



A Vote of One's Own: "Madame Momentum" and the Women's Network of 1868

Elizabeth Coons

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Review by Shelby Shapiro

In *A Vote of One's Own: "Madame Momentum" and the Women's Network of 1868*, Elizabeth Coons examines an unknown chapter in the life of Caroline Seymour Severance (1820-1914), an abolitionist, suffragist, kindergarten advocate, and reformer, best known for her role in founding women's clubs.

In addition to an Introduction and Conclusion, Coons divides her monograph into 6 chapters: Early Life; Marriage and Escape; Boston: Idea and Reality; The New England Woman's Club; Emersonian Self-Reliance; and The Traveling Lecturers Return. Coons points out that Severance's career as a suffragist was well-documented and described in a biography by Virginia Elwood-Ackers.¹ Coons aims to fill in particular holes left in Elwood-Ackers' work: specifically the establishment of the New England Woman's Club

(NEWC); her leadership approach; popularizing the self-reliance ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson among women; her love affair with Boston, "and how she used that experience to model a type of feminism that shared some of the philosophic ambitions that characterized transcendentalism." (xviii).

Caroline Severance personified American geographic mobility, an aspect of national life. Born in Canandaigua, New York, she studied in schools in nearby towns: Harmony House in Owasco, New York, and then the Geneva Female Academy in Auburn, New York. Both schools afforded young Caroline distance from a very oppressive home atmosphere. As oppressive as that environment was, her guardian (her late father's brother) held enlightened views as to what young women should be taught. In both institutions

¹Virginia Elwood-Ackers, *Caroline Severance* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2010).



she was encouraged to think on her own. As a sixteen-year-old graduate, she was able to become a teacher at a boarding school near Pittsburgh. Moving back to New York, she departed for Cleveland after marrying Theodoric "T.C." Severance. They lived there from 1840 to 1855.

The Severances then moved to the city of her dreams, Boston, in 1855. In 1875, the Severances made their last move, to Los Angeles. It is important to remember that in 1820, Canandaigua was just becoming more than a village; in 1840, Cleveland was still a frontier town; and in 1855, Los Angeles had only been incorporated for a mere five years. She died there in 1914, at the age of 95.

Elizabeth Coons traces Severance's trajectory of beliefs and movements, that is, the multiple motors that moved "Madame Momentum." Although her mother and father were Episcopalian, once he died, his brother's rigid Presbyterian outlook ruled - swinging on a gate as a little girl represented her entrance to eternal hellfire (pp. 3-4). Marriage liberated her; though both husband and wife had a short flirtation with the Second Great Awakening and its vision of an imminent End of Days, their religious outlook broadened to embrace Unitarianism. In Cleveland they began mixing with transcendentalists, suffragists and abolitionists through the medium of traveling lecturers. This provided the inspiration for what she achieved fame: the establishment of women's clubs. She also became active in the movement to provide kindergartens, a German innovation.

The New England Women's Club (NEWC) came to fruition in 1868, just a few short years after the massive dislocations of the Civil War. The context for its formation lay in the struggle within suffragist ranks over whether formerly enslaved men should get the vote before, or at the same time, as women. Where Severance stood on this issue is not explained. The club format represented an attempt to get past this issue and others of controversy without taking a firm stand either way. Severance thus insisted on the word "club,"

as opposed to "mission," "league," or other words which would have tied members to a particular stance. Severance sought to create a space where women could expand their minds, speak freely, and exercise leadership, in a setting of coequals. It was also a means by which differences could be finessed. Here women could discuss, debate and, if necessary, decide, without husbandly supervision, even though some husbands (such as TC) did participate, albeit as spectators.

Though Coons does not mention it, Severance's achievement is somewhat analogous to the creation of the "public sphere" (for men) outlined by Jurgen Habermas in establishing clubs and coffeehouses where men might meet and discuss the issues of the day. This public sphere - like Severance's women's clubs, became sites of learning, listening and leading, theoretically without regard to the varied social standings of its members.²

The greatest weakness in this monograph lies in centering Severance's actions on Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Emerson was among the speakers at the NEWC, and that Severance had read much of his work, Coons does not prove that reading his work or hearing him speak - along with others - led to the formation of the NEWC. However, she does demonstrate how others may have well laid that groundwork: the teachers at her elementary school, Harmony House, and later Elizabeth Stryker Ricord's Geneva Female Academy, institutions which provided a much broader education to young women than that usually offered; her acceptance and later rejection of Second Great Awakening doctrines; her husband's encouragement and support; the theology of her minister of eighteen years, the non-conformist Unitarian Theodore Parker. Of particular importance was Dr. Marie Zarkowska (1829-1902), a Polish physician who could not practice as a doctor in the United States, so worked as a midwife.

Severance's attraction to Boston, as place and concept, bears a striking resemblance to the attraction of artists

² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989, trans. of 1962 German original).



to Paris, and Jazz musicians to places such as New Orleans, Chicago, Kansas City and New York. Boston served as a center of education and the intellect, a Mecca for the enlightened. The Severances remained in Boston for about twenty years; the NEWC remained on the scene until at least 1970, the end-date of its record collection at Harvard University.

The greatest strength of this work lies in its awakening a desire to learn more about Severance and the milieu in which she lived, worked, led and inspired. Her post-Boston activities represented both continuity and rupture. She founded – three times – a women’s club in Los Angeles, the last version of which, the Friday Morning Club, succeeded.³ Establishing kindergartens in Los Angeles represented a lasting contribution. as did the establishment of a Unitarian church.⁴

Yet though Severance and her husband had started out as Abolitionists, that did not equate to a belief in social equality. The 1902 gathering of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs decided, at their Los Angeles meeting, that it was up to states to determine which clubs could become member organizations, thus explicitly providing cover to keep African-American women’s clubs out.⁵ The General Federation thus employed the “logic” enshrined in the US Supreme Court’s decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* –

“separate but equal” – to the world of women’s clubs: a stance wholly in line with Progressivism (note that segregation of hitherto integrated Federal work forces occurred under the reign of the “Progressive” President Woodrow Wilson). In justifying her action (Severance’s daughter had denounced her for her failing to defend women of color), Severance “[...] cited Booker T. Washington and the bishops of the colored church in claiming that a discussion of social equality could only hurt the problem of political equality.”⁶ Severance’s actions took place in the context of a failed attempt by Spanish-Mexican club women to participate.

The saga of Caroline Severance took many twists and turns; this monograph provides an entrance into some of her many worlds. Elizabeth Coons has helped rescue a “foremother” from near oblivion.

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³ Diana Tittle, “Significant Others: The Defining Domestic Life of Caroline Seymour Severance,” *California History* Volume 88:1, 2010, p. 45.

⁴Jensen, “After Slavery,” p. 182.

⁵ Jensen, “After Slavery,” p. 182; Wallis, Joan M., “‘Keeping Alive the Old Tradition’: Spanish-Mexican Club Women in Southern California, 1880-1940,” *Southern California Quarterly* Volume 91: 2, Summer 2009, p. 138.

⁶ Jensen, “After Slavery,” p. 182.