

Dr. Canning H. Woodhull

Born 31 March 1826,¹ Webster, Monroe County, New York.²

Died 7 April 1872, New York, New York.³

Buried Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.⁴



Victoria, Canning, Zula and Byron Woodhull
Ca. 1864

It is in this sense that we regard the life of the deceased who has just left us. Our acquaintance with him began while yet we were quite young and very unpleasantly situated. Eleven years of unremitting, wifely devotion, tried by every possible species of worldly temptation, and testified to by him upon every occasion, terminated a condition which became unendurable. When he found us inexorable in the determination to separate from him, he made no objection. He permitted us to depart in peace, and never from that day did he either upbraid or complain of us; but on the contrary often wondered that we had not left him before. And we know that he, though he felt the change severely, was just enough to rejoice in knowing that the changed conditions opened a wider field of usefulness and happiness to us, and in all our movements none were more gratified at our success, or more regretful for our seeming defeats than he. But with the cessation of our marital relation there were others that could not be so easily sundered as this had been. We had our children, for whom he had as warm a love as his nature could know. It was not in our heart to banish him entirely from them. Besides we owed him personally a duty, higher than that which any law can formulate or enforce. It was impossible for us to be indifferent to the needs and necessities of him to whom we had given so many years of our life, and though the world demanded that we should abandon him to all the exigencies

¹ This date was calculated from his 7 April 1872 death certificate that gave his age as 46 years 7 days. Census records give his year of birth closer to 1828.

² 1855 Census of the State of New York, where he was enumerated with his father, step-mother and siblings, as well as his wife and child.

³ New York City Municipal Deaths, file #112699; "Excitement in the Woodhull Mansion," *New York Herald*, 9 April 1872, p. 8, col. 5; "Born Into Spirit Life," *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, v. 4 no 24, p. 8, col. 1, 27 April 1872.

⁴ Green-wood cemetery burial records see https://www.green-wood.com/burial_search/

of his unfortunate weakness, we thank Heaven that we had the courage to brave its judgments and to perform that which was no more our duty than it was our pleasure to perform. He has always had a home with us whenever he has desired to occupy it.⁵

Canning Woodhull's short life was governed by and ultimately ended by his addiction to alcohol and morphine. Despite this failing, one thing is clear: he was devoted to his children and was drawn to the Claflin family – even after Victoria left him – because of their children, Byron and Zula. Separating fact from fiction in the case of this man is extremely difficult because his choices caused him to live much of the time in obscurity.

Born in Webster, New York, outside of Rochester, as a young man Woodhull drifted down to the Cleveland, Ohio, area where he put out a shingle proclaiming himself to be a doctor. He had no medical degree and his form of medicine was, as with the Claflins, magnetic healing. He was soon hired by Enos Miles of Mt. Gilead, Ohio, to push patent remedies. Miles, the husband of Buck and Anna Claflin's eldest daughter Margaret. It was in Mt. Gilead where, when Canning was called on to assist with an ailing Victoria Claflin, a chain of events was set in motion that led to the rise and downfall of one of the most famous women in America.

Smitten upon meeting the 15-year-old Victoria, Canning wooed her and within a few short months married her.⁶ Nine months later, their son was born in Chicago, Illinois.⁷ Byron Woodhull, named for Canning's father, would never lead a normal life. Accounts vary, either the child was born mentally challenged, had problems with his delivery, or his disability was the result of a fall as a young boy. The actual facts are immaterial because Byron required adult supervision and intervention his entire life of 78 years. Canning Woodhull, until he died in 1872, was often the one to provide it in between lapses into his addictions.⁸

Woodhull was the son of the prosperous and respectable Byron Woodhull and his first wife, Nancy Burnett. His father went west to Effingham, Illinois, shortly after the 1855 census of New York State. The elder Byron was a local judge, selectman, proprietor of a hotel, and farmer in Webster. In Effingham, Canning's father continued to have success in his ventures, running a prosperous hotel,⁹ though whether he had any contact with his son is unknown and open to debate.

