

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2004

Book Review: One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875-1930

Linda Edmondson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Edmondson, Linda, "Book Review: One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875-1930" (2004). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 260.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/260>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

young woman she became interested in social justice issues and worked for the territorial legislature, then directed a charity. Barnard saw Oklahoma's preparation for statehood in 1907 as a great opportunity and traveled to St. Louis, Chicago, and Denver to find the best examples of progressive reform legislation. She also worked with farmers, labor, and Democrats to ensure that her progressive ideas became planks in the new Oklahoma constitution.

In the state's first election, Barnard ran for commissioner of charities and corrections. Thirty-two years old, petite, beautiful, and unmarried, she had a flair for publicity, and her campaign appearances were wildly popular. A passionate speaker, she was elected overwhelmingly.

During her first term, the legislature passed Barnard's proposals regarding child labor, compulsory school attendance, and juvenile courts. She launched investigations into abusive conditions in asylums, orphanages, and jails, including abuses in the Kansas penitentiary that held Oklahoma prisoners on contract. Barnard's reputation spread, and she was heralded nationally as a champion of the underprivileged. Easily re-elected in 1910, she began to investigate Indian land frauds involving white guardians and courts that deprived Indians of valuable property rights. This effort met fierce legislative opposition and her appropriations were cut off. The state's newspapers began to ignore or criticize her. Barnard's health, always frail, worsened. She was often absent from her office, traveling, lecturing, and recuperating out of state. She did not run for reelection in 1914.

Unsuccessful in continuing her advocacy, Barnard struggled with deteriorating physical and mental health. She died alone at the age of fifty-four and for years was largely forgotten in Oklahoma history. Fortunately, interest in Barnard has recently been rekindled, and now Musslewhite and Crawford have furthered her re-emergence with a well-researched, incisive volume that describes her place in the progressive movement.

One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875-1930. By Lynn Musslewhite and Suzanne Jones Crawford. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xii + 231 pp. \$34.95.

Kate Barnard was elected Oklahoma's first commissioner of charities and corrections in 1907. The first woman in the country elected to a major statewide office, she remains Oklahoma's most famous woman politician. Lynn Musslewhite and Suzanne Jones Crawford have written a definitive biography of this western progressive and her reform efforts.

Born in Nebraska in 1875, Barnard moved with her father to Oklahoma in 1889. As a

The authors point out that many of Barnard's strategies were typical of progressives of her day. In her passionate belief that government should be an instrument to protect women, children, the handicapped, and the poor, she resembled other politically active women in the early twentieth century. But she also differed from typical women progressives. She was never a strong supporter of women's suffrage and did not forge the important alliances with suffragists and women's organizations that helped sustain progressive reforms in other states. She preferred partisan politics and usually worked directly with legislators.

Kate Barnard is one of the most fascinating politicians in Oklahoma history. Musslewhite and Crawford present her story in vivid detail for historians and general readers alike.

LINDA EDMONDSON
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma