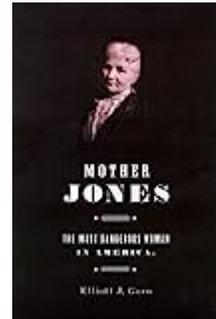




Elliott J. Gorn. *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2001. xi + 408 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7093-0.



Reviewed by Joyce A. Hanson (Department of History, California State University, San Bernardino)

Published on H-Women (September, 2001)

A Militant Matriarch

A Militant Matriarch

To many Americans, “Mother Jones” is the name of a hard-hitting, insightful, liberal magazine offering in-depth coverage of stories not covered by other media. To others, Mother Jones is an image on a poster with the caption, “Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.” But as Elliott Gorn persuasively argues, Mother Jones was a living, breathing radical: imperfect to be sure, yet a seemingly unstoppable force whose “passionate speeches” and “dramatic street theater” (p. 3) kept her in the center of the American labor movement. Mother Jones was the voice of inarticulate working-class men and women—miners, railroad, trolley-car, textile, brewery, garment, and steel workers—who fought for civil rights, an end to child labor, higher pay, and shorter hours.

Gorn’s stated purpose for writing this book is to rescue Mother Jones from what English historian E.P. Thompson called “the enormous condescension of posterity.” Gorn is of one mind with other labor historians who are working to reintegrate radical labor leaders into the discourse of labor history. Gorn’s work is a worthy

attempt to put Jones’ life into the context of broader industrial and political change and bring her “unique and powerful” voice back into the creative dialogue fostered by radicals in the early decades of the twentieth century (p. 6). While he succeeds in fulfilling his objective, Gorn’s task is not an easy one.

Exactly when Mary Jones became Mother Jones is a point of speculation. Although Jones was associated with radical movements such as the Knights of Labor, Coxey’s Army, the Populist Party, and the American Railway Union, it was not until the end of the 1890s that Mary Jones fully embraced the name and persona of Mother Jones. Mary Jones came from an obscure background and left no written records about her early life, and much of the information she chose to reveal about her later life was fictional, a part of her effort to transform Mary Jones into Mother Jones. Gorn attributes Jones’ refusal to reveal information about her private life partly to the Victorian era in which she lived. At a time when journalists, reformers, and moralists relegated women to the private domain of home, family, and religion, Jones’ refusal to reveal anything about her private life “revealed her rad-

ical intentions.” Even though her newly created identity evoked motherhood, the most sacred role for Victorian women, “she ignored family life and lived entirely in the public realm” (p. 8). As Mother Jones, Mary Jones expanded the boundaries of women’s domain over the private family to include the entire family of labor, tailoring her public behavior and structuring her appearance and speech to meet the needs and expectations of her union “family.”

Jones publicly rejected the Victorian notions of a uniquely “female sphere” inherent in the cult of true womanhood, becoming an “International Organizer” for the United Mine Workers—a very public and “unwomanly” job. Yet, in arguing for women’s higher education, voting rights, and a central role for women in the labor movement, Jones resorted to a rather conventional line of reasoning about gender roles, asserting that women derived their power from their roles as mothers. Their special gift to civilization was love, but love did not mean passivity. Jones saw the union as a family under siege by corporations that were intent on impoverishing the working-class for their own gain. The union movement was more than a group of workers bound together by economic concerns—it was a culture and a way of life bound together by “mother-love.” Mothers brought the extended union family together by teaching devotion, sacrifice, and solidarity: love brought women into the cause of labor and gave them the moral authority for active, public roles within the movement.

Jones’ union-organizing rhetoric was radical calling for the overthrow of the capitalist economy and seeking part ownership of the means of production for labor. Her

union activities were out of line for a woman in Victorian America. She put herself in the middle of violent strikes, faced gun-toting thugs, was shot at, and was jailed. She was an incendiary public speaker who incited working-class men and women through her words, and angered male labor leaders such as John L. Lewis, United Mine Workers president, when she spoke out against the conservatism of craft unions. Yet, despite her radical views of the relationship between capital and labor, Mother Jones never questioned the conventional understanding of women as wives and mothers. In fact, she used those roles as a wedge to make a place for women in the union. Her ultimate goal for working-class families was always in line with the traditional gender ideas of nineteenth century Americans: a living wage for working men so that women could stay home and children could go to school.

Mother Jones is a solidly written, well-researched study of one of America’s most passionate female labor leaders. Gorn situates Mother Jones solidly within the events, movements, and ideological thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He skillfully separates the real Mary Jones from the legendary Mother Jones, even-handedly assessing Jones’ strengths and weaknesses. Gorn’s lively prose and powerful narrative make this study accessible to popular audiences, yet, Gorn’s judicious use of archival sources, newspaper accounts, speeches, and Jones’ autobiography, make this book an equally important source for both undergraduate and graduate level classes in women’s history, labor history, ethnic history, as well as Gilded Age and Progressive Era history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Joyce A. Hanson. Review of Gorn, Elliott J., *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5530>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.