⁵ "Born Into Spirit Life," *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, op cit.

⁶ Cleveland, Cuyahoga County Courthouse, Register of Marriages, 20 November 1853, p. 434, entry 1.

⁷ Victoria C. Woodhull Martin Papers, Southern Illinois University, box 2, item 9. In 1930, Byron's sister, Zula Maud, applied for a passport for her brother. In the accompanying affidavit, Zula stated "I have always understood from my Mother and believe that my said Brother was born the Thirtieth day of December One thousand eight hundred and fifty-four." She had caused a search to be made by the Department of Health of the City of Chicago for his birth record and had been told that no record could be found. Byron's date and place of birth is corroborated by the 1855 New York State Census.

⁸ Canning was in the 1870 US Federal Census with Margaret Miles on 23 July 1870 in the 4th ward of Brooklyn, Kings, New York, and again on 20 December 1870 at 15 East 38th Street in the home of his ex-wife.

⁹ 1860 US Federal Census of Effingham, Illinois, 14 June 1860. He was enumerated as a hotel keeper with \$4000 in real estate and \$300 in personal estate. He was still in Effingham County at the time of the 3 July 1865 census, dying there 4 March 1870.

Shortly after the 1855 New York Census, Canning (who called himself a sailor in that enumeration), Victoria, and an infant Byron left for San Francisco to find their fortunes, or so they probably believed.¹⁰ The frontier nature of the city at the time probably did little to keep Canning from his habits, and more likely exacerbated them. On the couple's return in 1859 or 1860,¹¹ they seem to have first visited her parents in Indianapolis and then were briefly in New York City where their daughter Zula Maud was born on 28 April 1861 at 53 Bond Street.¹²

From New York, the couple drifted west again, where Canning and Victoria soon show up as actors in a play that would reach national attention thirty-eight years later when the startling news broke in the press that Tennessee Claflin, by then Lady Cook and Viscountess of Monserrate, had once married a ne'er do well bartender and gambler.¹³

Tennessee, who was fifteen at the time, had run away from her parents after a disastrous magnetic healing tour through Pennsylvania. She, together with her parents and sister Utica, had been arrested in Pittsburgh on the charge of "humbuggery."¹⁴ By late summer, Tennessee was in Sycamore, Illinois, supporting herself by clairvoyant healing.¹⁵ Canning and Victoria, leaving their children in the care of her parents and cousin Thankful Claflin in Cincinnati, joined Tennessee in Sycamore.¹⁶ At the time, Victoria and Canning were traveling under the aliases of Victoria Claflin and her 'brother' John Claflin.¹⁷ Tennessee had struck up a relationship with a bartender, and married him in September 1861. The foursome set out on a gambling spree that had them traveling around the 'west,' as the mid-west was called at the time, gambling and

¹⁰ Victoria related her trip to California to Theodore Tilton (*Victoria C. Woodhull. A Biographical Sketch*, The Golden Age, Tracts, No. 3, New York: The Golden Age, 1871, pp. 16ff). However, Canning alluded to it more directly in advertisements he placed in various newspapers in 1863. See the Davenport, Iowa, *Quad City Times*, 21 December 1863, where he stated: "The Doctor has discovered many remedies in his travels in South America, California and other countries." Had he traveled around the cape to San Francisco, he certainly would have been in South America.

¹¹ Both Theodore Tilton (op cit., p. 19) and Woodhull's 1895 Autobiography (collections of the Robbins Hunter Museum) say the couple went first to Indianapolis and then Terre Haute before going to New York. Victoria's parents were enumerated in two censuses in 1860 – Cincinnati and Anderson, Indiana.

¹² The absence of Canning and Victoria Woodhull from the 1860 US Federal Census suggests, but does not prove, they arrived in New York after its completion. See also Zula Woodhull, in the Ellis Island records gives this as the date of her birth. See www.ellisland.org, 3 April 1928, frame 540, Line 30; and 8 April 1931, Frame 472, Line 20.

