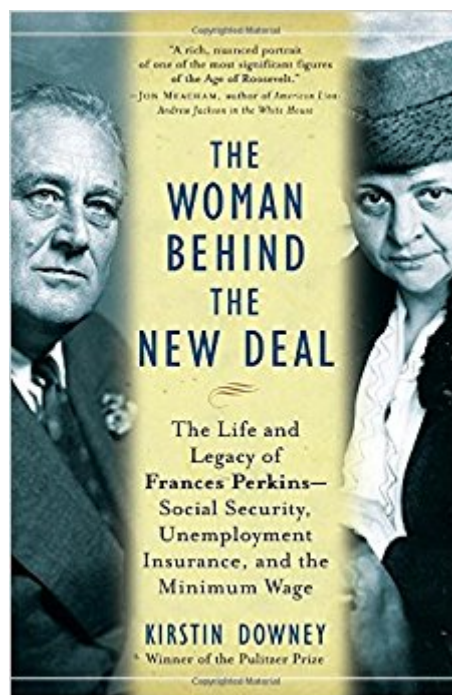




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# The Woman Behind The New Deal: The Life And Legacy Of Frances Perkins, Social Security, Unemployment Insurance,



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**Book Description** 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's 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.

Exclusive: Kirstin Downey on Frances Perkins

Housing prices had been pumped up by crazy new kinds of loans, and foreclosures of homes and farms were surging as borrowers faltered under the payments. Companies had enjoyed record profits and ploughed the money into machinery designed to boost productivity, cutting their workforces. The unemployment rate skyrocketed. Companies slashed the wages of the remaining workers, and asked them to work longer and longer hours. And then Wall Street imploded as the stock market crashed. This was the scenario Franklin Delano Roosevelt faced as he entered the presidency in 1933. An era of rampant speculation had come to an end. A woman stepped in to put things right. FDR turned to a long-time friend for guidance about how best to proceed, and asked her to join his Cabinet as Secretary of Labor. The middle-aged woman, a social worker named Frances Perkins, had spent a lifetime preparing for the job. She had studied economic boom and bust cycles, and knew they were a recurring pattern in modern industrial economies. She had a vision for how to blunt the worst of the hardship that American families were suffering, until business recovered again on its own. She proposed a system of unemployment insurance, so that when workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own, they would have some income to keep their families fed while they looked for new jobs. Senior citizens had lost their life savings as real estate values fell and the stock market tumbled, and they needed some sort of income support, some kind of social security, when they grew too old to work. Employed people were stumbling under long work hours. She advocated the creation of a 40-hour workweek and a minimum wage. Companies were hiring teenagers instead of adults to save money, and she thought the time was ripe to place new restrictions on child labor.

“Nothing like this has ever been done in the United States before,” she told him. “You know that, don’t you?” Within weeks she would head to Washington, D.C. by his side. The challenges they would face would be great. The conservative Supreme Court, businessmen, free-market ideologues and even some labor leaders would oppose them. They would try to block her work. They would argue that the poor should be left to fend for themselves. They would savage Frances's reputation, they would eventually try to impeach her. But she would not give up. Frances Perkins, the first woman to take a position in the top tier of federal government, would succeed. The institutions she created would help future generations cope with the recurring

economic downturns that she had predicted would come again. Her extraordinary achievements make her one of the most influential women of the twentieth century, one whose legacy should be widely celebrated. --Kirstin Downey (Photo © Evan Giordanella) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review. No individual "not even Eleanor Roosevelt" exerted more influence over the formulation of FDR's New Deal or did more to implement the programs than Frances Perkins (1880-1965). As former Washington Post staff writer Downey makes plain in this deeply researched biography, the first female Cabinet member was the primary shaper of such new concepts as unemployment insurance, the 40-hour work week and "last but not least" Social Security. At a time when the United States stands at the brink of another economic meltdown calling for sweeping federal interventions, Downey provides not only a superb rendering of history but also a large dose of inspiration drawn from Perkins's clearheaded, decisive work with FDR to solve urgent problems diligently and to succeed in the face of what seemed insurmountable odds. Confronting family issues "a frequently institutionalized husband with severe psychiatric problems; a deeply secret lesbian relationship with Mary Harriman Rumsey (sister of Averell Harriman); a daughter from whom she was often estranged" Perkins nevertheless exhibited tireless grace under pressure again and again, always rising to the occasion in the name of every and any progressive cause. (Mar. 3) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

