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Norma Smith. *Jeannette Rankin: America's Conscience*. Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2002. iv + 233 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-917298-79-0.

Reviewed by Christy J. Snider (Department of History, Berry College)
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Dedicated to Peace

Norma Smith has written a book-length biography of Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Rankin fell from favor twice—both with women's rights activists and the public—yet reestablished herself as a prominent peace activist and feminist icon by the time of her death in the 1970s. Rankin is best remembered for being the only congressperson to vote against the United States entry into World War I and World War II. After the press and her constituents condemned these votes it appeared to finish Rankin's public career. The growth of antiwar movements in both the 1930s and the 1960s, however, helped rehabilitate Rankin in the minds of many Americans.

Smith, a journalist and personal friend of Rankin's, provides new insights into the history of this controversial congresswoman through the use of sixteen interviews conducted with Rankin during the last decade of her life. These interviews cover not only Rankin's past political experiences, but also the important issues of the 1960s and early 1970s. When combined with additional materials, including reminiscences from men and women close to the Rankin family, oral interviews Rankin gave to various authors, the Congressional Record, and Rankin's personal papers, Smith's biography of Rankin presents the most detailed portrayal to date of this important political figure.

Smith wrote *Jeannette Rankin* to explore how the subject of her biography contributed to the women's movement and the peace movement despite the controversies she inspired. Throughout the work, Smith suggests

that Rankin's influence came from her determination to uphold her convictions even when they were unpopular and criticized. When what Americans viewed as important corresponded with Rankin's steadfast beliefs, she was heralded as a central and important public persona. However, when Rankin's views did not match those of mainstream America, many branded her as unrealistic, unpatriotic, and even the devil.

The text begins with an exploration of Rankin's childhood and education in Montana. It then examines her interest in social work and the suffrage movement. Like many suffragists of the period, Rankin was initially attracted to the women's rights movement out of her belief that women would support social legislation more than men. While working in children's homes in Spokane and Seattle, Rankin became involved in Washington State's 1910 women's suffrage campaign. Her local efforts brought her to the attention of the National American Women's Suffrage Association which hired her in 1913 to travel around the country working for the passage of state suffrage laws. A year later, she became one of the leaders of the woman's suffrage movement in Montana. Rankin's persuasive speaking ability and her belief in grassroots activism helped gain Montana women the right to vote in 1914.

Rankin's role in the successful Montana suffrage campaign made her an instant celebrity in the state. Her new notoriety, moreover, paved the way for her run for election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1916. Although she ran on the Republican ticket, Rankin did not

consider herself a Republican. Instead, she viewed the Republican Party as the political party that most closely matched her views and gave her the best chance at winning the election. One of the most interesting aspects of Rankin's candidacy was that the leaders of the women's rights movement did not support it. Many prominent suffragists worried that Rankin's campaign would lead to a backlash in other states against granting women the right to vote. Montanans elected her to the House of Representatives, however, even without backing from national women's rights leaders.

Numerous factors, according to Smith, aided Rankin's first successful political campaign. For the first time, Montana sent two at-large representatives to Congress. This meant that Rankin could run across the entire state under the slogan, "Vote for your local candidate and vote for Jeannette Rankin." This strategy insured that even without being any one region's favorite, Rankin could garner some support from across all of Montana. Another factor Smith reveals as affecting Rankin's campaign was the assistance she received from Montana's newly enfranchised women. Although national suffrage leaders did not encourage her, many of the women voters of Montana cast their first ballots in appreciation for Rankin's statewide suffrage efforts. In addition, Rankin's experience as a public speaker and her knowledge of how to effectively garner a statewide base also won her some supporters. Smith believes that one of the most important reasons for Rankin's victory, however, was that the state recognized her as a pacifist at a time when most of the nation wanted to stay out of the Great War raging in Europe.

The next section of the biography focuses on Rankin's time in Congress. Smith divides this part into three chapters. The first examines Rankin's vote on the declaration that brought the United States into World War I, the second chapter explores the rest of her term in office, and the third chapter follows her failed Senate run in 1918. The chapter on America's entrance into the war is seemingly the turning point in Rankin's life. Prior to this vote, Smith presents Rankin as something of a pragmatic activist, but her decision not to support President Woodrow Wilson's request for a declaration of war against Germany leaves her identified more as an idealist. Ignoring the advice of women's suffrage leaders and her family to vote for war, Rankin voted with her conscience. While fifty other members of Congress also voted against the war declaration, Rankin's vote received the most attention. Smith argues that this attention came primarily from societal views about women—they were perceived

to be too weak to be involved in foreign policy decisions and they were seen as more antiwar than men. She supports her position by demonstrating how the press focused on whether or not Rankin had cried while casting her vote. Rankin spent the rest of her time in office working for social legislation and a Constitutional amendment to grant women the right to vote.

A highlight of Smith's biography is her exploration of Rankin's activities after leaving office and the changing political situation which would return her to Congress in 1940. During this period Rankin directed her energies more toward peace activism than women's rights. She lobbied and organized for several prominent peace organizations of the time, including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and the National Council for the Prevention of War. While these activities did elicit hostility from some members of the public, by the mid-1930s America's growing isolationist sentiment returned Rankin to a position of political prominence, which led to her testimony before Congressional Committees on issues ranging from the Neutrality Acts to whether or not munitions industries had supported American involvement in World War I to protect their profits. Soon after World War II began in Europe, Rankin was re-elected as one of Montana's representatives in Washington. Her triumphal return to national politics, however, did not last long. In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt requested a declaration of war against Japan after that nation's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. His request met with overwhelming support, except from Rankin, who cast the only no vote and thus ended her political career.

The final section of Smith's biography examines the last thirty years of Rankin's life. It explores her travel, her personal connections, and finally her reemergence as an activist with the start of the Vietnam War. Smith suggests that Rankin became a symbol or a model for the 1960s antiwar movement not only because of her steadfast opposition to war, but also because of timing. The large student antiwar protests of 1967 coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Rankin's election to Congress and her vote against the United States' entry into World War I. The publicity generated by the anniversary brought her to the attention of both the peace movement and the women's movement. Rankin found herself more popular as a speaker than she had been since 1917. Despite her advanced age, Rankin accepted all requests for interviews and public talks that she received until her death at the age of ninety-two in 1973.

Smith's biography of Jeanette Rankin is a thorough narrative about the life of this important woman. Some of the most significant aspects of the work are the new insights and context it uncovers regarding Rankin's election campaigns, her work with the suffrage and peace movements, and her return to public activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Smith's work is also extremely readable. In spite of the vast array of details she presents, the text remains lively and absorbing.

For many academics, however, parts of *Jeannette Rankin* will be unsatisfying, particularly because the work is not situated within the historiography of women's changing roles, women in politics, or women in the West. While the introduction by Kathryn Anderson attempts to link the work to the historical scholarship, integrating this information into the text would

have been more effective. There are also several places in the book where Rankin's thoughts about issues seem too simple and linear. A more complex analysis of her thinking might be warranted, especially in regards to her votes against the United States entering World Wars I and II. Finally, the text is missing a suitable conclusion that could have summed up Rankin's contributions and long-term impact on the women's rights movement, the peace movement, and the American political system.

Nevertheless, *Jeannette Rankin* is a welcome addition to our knowledge about Rankin's life and activities. It will be essential reading for anyone studying the life of this significant woman or anyone examining the roles of women in the peace movement during the twentieth century.

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