

Lynn Musslewhite, Suzanne Jones Crawford. *One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875-1930.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xii + 231 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3563-2.



Reviewed by Kevin Motl

Published on H-SAWH (November, 2005)

With this traditional biography of Kate Barnard, the most influential woman in Progressive-era Oklahoma, Lynn Musslewhite and Suzanne Jones Crawford have rendered a great service to students of Progressivism in the Southwest. One feature of the historiography of southwestern Progressivism is the absence of studies that could anchor effective syntheses. Unlike Wisconsin and North Carolina, for example, states such as Oklahoma and Texas still lack broad scholarly surveys of the reform era, largely because many of the influences that shaped the politics and culture of the age remain unexplored. That a full biography of "the most dynamic force in Oklahoma progressivism" did not appear until 2003 only confirms this neglect of both the reform era and its noteworthy women—a neglect that continues despite decades of growing awareness of the significance of women as historical agents (p. 12).

Outraged by an early introduction to urban poverty and driven by her "sympathy for suffering humanity," Barnard adopted characteristic reform causes: child welfare, education, labor re-

form, prison rehabilitation, and the regulation of alcohol (p. 75). Her experience with voluntary associations and their limitations yielded only disillusionment; instead, Barnard embraced government intervention as the most effective means by which to promote social reform.

In Oklahoma's transition from territorial status to statehood (achieved in 1907), Barnard saw an opportunity to codify her reform initiatives in the new state constitution. A capable speaker and an unrepentant opportunist, Barnard shrewdly used the state press to build a coalition of support for her causes. She constructed a platform that incorporated her reformist mission, shaped the composition of the Oklahoma constitutional convention with her expanding influence, and parlayed that success into the Commissionership of the state Commission of Charities and Corrections, a position she would hold from November 1907 until January 1915.

Embraced initially by legislators as a novelty, Barnard quickly evolved into a robust power broker, exploiting the local press and shifting coalitions of interest to outmaneuver her opponents

while brandishing her femininity to shield herself from public criticism. Her political savvy yielded impressive results: Barnard secured the release of Oklahoma inmates from an inhumane Kansas penitentiary, shepherded the creation of a three-tiered penal system through the Oklahoma legislature, initiated and supervised improvements in state asylums, and influenced the enactment of a compulsory education law.

Like most of her Progressive counterparts throughout the South, Barnard personally and publicly endorsed Jim Crow. She did, however, intervene on behalf of blacks "unjustly penalized because of their race" (p. 142). Unlike other Progressive-era southern women, however, Barnard was at best a contradiction on questions of gender. Alienated early in her public career by a confrontation with a member of the state Women's Christian Temperance Union, she held women and their social clubs generally in contempt. When in political need, however, Barnard expected their support for her reform initiatives. Likewise, Musslewhite and Crawford argue that Barnard never concerned herself with the advancement of any explicitly gender-based reforms, yet she rarely hesitated to exploit her gender when personal or political advancement beckoned. She steadfastly opposed woman suffrage, for example, until her ambitions were threatened.

By 1913, beset by a host of illnesses and facing an increasingly intransigent and parsimonious legislature, Barnard's political power began to wane precipitously. With most of her original agenda fulfilled, Barnard's Progressive crusade no longer captured the imagination of Oklahomans. When, in her second and final term in office, she rose to the defense of Native American orphans and their property rights, she alienated many of her former supporters and exhausted the last of her political capital exposing fraud in the management of Indian lands. By 1914 she was regarded not only as a liability but also a "potential source of embarrassment" for the Democratic Par-

ty (p. 175). In 1916, a despondent and ill Kate Barnard vanished completely from public life.

One Woman's Political Journey is not an ambitious work; the authors dispense with the relevant historiography in a few sentences. They readily concede in the conclusion that Barnard "did not leave a lasting legacy for female political activists" (p. 186). They also make occasionally frustrating narrative choices: tantalizing the reader with the suggestion of controversy, for example, and then resolving the conflict in the next sentence with little or no descriptive detail; making leaps in time without providing chronological signposts to the reader; obscuring the intricacies of the political negotiations that no doubt brought Barnard much of her success; and, on a lesser note, introducing Commission attorney J. H. Stolper a full chapter after he plays an important role in the narrative (p. 150).

None of these, however, represent significant inadequacies in the content of the book. The authors have constructed a remarkable narrative of Barnard's life, given the fact that manuscript resources for this period in Oklahoma history are sparse. Musslewhite and Crawford's impressive bibliography is both exhaustive and judiciously deployed throughout the narrative. This biography of Kate Barnard is a critical stepping stone toward the development of an authoritative synthesis on Progressivism in Oklahoma after 1907.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Kevin Motl. Review of Musslewhite, Lynn; Crawford, Suzanne Jones. *One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875-1930*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10929>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.