

Prologue and Acknowledgments

Belva Lockwood seldom told stories on herself but she did like to describe her childhood obsession with the imitation of biblical miracles: she tried to walk on water, to move mountains, and to raise the dead. At age fifty-eight, having become the first woman admitted to practice law before the United States Supreme Court and the first woman to run a full campaign for the American presidency, she repeated the story of her would-be miracles in an autobiographical article, observing soberly that while she had failed to raise the dead, she had “awakened the living.”¹

Lockwood was born Belva Ann Bennett in the Niagara County town of Royalton, New York, on October 24, 1830, the second daughter, and second of five children, of farmers Lewis J. and Hannah Green Bennett. Unlike the famous transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, or women’s rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton, at birth she had neither social standing nor the promise of a fine education. Like Abraham Lincoln, she was self-made, and invented herself as a middle-class professional woman. Had she been a man, her life would have resembled a conventional nineteenth-century plot: ambitious and talented chap walks off the farm, educates himself, seeks opportunities, and makes a name. But because she was not male, in striving for the equal opportunity to compete, Belva became a radical. Her story flows from the denial of opportunity that men took for granted.

In her time, Lockwood commanded the attention of presidents, congressmen, and columnists as she adopted bold positions in support of equal opportunity for women. She did not hesitate to confront the male establishment that kept women from voting and from professional advancement. When the Supreme Court refused to admit her to its bar, she lobbied Congress until that body passed “An act to relieve the legal disabilities of women.” In March 1879 she became the first woman admitted to the high court bar and, months later, the first woman lawyer to argue a case there. Her bids for the presidency in 1884

and 1888 startled the country and infuriated other suffrage leaders. She was a steadfast member of the international peace and arbitration movement and was not above thinking herself, or her organization, the Universal Peace Union, a worthy candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Lockwood exuded ego. She openly chose fame, reveled in public notice, and offered herself as a model of female accomplishment and independence. She endured scorn and ridicule but also found, and cultivated, communities of women and men who shared her passion for reform. A person of great energy, she made her last trip to Europe at the age of eighty-three in order to lobby for the cause of women and international peace. She did not close her private legal practice until the following year.

Some years ago, while helping my younger daughter find books to read at the public library, I stumbled across a biography of Lockwood written for children. I realized immediately that I knew nothing about the woman or her accomplishments. As it turned out, I was not alone; virtually none of my university colleagues knew her name. A bit of scholarly snooping confirmed that historians had indeed lost the thread of Lockwood's long life, which had been devoted to nurturing democracy and individual rights.

I reached this conclusion after reading a handful of essays written by twentieth-century women writers who had attempted to rescue Lockwood from anonymity. Julia Davis, Madeleine Stern, and Julia Hull Winner each had sketched intriguing portraits of a woman who believed, with Jefferson and Adams, in "self-evident" truths, but who dared to imagine a more vibrant Republic in which women had equal rights and conflict could be resolved without war.² How had we lost the story of this extraordinary life and of an event as important as a nineteenth-century woman running for the presidency? It would be easy to say that she fell out of history because she was a woman and women, particularly in politics, have had to struggle for notice. But Lockwood's obscurity results from many factors, of which a preference in history books for Founding Fathers and fighting generals is only one.

Late in her life, Lockwood agreed that a nephew's wife, Lella Gardner, could write her biography.³ Curiously for someone given to self-promotion, Lockwood did not throw herself into the project. She was often too busy to give her niece the hours needed to recall a life rich in events and personalities, or to find the documents and correspondence

Lella needed to write the book. Lella lived at some distance from Washington. She was not a professional author and had begun the project when her aunt was eighty. When Belva died six years later, the biography was nowhere near complete. Lella struggled for thirty years to write a complete biography but did not succeed.

Lockwood's slide into obscurity also occurred because, at the time of her death in 1917, few libraries collected the papers of women activists. Family members had to be relied upon to save the correspondence, diaries, and documents of respected relatives, and here fate conspired against Lockwood. She had suffered financial reversals three years before her death and was forced to leave her large house on Washington's F Street. She had outlived her daughters and buried her second husband. Her closest relative, grandson DeForest Ormes, was in his twenties with no permanent home. Her books and files, including a full library of peace literature, did not fit easily in the new apartment, but apparently she was not ready to give them to Lella. Her niece wanted the collection; she understood its importance to the completion of the biography, but when her aunt's death was announced she reached Washington too late to claim what she said had been promised to her.⁴ Before she arrived, DeForest took away several cartons of papers from the apartment: active legal files, partial sets of lecture notes, a few letters, campaign memorabilia, and at least one scrapbook.⁵ Insufficiently appreciative of his grandmother's place in history, or unable to make room for this life-bulk, he then arranged for the Salvation Army to take the rest of her papers, later telling Swarthmore College curator Ellen Starr Brinton that they were probably "sent direct to a paper mill" and made into pulp.⁶

In 1998, knowing only some of these facts, I weighed the probability that sufficient documents had survived and plunged into the writing of this biography, gambling, with decent odds, that a woman as accomplished as Lockwood had left footprints.

