



One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875–1930

Lynn Musslewhite, Suzanne Jones Crawford

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Born in Nebraska in 1875, Kate Barnard spent most of her childhood in Kansas, where family dislocation and financial failure darkened her early life. After Barnard and her father moved to Oklahoma Territory in the 1890s, Kate had unsatisfying stints as a schoolteacher and a stenographer before she discovered her life work in politics and social reform. *One Woman's Political Journey: Kate Barnard and Social Reform, 1875–1930* details the life's work—including the political successes and failures—of a complex and courageous woman who appreciated that she was on the cutting edge of new and novel opportunities for women.

Crusading for the disadvantaged, Barnard became a spokeswoman for child labor laws, a compulsory school attendance law, a juvenile justice system, and a modern penal structure. In 1907, at age thirty-two, she became the first woman in the nation elected to a state post—Commissioner of Charities and Corrections, a post created specifically for her by Oklahoma's constitutional convention. Her dramatic rhetoric and favorable publicity attracted national attention and the admiration of Oklahomans.

Convinced that women could effect positive change, she encouraged them to move into the public arena and embrace social justice reform. She also formed a coalition of farmers and laborers that led to the creation of Oklahoma's Democratic Party. In her first term, Barnard persuaded Oklahoma's all-male legislature to pass reforms announcing state responsibility for the welfare of children and forced changes in the state's humanitarian institutions. In her second term, she sought protection for property rights of American Indian children. But Barnard's career was not without obstacles. Her lack of control over budgets and personnel, along with her frequent clashing with male politicians limited her effectiveness and fueled her growing discouragement with politics.

Named by *Oklahoma Today* as one of the fifty most influential Oklahomans in the past one hundred years, Kate Barnard is finally the deserved focus of a full-length scholarly biography.

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