

Book Review of  
The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins—  
Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the Minimum Wage  
By Kirstin Downey

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Submitted by Deborah Vose  
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In her 2009 book, *Frances Perkins: The Woman Behind the New Deal*, Kristen Downey explores the 'life and legacy' of America's first female Presidential Cabinet member. Downey asserts that Perkins's extraordinary contributions to both labor and social legislation, as well as her integrity and personal courage, deserve much greater recognition and acclaim than they have received. The author's extensive research, coupled with her impressive knowledge about the political and social events during Perkins' lifetime, 1880-1965, offers a robust picture of the world that Perkins observed, and strove mightily to improve.

Downey attributes Perkins success to three primary qualities: she was an adept observer of people who could figure out what make them 'tick'; she constantly searched for common ground between warring factions, and she was willing and able to make herself inconspicuous, and let others take credit for her ideas and victories as long it helped to achieve her goals. A more critical analysis might fault Perkins for modifying herself to further her personal ambitions. However, Downey justifies Perkins switching her religious and political affiliations, as she had drifted from the beliefs passed on by her parents, while modifying herself to appear matronly was intended to get male colleagues to view her as they would their mothers.

Downey forthrightly details Perkins's effort to conceal that her husband, Paul Wilson and daughter, Susanna, were institutionalized periodically to treat bipolar disorder, but points out that a woman's career could not have survived these revelations in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike other biographers, Downey does not draw a definitive conclusion, but cites strong circumstantial evidence that she and Mary Harriman Rumsey, a wealthy, widowed socialite, were intimate. Though she clearly admires Perkins, Downey

manages to offer a full, balanced, picture of this complex, energetic woman in this well-written and documented biography.

Perkins, christened Fannie Coralie, was born in 1880, and raised in Worcester, MA. Her independent spirit often baffled her parents, and though her father encouraged her, she recalled friction with her anti-intellectual mother who favored her younger, prettier sister. Frances's queries about why poverty afflicted some families and not others perplexed her middle class parents. Although her family contributed to food baskets, and her mother helped needy families through her church, Frances was distressed by her family's superior attitude toward poor people. After attending a mostly male high school, she enrolled at all-female Mount Holyoke College where her obvious leadership skills were recognized, culminating in her election as president of her senior class. She also shed the name Fannie, despised because of its demeaning connotation— and adopted Frances, which she felt was more dignified. She studied sociology to satisfy her desire to understand the causes of, and ponder remedies for, myriad social ills.

Her interest in helping the less fortunate motivated her to move to New York City and apply for social work jobs. Perkins lacked experience, and was advised to volunteer. She had to support herself, so she taught in Chicago, but became a dedicated volunteer at programs run by Jane Addams' Hull House, and "immediately set about reinventing herself. She changed her name, her faith, and her political persuasion, and impressed everyone with her energy and her growing political savvy "(16). She left her childhood Congregational sect for the Episcopal Church, and found that her values had shifted away from those of Republican Party that her parents favored. It would be hard to view

this reinvention as simple expediency. Downey explains that Frances recognized she no longer shared her family's beliefs and was disengaging from them and connecting with influential people who supported her aims to improve the lives of the poor and powerless.

Almost every one of Frances's dreams echo those of liberal Americans even today, favoring social programs that would provide 'cradle to grave' support. First in New York, and later in Washington, she worked to outlaw child labor, institute a shorter workday, fire safety standards, a minimum wage, workman's compensation insurance, and social security (for widows). She also demonstrated for women's suffrage, and opposed discrimination based on race, gender, and religion. She even supported universal health care, a cause that remains controversial to this day—more than 60 years later. Her prescience is impressive, as she recognized that the men who headed labor unions were susceptible to the same lust for power that afflicted some business leaders. She also allied herself with politicians, especially after New York Governor Al Smith 'chided' [her], "If you girls are going to get what you want through legislation, there better not be any separation between social workers and government." (77)

Perkins' witnessing the Triangle Factory fire in March 1911 that resulted in 146 deaths of Italian and Jewish textile workers, most young women, was a coincidence. She happened to be having tea at a nearby ritzy home, but it was "without doubt . . . a turning point, [and] reoriented her life. Journalist Will Irwin, a close friend, summed it up: 'What Frances Perkins saw that day started her on her career.'" (36) No less a personage than Former President Teddy Roosevelt chose her to chair the New York State Factory Investigating Committee that was formed to make recommendations that would protect

factory workers from unsafe, even fatal, working conditions. Downey herself poses the question, wondering how Roosevelt even knew who Frances was, “How would a former president be acquainted with a young newcomer to New York City?” . . . Frances had paved the way by corresponding with [asking him to advocate for the National Consumers League.] At that time he said no, but had left the door open for future requests.” (48-49)

Perkins’ alliance with powerful men reveals her uncanny ability to take the measure of people, and figure out how to get them to support her social agenda. The list of men she cultivated is long and includes some rough-hewn characters, such as Smith, fire engineer and safety advocate H.F. J. Porter, and union leader John Mitchell, whose admiration and loyalty she won by a combination of flattery, political savvy and skill, and her sincere wish to improve her country. She kept exchanges with men, including letters she found humorous; in a red envelope she labeled “Notes on the Male Mind.” (45) She realized that her gender was not always a liability, and deliberately adopted black dresses, pearls and a more matronly demeanor . . . [and set out to] comport herself in a way that reminded men of their mothers. (45) Rather than making herself more attractive to men, she believed that she would elicit more cooperation, if she looked more staid and matronly, reflecting that men “know and respect their mothers—ninety-nine percent of them do. . . .”(45)

In 1918 Smith appointed her to Industrial Commission, where she also inspired her colleagues to be more active in mediating labor disputes. Just months into the job, she traveled to Rome, New York, to help resolve a volatile battle that was brewing between Italian immigrant workers and copper factory owners. She persuaded the governor to

grant her more time to negotiate with the strikers who had explosives and were in a standoff with gun-bearing state police . . .

