Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent sprung from the late twentieth century expansion of women’s and gender history, the architects of which declared the field’s importance to every time and place. These scholars reframed developments long presumed to affect, but not to be made by, women: politics, the economy, urban culture, international relations, war. In this context, Rutgers University historian Dee Garrison found the activist and journalist Mary Heaton Vorse to be an irresistible protagonist. Garrison pushed past warnings that a biography might not boost her career or contribute to scholarly debates enough to reward the many years she devoted to it.1

In Vorse’s life, Garrison had found the perfect vessel for advancing women’s and gender historians’ basic premise: the falsehood of separating the personal, or private, from the political, or public. This divide tends to dismiss the former as unworthy of study and deny women a place in history. Vorse helped to build many of the past century’s radical movements, but Garrison gives equal attention to how these class- and gender-based conflicts convulsed her own life, too. A sterling artifact of its era, Mary Heaton Vorse has much to teach today’s scholars and activists.

Mary Heaton Vorse spent more than five decades fighting for feminism, labor rights, and global peace. She started at the margins but moved to the center of these campaigns. Born in 1874, a stifling time

Foreword

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for ambitious women, Vorse began a life of rebellion in her early twenties. Defying her wealthy Massachusetts family by striking out as a writer and settling in Greenwich Village, she commingled with the most famous radical intellectuals and activists of her time. Vorse’s earliest writing was women’s fiction that explored gender and economic inequality. These issues troubled the nation as unbridled industrialization drew more women to work and their rights claims grew louder.

Widowed with two young children in her early thirties, Vorse was emboldened by her vulnerability. She understood the “brutal handicaps” shouldered by working women like those she saw burn to death in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Vorse joined and reported on labor conflicts in the east, south, and midwest, including the bloody campaign that ended with “labor’s new millions” building the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As a foreign correspondent, she published accounts from all over Europe, including Lenin’s Moscow and Hitler’s Germany. In writing that was meant to “move people as well as to report facts,” Vorse gave special notice to women and their concerns: “The immigrant wife, the Serbian orphan, the mean tenement home, the starved children, the courage of girl pickets — these [were] the core of her material.”

Her activism was so effective, her writing so forceful, that she remained on an FBI watch list well into her ninth decade. Vorse enjoyed considerable fame, but in this biography her reputation is the backdrop to the story of her inner turmoil. The book’s running thread is the tension between Vorse’s desire to do work that met her own standards and her need to support her family. She critiqued even as she succumbed to the cultural and economic constructs that demanded everything from women, then devalued it. Vorse’s efforts to be both “a model of selfless womanhood” and “an autonomous individual” pulled her apart. She was sometimes an overbearing mother and sometimes an unapologetic careerist. At points she showed unflinching bravery, and at other moments she withdrew from challenges she would have previously embraced. Vorse ultimately deemed herself a “double failure” because she could not pay complete attention to her work or her three children—children who only became self-sufficient when Vorse was in her sixties. Only in her eighties could she write completely on her own terms. Throughout her life, Vorse weathered cycles of security and precarity, conviction and uncertainty. Her story followed no smooth arc.
This book bears several hallmarks of its time. Scholars in the late twentieth century experimented with narrative and evidence, pursuing different avenues to demonstrate that incorporating women and gender transforms historical knowledge. This effort continues, and feminist biography has newly come into fashion. Recent biographies have restored notable women to their place in history. But they are also deeply revelatory, providing an intimate portrait of the protagonist and then reinterpreting an era through her eyes. Garrison sets Vorse at the center of an America in transition, making it appear both far off and familiar. The book invites the reader to share Vorse’s outrage that poor mothers had to buy cheap milk they knew would sicken their babies and to sympathize with her as she sobbed in the barber’s chair when her teenaged daughter convinced her to shear off her hair.

Biography is well suited for another of women’s and gender historians’ recent preoccupations: challenging concepts and categories that can mean more to scholars than they did to their subjects. This book models that approach. Vorse’s life cut across movements and eras as she moved in many circles at once. Her creed was a hard-boiled pragmatism. Vorse became an activist in the early twentieth century not because it was the Progressive Era, but because certain experiences aroused her convictions. She came to view pacifism, feminism, and labor rights as parts of the same fight to distribute power to those ground down by class stratification and male supremacy. While she appreciated Communism for its ability to galvanize workers — and federal officials sought to smear her as a “Red” — she came to reject the Party for its infatuation with debate over action. Garrison’s account of Vorse’s life undermines tempting assumptions that can flatten historical actors and distort their motivations.

Mary Heaton Vorse was one of several landmark late-twentieth century histories that examined how ideas of gender difference have shaped economic structures. Scholars have recently returned to explicit analysis of capitalism, emphasizing powerful men and abstract market forces. These new works tend to ignore how “the circumstances of women were essential to both capital accumulation and class formation,” as the historian Amy Dru Stanley has written.7

To Vorse, women offered the most accurate perspective for taking stock of capitalism. Only a female-centered standpoint, she thought, could explode masculine myths and reveal the true costs of economic
inequality and war. Vorse sought to capture how gendered notions naturalized the suffering of starving children and the plight of women who kept families afloat however they could. But she did not perceive them as passive victims. She recorded their challenges to elites’ power as well as the indifference of middle-class onlookers.

Vorse believed that if she wrote well enough, she could unsettle her readers with the human horrors of runaway capitalism and global unrest, convincing them that neither was inevitable. Her story, and this book, remain as fresh and urgent as ever.

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