

The life of Frances Perkins

The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience. By Kirstin Downey, New York, NY, Doubleday, 2009, 458 pp., \$35.00/hardback.

In a captivating style Kirstin Downey has told a tale of moral complexity that transcends fictional drama. A real life experience, it is not limited by the author's imagination. The author chronicles one of the historic struggles that shaped our nation as she demonstrates what these changes owe the individuals who brought them about.

In the first six chapters of the book Downey describes Frances Perkins' struggles in life as an independent woman. The formative years of Perkins' young adult life seemed almost destined to result in her achievements as a cabinet official during the transforming era of the Great Depression. Reminiscent of the John Adams described in James Grant's biography, it is in the interplay between her values and her life experiences that were forged the idealism that led to Perkins' confrontation with inadequate governmental institutions.

After graduating from Mount Holyoke, Perkins had been unable to find work until she received an offer to teach at a woman's college in Lake Forest, Illinois. It provided her an opportunity to leave behind the socially conventional milieu of a merchant's daughter in Worcester, Massachusetts; she reinvented herself by changing her first name (to Frances) and her faith (to Episcopalian). Whatever worldly advantage this move to a new faith gave her, for she was also a bit of a social climber who did what it took

to advance her agenda, she remained committed to the Episcopalian church until the end of her days. Meanwhile, Perkins escaped the finishing school atmosphere of the school by absorbing nearby Chicago in its notorious turn of the century heyday. She learned from the radical feminist Florence Kelley, who remained her mentor, and Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, a leading "settlement house" which had the implementation of social reform as its goal.

Perkins was ever mindful that she was a direct descendant of Revolutionary War patriot James Otis, who had railed against taxation without representation. The event which transformed her from social reformer to social activist was when she witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. Her leadership role in investigating its cause led to an appointment as Director of the Committee on Safety that established fire regulations, particularly as they concerned worker safety. A woman of abounding energy, Perkins was fearless in the face of intellectual and physical challenges. She entered into the world of political reality by recognizing in notorious Tammany Hall the ability to make things happen on behalf of its constituency. Consequently, she marched into the cigar chomping all male den of its headquarters and demanded to see the man in charge. She came armed with facts and figures. In addition to her work on fire laws, she championed a fifty-four hour work week for women factory workers. The legislation passed at her instigation by allowing a compromise on an exemption for cannery workers. Her perfectionist social worker colleagues were angry, but she had learned to compromise to get things done and the following year was rewarded by seeing the cannery workers included as well.

Frances Perkins earned her appointment as the first female cabinet member in U.S. history and FDR's only Labor Secretary as a result of these successes. Perkins became the impetus while FDR understood the need, and together they had the political skill to propose and shepherd legislation to successful outcomes. Their close collaboration was instrumental in the passage of landmark Social Security, Fair Labor Standards, and other safety net legislation. FDR had first learned of her extraordinary competence when she served him as Industrial Commissioner of New York State. Her brilliance as a government official centered on her unusual effectiveness in persuading others of the merits of her well conceived and rehearsed agenda. This quality was one Perkins also sought in her appointments, notably that of Isador Lubin (whom she named Commissioner of Labor Statistics in 1933 shortly after she became Labor Secretary).

Family considerations were another important factor that shaped Frances Perkins' life. At age thirty three she married a socially prominent, urbane man four years her senior. Chapters seven through nine in the book detail the heartbreaks that followed this seemingly 'good match.' Her husband ran through his fortune by increasingly bizarre behavior that was clinically diagnosed as manic depression. Their daughter was later to suffer the same illness. Isolated emotionally from family ties, Perkins was forced by necessity to become decision maker and breadwinner for her husband and daughter.

Mary Rumsey and Frances Perkins shared a home in Washington D.C. when Mary became a widow and Frances' husband needed hospital care.

They entertained extensively, a life style that suited the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration. A good deal of legislative business was handled in these entertainments. Downey cites an instance in which a Supreme Court justice guest tipped off Perkins that the taxing power of the Federal Government could be used to ensure that state unemployment compensation met national standards. In a 5–4 decision the court upheld the constitutionality of this provision of the Social Security Act.

In her closing chapters Downey recounts Perkins' work on the U.S. Civil

Service Commission from 1946 to 1952 and the offer Perkins accepted to join Cornell University's fledgling Industrial and Labor Relations School. While the Cornell position appeared to be to her liking, the Civil Service Commission job was not commensurate with her experience as Labor Secretary; Perkins had hoped to be appointed head of the Social Security Administration. She was clearly disheartened by both the lack of recognition and by being told that the other cabinet members did not wish to work with her because she was a woman... that her mere presence made them

uncomfortable.

Kirstin Downey has written an excellent book about a page turning political history which needs to be read. Frances Perkins was a pioneer in shaping the world we know. Her personal life was full of sorrow. Her professional life was a constant struggle whose triumphs were often rewarded with hostility. Downey shows us what it costs to be the catalyst that recasts societal values in a resistant world.

—Solidelle Wasser
New York Region
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Wanted: Book Reviewers

Interested in reviewing a book for the *Monthly Labor Review*? We have a number of books by distinguished authors on economics, industrial relations, other social sciences, and related issues waiting to be reviewed. If you have good writing skills and/or experience, then please contact us via E-mail at mlr@bls.gov