

Connie Cronley. 2021. *A Life on Fire: Oklahoma's Kate Barnard*. Oklahoma. 301 pages.

A Life on Fire provides a realistic, fascinating portrayal of the life and career of Kate Barnard, one of the most important political figures at the dawn of politics in Oklahoma. Although known as “the Good Angel of Oklahoma,” Kate lived her life with a fierceness that defied the expectations and limitations placed on women and helped shape the political landscape of the State of Oklahoma. Even while providing an inspiring depiction of Kate and her work, Cronley does not hesitate to acknowledge that Kate was not a flawless icon. She was subject to and part of the language and ideas of her day. This book chronicles Kate’s triumphs and failures including her political missteps, hard decisions, regrets, and tendency to overwork herself until she became ill.

The opening chapters follow Kate’s early life, education, and budding career as a politician and reformer. In many ways, Kate’s personal growth paralleled Oklahoma’s path into Statehood. The book details her lonely childhood with her widowed, often absent father and speculates that this upbringing likely influenced her desire to look out for others. Cronley describes what ended up being a turning point for Kate, when she attended the 1904 World’s Fair and she was first introduced to ideas of social reform and ultimately “found her destiny.” After returning to Oklahoma, Kate began working to organize to feed and clothe poor families. However, she quickly realized that solving poverty required more permanent solutions than clothing and food drives and is quoted in saying, “[i]n my effort to do something for humanity, I was drawn into politics.”

While telling the story of Kate’s early work in politics, Cronley sheds light on the internal struggles at the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention including Kate’s clashes with Alfalfa Bill Murray (President of the Constitutional Convention and later Governor of Oklahoma). Through Kate’s work as the Oklahoma Commissioner

of Charities and Corrections, readers are offered a chilling account of the orphanages, prisons, and “insane hospitals” at the time of early statehood. Among many offenses that Kate uncovered, one that is particularly highlighted is what she called the “Indian Problem,” referring to the extreme theft and mismanagement of the property of Native American orphans by non-Native wards. Kate’s fight to end this injustice ultimately plays a critical role in her political downfall.

A Life on Fire provides a thrilling account of not only the life and work of Kate Barnard, but also a unique glimpse into the politics of early statehood. Kate focused her entire existence on protecting the most vulnerable and in Cronley’s book we are able to see their real-life struggles. Through both Kate’s successes and failures, readers are able to gain invaluable insights on politics, justice, and hope.

Jacintha Webster
East Central University