, and a world devastated by

wars, are among the results of masculine domination.”²⁷ To Parkman’s concern that the bad effects of women in politics would be at their worst among urban, immigrant, and Roman Catholic populations, Stanton answered simply, “Throw politics open to woman, and you weaken the hold of the Church upon her.”²⁸

Conclusion

Parkman himself termed the nineteenth century as a “riddle of history” where currents and countercurrents of cultural norms swirled and mixed. The opposing views presented in the *North American Review* showed that Parkman was right, if only on that point. Perhaps his years of invalidism, the decades when he immersed himself in the past, and his societal isolation as a Brahmin among Brahmins, had cut him off from the central current of human history as it flowed towards a greater recognition of human rights. His biographer Mason Wade observed, “Parkman’s ideas did not alter perceptibly from the 1850’s . . . to his death in 1892—largely because of his extraordinary isolation from the intellectual life of his own time through illness and the closely guarded security provided by his means.”²⁹

Julia Ward Howe challenged Parkman directly on his perceptions as a historian, suggesting that he himself had become an anachronism. She wrote, “The future, like the past, can be read from an adequate or inadequate point of view. He who fails to seize the sense of the present can give no true account either of what has been or of what shall be. The true prophet discerns the signs of the times, the deep normal tendencies of human nature, which are ever more and more toward amelioration, and the greater good of the greater number.”³⁰

The two sides in this argument adopted fundamentally different views of the societal evolution. Either, as Parkman believed, the world was deteriorating, losing its riches of high culture, and eroding the great truths and principles of the past, or else, as his antagonists asserted, humankind was making progress toward a brighter future. As Julia Ward Howe said, “That the future of human society is to be more and more dedicated to the peaceful development of human resources, that the reign of justice is gradually and permanently to supplant the reign of violence—these are prophecies far more ancient and weighty than are Mr. Parkman’s predictions about ‘the bad time coming.’ This reign of peace and justice will be greatly promoted by the influence and action of women, who have everything to gain from it.”³¹

Parkman answered back to his critics in the January 1880 edition of *North American Review*. He responded with a mix of bemusement and irritation that the suffragists had twisted his words and torn down straw man arguments that he had never presented, but he was done arguing. He wrote, “We have replied to our critics, but must decline further debate. We do not like to be on terms of adverse discussion with women or with men who represent them, and we willingly leave them the last word if they want it.”³² There was no answer to his offer of the last word. But in other settings



the arguments went on for another forty years, until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in 1919 finally gave women the right to vote.

The Francis Parkman Prize is awarded annually by the Society of American Historians for the year's best non-fiction book in American history. *From the Society of American Historians*, <http://sah.columbia.edu/content/prizes>

Today Parkman's arguments against women's suffrage seem silly. Though “The Woman Question” is indefensible, many respected historians have tried to encourage a fuller appreciation of Parkman's larger body of work, accounting for its good qualities as well as the bad. David Hackett Fischer has written, “Parkman's work was marred by major interpretive error, but it was important in another way. He created the most visually striking images.”³³ C. Vann Woodward acknowledged that some of Parkman's “limitations are not to be explained away or excused by differences of time and point of view. Too often Parkman could ignore evidence that was not in accord with his views, permit his bias to control his judgment, or sketch characterizations that are little better than hostile caricatures.” Yet, as Woodward reminds us, Parkman “was a man of *his* time and not ours.”³⁴

The modern reader has sailed down history's stream for one hundred and twenty years since Parkman's passing. His best writings (of which "The Woman Question" is not an example) now seem like the ruins of an ancient temple, admired today for the grace of its architecture, the apparent industry of its builder, and the way time has weathered it so impressively. Yet no one practices the old religion any more. Parkman, despite his eminence, has been left far upstream, and on the wrong side of history.

Notes

¹ U.S. Constitution, *Nineteenth Amendment*.

² Francis Parkman, "The Jesuits in North America," in *The Francis Parkman Reader*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 27.

³ George B. Dorr, "A Glorious Tribute to France: The New Lafayette National Park on the Maine Coast," *La France* (September 1920), 590-91; Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1867), x-xi.

⁴ George B. Dorr to Charles W. Eliot, May 7, 1919; George B. Dorr to Frank Bond, May 2, 1919, quoted in Ronald Epp, "Francis Parkman on MDI?" E-mail to the author, January 2, 2012.

⁵ *The Parkman Reader*, ix.

⁶ *The Parkman Reader*, xi.

⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 10.

⁸ Francis Jennings, "Francis Parkman: A Brahmin among Untouchables," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (July 1985), 306. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1918930>.

⁹ Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies and Tribes in the Seven Years' War in America* (New York: Norton, 1988), 480, in John Mack Faragher, review of *Francis Parkman, Historian as Hero: The Formative Years*, by Wilbur R. Jacobs, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 1993), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/205399>.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Hornsby, "The Gilded Age and the Making of Bar Harbor," *Geographical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1993), 456.

¹¹ Kim Townsend, "Francis Parkman and the Male Tradition," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712595>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Parkman, "The Woman Question," *North American Review* 129, no. 275 (October 1879), 304, 319.

¹⁴ "The Woman Question," 312.

¹⁵ "The Woman Question," 314.

¹⁶ "The Woman Question," 314-15.

¹⁷ "The Woman Question," 318-19.

¹⁸ "The Woman Question," 316-17.

¹⁹ "The Woman Question," 320.

²⁰ Julia Ward Howe et al., "The Other Side of the Woman Question," *North American Review* 129, no. 276 (November 1879), 420-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100805>.

- ²¹ Phillips, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 438; Phillips, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 440.
- ²² Stanton, in Howe et al., "The Other Side", 438 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100805>.
- ²³ Higginson, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 424.
- ²⁴ Stone, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 425-26.
- ²⁵ Stone, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 426.
- ²⁶ Howe, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 413-15.
- ²⁷ Stone, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 429-30.
- ²⁸ Stanton, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 439.
- ²⁹ Mason Wade, *Francis Parkman: Heroic Historian* (New York: Viking, 1942), 330.
- ³⁰ Howe, in Howe et al, "The Other Side," 420.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Francis Parkman, "The Woman Question Again," *North American Review* 130, no. 278 (January 1880), 30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100823>.
- ³³ David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 541.
- ³⁴ C. Vann Woodward, "Forward," in Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe: The French and Indian War* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo, 1984), xxx.