First the book review: The book was extremely well written, the author has an enjoyable writing style and she did a wonderful job of sharing Frances' life, accomplishments, and challenges with the reader. It was very sad that Frances spent her life helping others only to die alone neglected by her family thanks to her daughter's selfishness. Kirstin's description of the daughter was wonderful on page 392, "more ornamental than useful, who felt contempt for people who worked for a living." while she sponged off her mother whom she hated. Despite having a mentally ill husband and daughter who took most of her money and a great deal of her time and were continuous burdens Frances made the world a better place to live. Then my observations: Frances was amazing, too bad FDR did not better support her. Strange how history has forgotten Frances and credits FDR with her work. The portrayal of FDR was fairly accurate which surprised me. The book left me with three questions, did Frances receive social security payments, how much of FDR's success came from Frances, and how much better would things be today if FDR had fully supported Frances? Frances

worked extremely hard to make things better while dealing with horrible family problems that would have incapacitated most people. What a contrast to most of today's politicians who only take while making things worse.

Read this for my liberation and process theology course in 3 days. It provides a history that is not taught; a history that places current political arguments and benefits received/or lack thereof in perspective. It provides a truer insight into the historical-political situations that unfolded. As for the main character, I wished I could have met her. She was an American in the best sense- strong yet flexible, reliable, thoughtful, discerning, savvy, disciplined, strategic, caring and led by a deep spiritual concern for humanity. Simply an amazing, astounding woman. I and many Americans and non-Americans (see: pre-curse to martial plan and general labor policies) are near indebted to you. Not in the sense that we must do anything. But after reading of her life, how could you not be compelled to do great things for humanity. Thank you to the author and others who made this book available. Miss Frances Perkins, you will not be forgotten.

I bought this book after reading about Frances Perkins in "The Road To Character" by David Brooks. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. What this woman contributed was amazing, the people she influenced are a who's who and the history that the story retold provides a lesson for everyone today. It was hard to image the living conditions and suffering that took place in New York City in 1911, when the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire took the lives of 146 workers. Her experiences could fill many lifetimes. Her dealings with Tammany Hall in New York and the Federal Government in Washington D.C. provide intriguing insights to history that many of us forgot or never appreciated. Many of today's political hot buttons are discussed; social security, unemployment insurance, minimum wage, immigration, education and much more. Frances helped design and impact much of it. Seems many of her accomplishments were borrowed by others to bolster their supposed legacy. This should be required reading for all students as it provides great context for issues we labor over today and presents the reader with a government official who worked for the good of the masses. There were few such officials at that time who were so selfless, and probably fewer today unfortunately.

This was an illuminating biography of a real boundary breaker. Francis Perkins, whose politics leaned a bit further left than I personally stand, was nevertheless a thoroughly impressive female leader in a setting where outright hostility and malevolence based on gender alone was not only

accepted but seemingly encouraged. Ms. Perkins' sublime way of sidestepping blustering male counterparts and outwitting (and outworking) male adversaries whilst earning stolid loyalty and respect from open-minded men of the day remain admirable and shocking to a woman born in the late 20th century. This is a great read!

Just received this excellent copy - almost new. Very pleased with the sturdy copy. The writing, however, is what the review should be about. I delved into the book immediately. My book club is coming up soon. The writing is engaging, and it is obvious from the first few chapters that the author deeply respects Mrs. Perkins' work in the Roosevelt Cabinet. Her work ethic and accomplishments are amazing. I remember being introduced to her in a history class in High School. I look forward to continue reading this well written, well researched book

Wonderful account of America's history with the role of government and the protection of citizens from poverty and abuse at the hands of employers. Frances Perkins is the person, more than FDR or anyone else, responsible for the New Deal. it is dismaying to see what she faced for being an intelligent, progressive, assertive woman that played the male politicians' game. There are so many parallels to today's political situation. I highly recommend it to anyone who cares about our country and where we are headed. Well written and documented.

If you love history as made by extraordinary people, you'll love this book, as I do. The author, an investigative reporter, has dug out instance after instance when Frances Perkins quietly, cleverly and successfully laid the foundations of the New Deal. Also, it's instructive to realize how many of the issues she dealt with (racism, sexism, xenophobia, unions struggling to survive a huge economic down turn isolationism and petty partisan politics (and more) are still with us today. But mainly, this is just a book you don't want to lay down. I've already bought two more copies for close friends, and will no doubt buy and send more! Nicholas Cunningham MD Dr P.H.

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