¹³ "Tennie was his Bride," *The Inter Ocean of Chicago*, 2 July 1899, p. 33.

¹⁴ "A 'Natural Clairvoyant' in Trouble," *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, Maryland), 20 March 1861, p. 1.

¹⁵ *True Republican* (Sycamore, Illinois), 20 August 1887. "Some twenty years ago these two sisters of decidedly dubious character put up at Paine's Hotel in Syracuse, advertised themselves in *The True Republican* as Magnet or Spiritual healers, and spent many weeks here engaged in the practice of their art. . . The younger and prettier of the two married a young fellow who tended bar opposite our court house on the south side, but left him in a short time, and in years after went through the ceremony of a divorce. After some weeks of mighty disreputable performances here they decamped suddenly, and their bills for advertising in *The True Republican* are yet unpaid."

¹⁶ Correspondence from a neighbor of Thankful Claflin discussing her experiences with the family, the Emanie Sachs (Nahm) Arling Philips Archive, Manuscript and Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University, MS 317, Box 5, Folder 3.

¹⁷ Of course, Victoria and Tennessee had no brother named "John." Their brothers were both married men with children at the time and were documented to have been elsewhere – Malden was in Cincinnati and Hebern was in Chicago.

grifting.¹⁸ The fun came to a fairly quick end when Tennessee and her husband began fighting and agreed to separate. Tennessee, Victoria and Canning headed for Chicago, taking rooms at 10 Harrison Street,¹⁹ leaving Tennessee's husband behind.²⁰ In time, Buck Claflin, found his wayward daughter and took her back into his custody, installing her in Ottawa, Illinois, again as the matriarch of the family business. Canning and Victoria then joined forces with Hebern Claflin at 65 Wabash Avenue in Chicago. Canning embarked on a 'healing tour' through the Midwest, with Canning advertising himself as a cancer and consumptive doctor,²¹ but keeping the Wabash Avenue address as his home base. In August 1863, the king of cancer and chronic disease, Dr. Canning Woodhull, together with the American Cancer Champion, Dr. Hebern Claflin, established themselves in St. Louis, at 41 Fourth Street.²² Hebern had moved on by August 19, and Canning soon followed him to Chicago, where the pair worked from 65 Wabash Avenue.²³

According to Victoria's later accounts, she had had enough of Canning's drunkenness and erratic behavior by 1864 and demanded a separation which he accepted.²⁴ There is no record of a divorce, only Victoria's later vague references that it had occurred in 1864.²⁵ Victoria had remained in St. Louis when Canning went to

¹⁸ "Tennie was His Bride," op cit. See also, the Sycamore Illinois *True Republican*, 24 May 1871: "Both Mrs. Woodhull and Miss Claflin have practiced clairvoyance in this town, and Miss Claflin, as she calls herself, was married here some years ago to a bar tender and gambler, who once infested this place, by the name of Joe Bartle, if we recollect aright." See also the *Chicago Examiner*, 3 March 1911, p. 1, col. 5, where Tennie discusses this period of her life.

¹⁹ Both Tennessee and Canning Woodhull advertised from this address. They were certainly at 10 Harrison Street by October 1862, however, in August, Canning had unclaimed letters at the Chicago Post Office (*Chicago Tribune*, 18 August 1862, p. 3). *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 1862, p. 4 and *Chicago Tribune*, 7 February 1863, p. 2.

²⁰ Tennessee's husband, John James Bartle or Bortle, appears in records variously and it is impossible to determine exactly his surname. He enlisted in Bolton's Battery in Illinois as James Bortle (Illinois State Archives, Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls, *Civil War Detail Report*), filed a pension as John J. Bartle (*U.S. General Index to Pension Files*), enlisted in the 50th New York Engineers as John J. Bortle (*Rosters of the New York Engineers and Sharpshooter Battalions During the Civil War*, New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, 50th New York Engineers Report of the Adjutant-General, p. 838); and he was buried in Rosehill Cemetery, Chicago, as John J. Bartel (*Illinois Soldier Burial Places 1774-1974*).