And she had. Lockwood was a consummate publicist who used newspapers as a public diary. The staff of the *Washington Evening Star* could not print enough about her. Newspapers in New York City, upstate New York, and the Midwest also thought her good press. *Harper's* wrote about her, cartoonists for *Puck* drew her, and daredevil journalist Nellie Bly sought her out for a feature interview. Lockwood herself wrote autobiographical articles and for many years her daughter, Lura McNall, published "Our Washington Letter." This column, appearing

principally in the *Lockport* (New York) *Daily Journal*, offered an insider's view of the nation's capital and, not infrequently, reported on "Mrs. Lockwood, Washington's lady lawyer."

The National Archives was another treasure trove filled with details of Lockwood's life. Her law practice was based in Washington and the records of the courts in which her cases were tried are housed at the Archives. At the Library of Congress, I unearthed her letters to presidents, leaders of the woman suffrage movement, and World City enthusiast Henrik Andersen. Colleagues and new websites helped me track down other correspondence and memorabilia. Certain finds demanded weeks of sleuthing. One summer afternoon, after a long search, I telephoned an elderly woman in California. "Yes, my deceased husband was a Lockwood relative. . . . Years ago he framed a letter that she wrote and a funny little stock certificate with her picture and hung them on our living room wall." The letter provided new insight into family relations while the handsome stock certificate gave me the surprising news that Lockwood had tried to start a homeopathic remedies business.

Together, the letters, case files, government documents, reform movement newsletters, personal memorabilia, and newspaper articles are more than enough material from which to write a woman's life. And yet, large pieces of Lockwood's life and soul are missing. No original documents or artifacts—letters, diaries, school copybooks—survive from her childhood. With enormous frustration, I realized that a narrative of her early life was not possible. Much as I longed to explain the actions of the adult woman through the lens of compelling childhood events, or charismatic role models, I lacked the necessary evidence. Lockwood had little interest in future generations knowing about the home she shared with her parents and siblings, or the one she established with her first husband, Uriah McNall. She was a person who lived in the present and for political purpose. Even when given the opportunity, she chose not to write in detail about her family, and in autobiographical articles she recycled the same carefully selected stories: miracle making, discriminatory pay, Uriah's mill accident. The accident is all we ever learn about Uriah. We do not know whether she loved him, whether he encouraged her dreams, or what they felt when their child, Lura, was born.

Lockwood became a more accessible biographical subject when, after her move to Washington, D.C., she entered public life. She lobbied

for women's rights, argued civil and criminal law cases, campaigned for the presidency, spoke at international peace conferences, and delivered paid lectures. She was old-fashioned as a public figure, disliking the confessional mode. She laughed off her second marriage to the elderly Ezekiel Lockwood with a dismissive sentence; she argued equal opportunity for women but never spoke about her aspirations for the grown daughter who was always—loyally—at her side, or about Lura's husband, who remains a cipher. She did not deny domestic life, but the law, politics, and social reform were her abiding interests. The life that Lockwood intended to be inscribed, the one that I have written, contemplates those interests. For me they are more than enough. Lockwood withheld from posterity the tools of psychological biography. She did not want us boring into her soul or psyche. That was for her Methodist god.

Lockwood, by then a 36-year-old widow, arrived in the nation's capital in 1866. She was curious and ambitious but also poor and without connections. In seven years, against all odds, she would earn a law school degree and open a Washington law office; in eighteen years, she would be an announced candidate for the presidency of the United States. She came to the capital for the same reasons that many men—and a few women—flooded into the city at the end of the Civil War. She was fascinated by politics and quietly entertained the idea that she might transform her life in a city bustling with adventurers and office seekers. Emerging from rural New York, she radically altered the course of what had been an unsatisfying life. She chose a public stage. It suited her forceful, resolute personality. From that platform, as an advocate for women's rights, a presidential candidate, and a peace activist, she demonstrated an unyielding faith in the promise of American ideals.

This book has been a joy to research and write in no small measure because of the people who also believe that Lockwood deserves a biography. Wendy Chmielewski guided me through Lockwood's papers as well as those of the Universal Peace Union at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, and has become a friend. Robert Ellis has patiently steered me through the extraordinary collections housed at the National Archives and has demonstrated an unflagging interest in Lockwood's life. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the National Mu-

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