

Public Faces, Secret Lives: A Queer History of the Women's Suffrage Movement

Wendy L. Rouse

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Wendy L. Rouse's historical survey *Public Faces, Secret Lives* reveals the LGBTQ+ side of the fight for women's suffrage.

Many suffragists, Rouse says, were “very queer”—a term that, in the book, extends to suffragists who were not white, middle class, or wealthy, or who resisted traditional feminine roles—and it's time that their stories were told. The book covers figures like physician Mary Edwards Walker, who called for dress reform in the 1870s, knowing that many women wanted to wear bloomers, rather than constricting corsets and gowns.

But suffragist leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony felt that demands like Walker's would reinforce negative perceptions about the movement. Public fears existed that, if women were given the vote, they would no longer be content with their role as the “gentle,” nurturing sex. Thus Walker's notable achievements as a Civil War surgeon were minimized, and the quest for women's voting rights excluded women like her, who were perceived as too eccentric or masculine.

The book also explores romantic passion between suffragettes, which galvanized their commitment. Some entered partnerships known as “Boston marriages,” owning property together and adopting children. Other women had men as their spouses but continued to use their “accepted” marital statuses to conceal lesbian liaisons.

The book also covers how the measured decorum of early protests gave way to more militant actions, as the defiant outrage of British suffragists inspired the US movement. But there was racist othering in the movement, too: suffragettes who were Black, Indigenous, and women of color were diminished. Such exclusion was led by the movement's white leadership.

From the brutality of prison force-feedings to the vaudeville ditty “No Wedding Bells for Me,” the LGBTQ+ historical survey *Public Faces, Secret Lives* reveals the movements behind the suffrage campaign with verve.

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