Frances met once again with the workers and promised to hold hearings into their allegations. Speaking imperfect Italian, she asked them to get rid of the dynamite immediately. They agreed and delivered loads of explosives in suitcases, bags, even a baby carriage. The dynamite was dumped into a canal. Frances sighed with relief. (82)

She persuaded Head Commissioner Mitchell, and the other colleagues to preside at the hearings, and the dispute was settled. She summed up her approach, one that she employed successfully again and again, in these words,

‘My plan of action was the usual trick,’ Frances said, ‘You meet the workers and find out what their complaints are. You know they are. You’ve been told. But you meet them so they will know you know . . . This is a standard technique. Every mediator does this. You listen to the employers and you listen to them equally sympathetically. They have problems, too. (82-83)

She next showed a craftiness that demonstrated her political skill. In her purse she had a copy of an obscene letter that the most truculent of the factory owners had written to the workers’ representatives—this in addition to physically manhandling some employees. She showed Mitchell the letter, and at a critical point in the negotiations, he read the letter aloud to buttress the workers’ claims of unfair, insulting treatment. It was a turning point, and the strike was quickly settled.

Her long history with Roosevelt began when she worked on his successful campaign for governor of New York. Though the outgoing governor, Al Smith, lost his bid for the Presidency and had a bitter falling out with FDR, Frances remained friendly with both men. Perkins was well aware of their differences; Smith was a self-made man, a Roman Catholic, a machine politician and a bit uncouth, while Roosevelt was a patrician, born into a wealthy family who knew all the right people. It is a testament to Perkins’ perceptiveness that she appreciated the ‘reformer’ in both men. Especially for FDR, she was a sounding board,

pushing him to include improvements in working and living conditions for ordinary people in his agenda. FDR repeatedly sought her advice because of her proven ability to nudge opposing parties to common ground, and her remarkable ability to sense the depth of the support for her social agenda. Although she did not receive credit for many of the programs that she conceived, she was proud that many of them became successful elements of “The New Deal”. She survived an impeachment attempt, and submitted her resignation to Roosevelt several times, he begged her to stay. One time he even wept and leaned on her shoulder, pleading with her to stay. She had befriended both Eleanor, and Sara Roosevelt, FDR’s mother, and both women saw her as an asset to the President. The explanation for Perkins’s devotion to social programs that would rescue people from poverty and illness can be found in her passionate faith.

The church’s teachings also gave her substantive guidance about the right path to take when confronted with decisions, and the hopeful message of Christianity helped her retain her optimism. Her devotion waxed and waned over the years, but nonetheless served as a bedrock and a way to seek meaning in life when so much seemed inexplicable. . . . When friends once questioned why it was important to help the poor, Frances responded that it was what Jesus would want them to do. (18)

Truman accepted her resignation in 1944, but Frances still needed to make money to support herself and her troubled family. She wrote the moderately successful *The Roosevelt I Knew* and was working on her autobiography when she died. She also needed a place to live. The existing pattern of friends and admirers aiding Perkins in her time of need continued. A group of young Cornell scholars, in awe of her role as a ‘New Dealer’, arranged for Frances to get both a teaching position and on campus lodging at the Telluride House, where graduate students flocked to her. Men and women young enough to be her grandchildren were drawn to her warmth and intelligence, and included her in their

conversations, dinners, and outings. Although newspapers detailed her accomplishments in obituaries following her death in April 1965, most Americans remain ignorant about the key role she played in much of the social legislation that guaranteed worker safety and for her belief in a society's duty to care for its most vulnerable citizens. Downey's book goes a long way in righting the neglect she has suffered, and placing her squarely among those who pioneered social legislation in this country between the 1930s and early 1940s.



## Summary of Downey's Sources and Methodology

Downey details the sources she used in writing this book in an "Acknowledgments" section that lead me to conclude that she did an admirable, thorough job of ferreting out information about her subject. Fortunately she was able to locate Perkins' diary in which she recorded many of her conversation verbatim. Caches of letters located in the homes of various friends helped corroborate her diary entries, as well as add more information. The author also used Frances book's *The FDR I Knew*, and the thousands of hours of oral history collected by New Deal scholars currently housed at Columbia University. Her papers and other archival materials were stored in at least 10 separate locations, and though her autobiography had not been completed when she died, Perkins left extensive notes. After Frances' death, Martin Neufield, one of her young, admiring Cornell associates who knew something of Susanna's mental instability and egocentric tendencies, wisely made copies of all Perkins' notes for the book before handing them over. His move proved prudent, because as soon as she learned of her mother's death, Susanna took steps to destroy all references to her own mental health issues, and those of her father's. A more complete portrait of Perkins is possible thanks to these notes, and they refute the criticism directed at her (even by some friends) that she emasculated her husband, and neglected her daughter for the sake of her career.