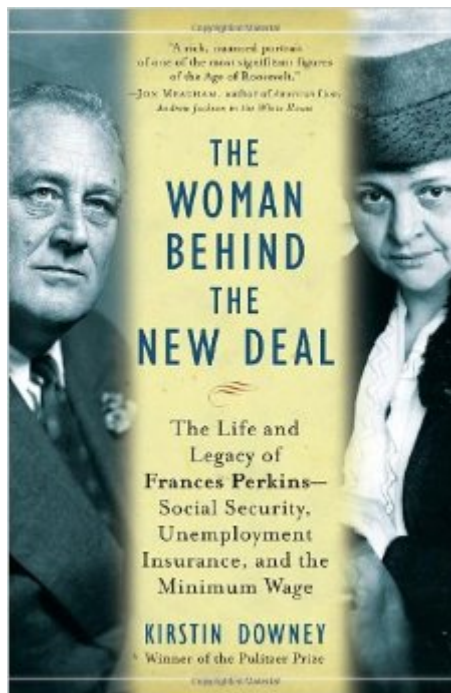


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The Woman Behind The New Deal: The Life And Legacy Of Frances Perkins, Social Security, Unemployment Insurance,



Synopsis

“Kirstin Downey’s lively, substantive and “dare I say” inspiring new biography of Perkins . . . not only illuminates Perkins’ career but also deepens the known contradictions of Roosevelt’s character.” —Maureen Corrigan, NPR Fresh Air
One of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s closest friends and the first female secretary of labor, Perkins capitalized on the president’s political savvy and popularity to enact most of the Depression-era programs that are today considered essential parts of the country’s social safety network. Frances Perkins is no longer a household name, yet she was one of the most influential women of the twentieth century. Based on eight years of research, extensive archival materials, new documents, and exclusive access to Perkins’ family members and friends, this biography is the first complete portrait of a devoted public servant with a passionate personal life, a mother who changed the landscape of American business and society. Frances Perkins was named Secretary of Labor by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. As the first female cabinet secretary, she spearheaded the fight to improve the lives of America’s working people while juggling her own complex family responsibilities. Perkins’ ideas became the cornerstones of the most important social welfare and legislation in the nation’s history, including unemployment compensation, child labor laws, and the forty-hour work week. Arriving in Washington at the height of the Great Depression, Perkins pushed for massive public works projects that created millions of jobs for unemployed workers. She breathed life back into the nation’s labor movement, boosting living standards across the country. As head of the Immigration Service, she fought to bring European refugees to safety in the United States. Her greatest triumph was creating Social Security. Written with a wit that echoes Frances Perkins’ own, award-winning journalist Kirstin Downey gives us a riveting exploration of how and why Perkins slipped into historical oblivion, and restores Perkins to her proper place in history.

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Customer Reviews

In this age when Presidential cabinet members come and go almost with the frequency of auto salesmen, several generations of politics watchers have grown up pretty much ignorant of the name Frances Perkins. Her time in the national spotlight was brief --- the 12 years of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. As FDR's Secretary of Labor she was especially prominent during the years 1933-1940, when domestic concerns were on the front burner and she played a leading role in pushing for such causes as the Social Security Act, wage and hour laws, immigration reform, workplace safety, the right of workers to organize, pensions, welfare and old-age insurance. When World War II erupted, she was less often in the news but still active in matters like pushing for admission of Jewish refugees into the U.S. As the first woman ever to serve in a President's cabinet, she was subject to blatant sexist attitudes and scurrilous rumors not only from know-nothing outsiders but also from her own colleagues in government. Author Kirstin Downey was perhaps too young to have known anything about Perkins at first-hand, but she has done a thorough job of bringing this determined yet personally complex woman to life for a new audience. She shows how Perkins's complex character was molded by early revolt against her family background and by a conscious strategy of working with "imperfect people" to attain ends she thought important. Downey is sympathetic toward her subject's sly tactic of first studying closely the people she wanted to use, then playing up to them in ways that helped her get things done. She had a gift for ingratiating herself with people who could help her. She was an early associate of Jane Addams and Al Smith.

This book should have been written years ago. Really. Being Sec. of Labor for 13 years is a big deal and should be considered one. Unfortunately, Perkins is the butt of too many jokes in DC "in labor for 12 years and gave birth to nothing!" and that god-awful ugly building over 395. It's great to think that we once had someone better versed in social work than a lawyer as Sec. of Labor. Washington had a heart back then. The thing that bothered me about this book is that the author seems to have completely bought into the rivalry - albeit, one-sided - between Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt. I don't think Eleanor was aware of it. And I don't think it was a rivalry until later in life. There was then and is now, room for two prominent women, not just one. I don't think a comparison between a

bureaucrat and a First Lady is an apt one. It's as if Eleanor Roosevelt is a dragon this author must slay to reveal Perkins' contribution. They had a lot of things in common. It was interesting to read of the ways that sexism affected her career. In unexpected ways, actually. I was saddened to read of Perkins' deliberate efforts to downplay her appearance. Her exclusion from cabinet social events - and her awkward inclusion in cabinet wives social events. I found the 1920s very interesting reading. The '20s were tough for both Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt. As Louis Howe once said, being in the White House was easy compared to the '20s for Eleanor. The same could be said of Perkins as Sec. of Labor. The discussion of the establishment of Social Security is a good read for those interested in the politics of today and the arguments over 'fixing' SS and broadening access to healthcare.

As an American History teacher high school teacher, all my texts include a sidebar, or mention of sorts, about Frances Perkins. This book exceeded all my expectations, and I found myself breathless (?) as I raced to read more! In fact, I almost had a sick feeling of what would have happened if I hadn't read this book, a kind of "near miss," for it is that good. For a history teacher of 20+ years, I count it in my top 5 books or educating me about a person's impact on history. Even after reading it, I went back and learned about how Downey sleuthed to find all the details about Perkins--a feat that allows us to understand and appreciate her subject's life. The pivotal role of Perkins' accomplishments begins with her ties to the suffrage movement and crusade for better labor laws--as she herself said--"I'd rather have laws than a union." It highlights her close relationship with Florence Kelley, but also the New York of Tamany Hall, and the ins and outs of Albany politics. She even witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist fire herself...then, later, she continues to press for changes in labor laws (a man's world) for women, and her particular crusade against child labor. Downey discusses Perkins' deep religiousness--how she prayed and pondered over the draftmanship of the Social Security proposal while in isolation at a priory. Do not blame Perkins for the state of Social Security today--for, as this book makes clear, it was an immediate lifesaver for millions of elderly Americans. She wanted to oversee it after she retired from the cabinet, but was not able to obtain the post.

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