

A Mind of Her Own: Helen Connor Laird and Family, 1888–1982

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revealed the level of strategic flexibility possible. The National American Suffrage Association avoided confrontational tactics, supported the war effort, and continued state campaigns. Members of the Congressional Union picketed the White House, campaigned against Democrats, and went on hunger strikes while in jail. All of these activities are covered in abundant photographs and documents.

Readers of the *Annals of Iowa* will find that Carrie Chapman Catt, Iowa's best-known suffragist and the leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in its final years, is given the attention she deserves. Cooney traces Catt's career in Iowa from 1885, when she joined the Iowa Suffrage Association (68), until she helped to organize the League of Women Voters in the 1920s. Midwestern readers will also appreciate the careful coverage of the state referendum campaigns in Illinois, Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and South Dakota.

For the general reader, this work is an excellent introduction to the history of woman suffrage. For the collector of campaign and woman suffrage memorabilia, it displays rare campaign posters and buttons. This volume is valuable for those who pursue research in state and local history because of the index and bibliographical references. Cooney has done the hard work of finding, identifying, and analyzing some new primary sources from dozens of research collections scattered across the country. *Winning the Vote* is the successful culmination of the National Women's History Project to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

A Mind of Her Own: Helen Connor Laird and Family, 1888–1982, by Helen L. Laird. Wisconsin Land and Life Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. xvii, 508 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Theresa Kaminski is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point. She is the author of *Prisoners in Paradise: American Women in the Wartime South Pacific* (2000).

What makes an individual worthy of a full-length biography? Typically, subjects of biographies are national or international figures or, a bit more unusually, they are ordinary people whose lives represent something important about larger issues. Although Helen Connor Laird came from an influential Wisconsin family, she fits more easily into the latter category. So the critical question, at least for assessing the value of this book for historians, is whether author Helen L. Laird has been able to connect her life to the important issues of twentieth-century political history and American women's history.

In her prologue, Helen L. Laird argues that her mother-in-law's life "reflects the proud and painful American twentieth century," that it speaks to "a stridently materialistic nation with a deep and persistent spiritual component." Moreover, by examining Laird's life within the context of Laird family politics, the biography "broadens the scope" of the history of the progressive movement in Wisconsin (xiii).

The biography is written chronologically, beginning with information on Helen Connor's family and its ties to Wood County, Wisconsin, and ending with her death in 1982. A 1912 graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Helen Connor married Melvin R. Laird the following year and immediately started a family. Their third son, named for his father, would become U.S. Secretary of Defense in 1969. Helen found the traditional roles of wife and mother stifling, and she suffered a breakdown. In the 1920s she convinced her husband to abandon his ministerial calling and work for her father's lumber business. During the Great Depression, Helen was an active clubwoman. In the 1940s she helped found the Wood County Republican Woman's Club to promote her husband's state senate campaign, contributed to the Council on Foreign Relations, and supported the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. In 1951 Helen began a nine-year stint on the University of Wisconsin's Board of Regents, where she chaired the education committee.

Helen L. Laird is a graceful writer, even when she gets bogged down in the minutiae of Laird family life. Her use of primary sources, including private family papers and collections from the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, is meticulous. Her decision to make the book about the entire Laird family in addition to Helen C. Laird provides for a broader look at state-level political and economic issues. In this, the book is a model of local history and should appeal to anyone with an interest in Wisconsin history, especially its politics. The largest disappointment is the author's inability to connect Helen C. Laird's life to women's history. Beyond a general sense that she was an unusual woman for her time, we do not learn exactly why that was so. If Helen L. Laird had opened that avenue of analysis, this biography would be invaluable.