²¹ *Daily Illinois State Journal* (Springfield, IL), 16 April 1863, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 November 1863, *Quad City Times* (Davenport, IA), 21 December 1863 and 4 January 1864; *Marshall County Republican*, 28 January 1864; *St. Louis Democrat*, 4 September 1864.

²² *The Missouri Republican -- Saint Louis*, 6 August 1863, p. 3; 9 August 1863, p. 3; 12 August 1863, p. 3; 19 August 1863, p. 3.

²³ *Weekly Journal* (Muscatine, Iowa), 25 December 1863; *Quad City Times* (Davenport, Iowa) 21 December 1863; *Marshall County Republican* (Indiana), 28 January 1864.

²⁴ No record of the divorce has been found, but see Victoria's account in her husband's obituary "Born Into Spirit Life," op cit. In 1871, testifying in his own defense during a lawsuit brought by his mother-in-law, James Harvey Blood said "I don't know" in answer to a direct question by the prosecution as to whether Woodhull had a divorce from Canning before they were married. ("Blood, Woodhull, Claflin," *New York Herald*, 16 May 1871, p. 3, col. 5.)

²⁵ See "Born Into Spirit Life," op cit, where she discusses their separation and the causes. In addition, in later sworn testimony, James H. Blood, when asked if Victoria had been divorced when they married, he tellingly answered "I don't know."

Chicago,²⁶ and when Canning did reappear in St. Louis in the fall of 1864, he was advertising from this same address.²⁷ Victoria soon met and married Col. James Harvey Blood. The marriage was, in his case certainly and in hers open to question, a bigamous union. He was a civil war hero and devoted Spiritualist.²⁸ Canning followed them, appearing for a while then disappearing on benders. He was given a place to stay in Victoria's home where, when sober, he could practice as a cancer doctor.²⁹ Canning followed the couple to Cincinnati, where

One night, about a half a year after their marriage she and her husband were awakened at midnight, in Cincinnati, by the announcement that a man by the name of Dr. Woodhull had been attacked with delirium tremens at the Burnet House, and in a lucid moment had spoken of the woman from whom he had been divorced, and begged to see her. Colonel Blood immediately took a carriage, drove to the hotel, brought the wretched victim home, and jointly with Victoria took care of him with life saving kindness for six weeks. On his going away they gave him a few hundred dollars of their joint property to make him comfortable in another city. He departed full of gratitude, bearing with him the assurance that he would always be willing to come and go as a friend of the family. And from that day to this the poor man, dilapidated in body and emasculated in spirit, has sojourned under Victoria's roof, and sometimes elsewhere, according to his whim or will.³⁰

In 1866 Tennessee, now calling herself Tennie C., opened her Magnetic Healing Institute in Chicago with a branch in Cincinnati. Shortly thereafter, according to her ads,³¹ she enlisted the help of "Dr. C. H. Woodhull" to assist with the volume of her business. From then forward, Canning was a fixture of the Woodhull-Claflin household. Canning went with the family to New York, living for a time with his son and sister-in-law, Margaret Miles, then, briefly, in the Murray Hill mansion, before again moving in with Margaret.³²

Canning also treated Col. Blood for the lingering effects of his war wounds in 1869, 1870 and 1871,³³ in lieu of his regular doctor being unavailable.

When Anna Claflin sued Col. Blood for the alienation of the affections of her daughters and physical abuse in 1871, Canning testified on behalf of his former wife.

²⁶ Victoria had unclaimed letters at the Chicago Post Office in February (*Chicago Tribune*, 28 and 29 February 1864) and Canning was listed in the St. Louis City Directory (published 1 March 1864) indicating he had been at the address prior to that date.

²⁷ *St. Louis Democrat*, 4 September 1864.

²⁸ See biography of Col. James Harvey Blood on this website.

²⁹ "Highly Important to Invalids," *St. Louis Democrat*, 4 September 1864.

³⁰ "Free Love," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 15 September 1876, p. 4.

³¹ *Richmond Weekly Palladium*, 15 February 1866; "Magnetic Healing Institute and Conservatory of Mental and Spiritual Science," *Buffalo Daily Courier*, 14 December 1868, p. 1.

³² 1870 US Federal Census of the 4th Ward of the City of Brooklyn, Kings County, New York, taken on 25 July 1870, p. 172, line 27. 1870 US Federal Census of the 19th Election District, New York, New York, taken 20 December 1870, p. 23, line 5. He was again living with Margaret at the time of his death in 1872.

³³ James H. Blood, Pension Records, National Archives and Records Administration, file # 459.314 and 362.422.

Very little notice was made in the press of the testimony, the journalists were far more interested in the fact that Canning, Victoria's "past husband," was living in the house with the family and her "current husband." His dissipation was obvious from the description:

Finally that beautiful specimen of humanity, "Dr." Woodhull, was called on the stand. The divorced, but not separated, is a bloated, sodden, tobacco chewing individual of about 40 years of age, whose features bear the impress of having been handsome and intellectual. He was dressed in a nondescript suit of greasy clothes, a dirty shirt, and a blue kerchief around his neck, loosely tied. He deposed, with averted glance, that he knew Colonel Blood and Mrs. Woodhull, and that the Colonel was generally kind. Counsel for the prosecution contemptuously declined a cross-examination, when court took the papers and reserved its decision.³⁴

Canning had less than a year to live. He continued to work with Victoria's sister, Margaret, at their magnetic healing institute in the interim. In April 1872, his addictions caught up with him. Taking to his bed with pneumonia, he self-treated for as long as he could. Diplomat medical doctors were called in, and while they made the mistake of withholding his morphine – to which he was very addicted at this point – they did give him the best care they knew how at the time. Canning died on the evening of April 7, 1862. His last words to Victoria were "Mama you are a noble woman the only trouble was I was not worthy of you. I have ruined your life as well as my own through that terrible demon drink and I thank God in my moments of frenzy I have not killed you or our children."³⁵ Canning Woodhull was buried in Green-wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

On Sunday, April 6th, as the shades of evening were gathering, our former husband and later friend and brother, Canning H. Woodhull, escaped, after a week's painful struggle, from his confinement in a material form, to the freedom of Spirit Life. This transition, though somewhat sudden, was not wholly unanticipated, either by him or us. Certain unhappy habits of life, with peculiarities of constitution placed a not indefinite tenure upon the extension of his physical life. Some ten years ago he remarked: "I cannot expect to live longer than till 1875." This prophecy was shortened by only three years, expiring in 1872 instead. . . It must not be inferred, however, that there were no good traits of character represented by the deceased. In spite of all his unfortunate habits, he was one of the most skillful physicians we ever knew. His presence in our family was a source of great satisfaction in this regard. He was ever ready at a moment's notice, day or night, to attend to the ailments of any who required his services, and no clearer nor better testimony of the deep regard, aye love, he had for our present husband, could be had than the care bestowed upon him during several violent attacks of sickness, and no better assurance of thorough trust and confidence on his part than that he would permit no other physician to prescribe for him. These two people were not rivals. They were brothers; and in spite of all

³⁴ *New York Clipper*, 27 May 1871.

³⁵ Reminiscence by Zula Woodhull with note from Victoria added. Victoria Woodhull Martin Archives, Southern Illinois University, box 1, folder 6.

the attempts made to make them enemies, they remained friends to the last, he who is still with us, watching over the death-bed of him who has gone, with all the sleepless anxiety that danger imparts to those who love. But Dr. Woodhull was one who desired no responsibility, not even of his children; he wanted a place of rest, and so far as we could, we relieved him from the first and ministered to the last.³⁶

³⁶ “Born Into Spirit Life,” *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*, op cit.