

From A Women's Eyes: an Analysis of the Society of the Great Depression

Mary Dudro

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“It was the best of times and the worst of times,” said Charles Dickens of the French Revolution, and judging by a letter written to a friend in the summer of 1931, it seems that Mary Warner would have said the same thing about the era of the Great Depression in the United States. Born in 1874 on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Warner was raised by Irish immigrants with strong values of courtesy and respect towards both man and nature, and she was no stranger to hard work. She received no higher than an eighth-grade education and married sometime in her late teens. Her husband, Mason, started out as a type-setter but eventually became owner of his own advertising agency, which raised their level in society from lower to upper-middle class. Her elevated social status gave her the leisure to pursue her own interests, such as learning to drive a car and further educating herself through extensive reading, and she was well acquainted with important women of her time, such as the author Willa Cather and the political activist Emma Goldman, both of whom stayed in her home. Her identity as being from the Mid-West certainly influenced her perspective on the Depression in a unique way, as the Mid-West had particularly experienced many changes brought about during the previous age, the Progressive Era. In her letter, Warner focused mainly on a road trip she took over the summer from her home in Winnetka, Illinois, a rapidly growing, affluent town on the North Shore of Chicago, across the Midwestern states to her childhood home in South Dakota, which she had left some forty years earlier. She regaled her friend with the scenery and related any interesting discoveries or observations made along the way. She also commented on many current issues. Although sheltered from the poverty felt by many during the Depression, Warner's keen interest

in and insightful observations about society showed her to be an intelligent and independent thinker, which was no doubt a reflection of many women in her day. Mary Warner's letter revealed many aspects of society during the Depression, including the ever progressing status of women, the debt-problem behind the financial crisis, the changes in industry and rural life, the presence in the Mid-West of certain immigrant populations, and the mistreatment of Native Americans.

Throughout her letter, Warner's subtle references to marriage and female education and self-support, revealed the changes for women that had been brought about by the women's movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The pretext of her letter itself, to tell her friend about the road trip she took over the summer, served as testimony to the new freedoms women were experiencing. "I managed to wangle a Packard out of the financial welter then wrote her to join me for that long deferred trip," the trip being a twenty-six hundred-mile voyage by car, which was possible only in light of recent changes made in social norms by the Women's Movement.¹ In fact, women and automobiles had been developing quite a relationship with each other since the early 1900s: paving the way for many others after them, several extraordinary young women learned to drive when automobiles were first coming into fashion and made cross-country road trips, promoting the Women's Movement throughout the States; during the 1920s Henry Ford employed women in his plants, and by the 1930s car manufacturers were actually marketing cars towards women due to the rise in women drivers.²

Warner began her letter by relating the latest news about a friend of hers and mentioned that her friend's daughters were "just in the midst of their vital education for self-support,"

¹ Mary Warner, "Letter to Mrs. Nelson." 1931.

² "Women's Automotive History Highlights," *Antique Auto Museum* [online]; available from <http://www.aacamuseum.org/Pdf/WomensHistory.pdf>; Internet; accessed 01 May 2012.

adding that such a period was an anxious time.³ Lower- and middle-class women had been pursuing careers for self-support since post-Civil War days, and their education had expanded to college by the early twentieth century, although it was mostly public universities that had allowed for co-ed education, mainly in the Midwest, while private ivy leagues and colleges in the South still discriminated against women.⁴ Educated or not, women had been entering the work force steadily since the Industrial Revolution and by the end of World War I, the total number of working women amounted to eight million. Although the work and education available to women was still highly gender-role oriented, the most respected jobs being social work and teaching, by the 1930s women were gaining opportunities to become nurses and even study law and theology.⁵

Although Warner herself did not receive a college education, she was well-informed about the world around her and formed her own opinions about economics and politics. Further on in her letter, she mentioned a conversation she had with her husband about his investments in the stock market some years earlier, in which she doubted the security of his investments. Her husband replied to this with, “You do not seem to be duly pleased. The trouble with you, Mary, is that you are so filled with socialistic ideas you overlook the facts.”⁶ She followed this patronizing remark of her husband's by saying to her friend that, though angry, she did not show it, realizing that “a man craves praise, and rightly so, for doing his level best for his family,” and instead replied with, “No Mason, I appreciate all you've done, but I have a feeling that not one

³ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

⁴ “Women and Education,” *American Decades*. Ed. Judith S. Baughman, et al. Vol. 2: 1910-1919. Detroit: Gale, 2001. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GAIE%7CCX3468300408&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 05 April 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

dollar you are counting on will ever be realized.”⁷ Not only did Warner show herself to be wiser than her husband in this matter, but also proved her intelligence as an independent thinker, almost predicting the stock market crash that would later take place, thrusting the country into the Depression. Warner, like many women, associated with the Socialist Party, which came to prominence during the Progressive movement with a strong center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and saw a revival during the late twenties and early thirties. The movement was particularly important to women, immigrant workers, and farmers as it promoted equal rights for all and the redistribution of wealth.⁸ It is likely Warner was more interested in economics and politics than in fashion or decorating the house, for she also wrote that “trimming hats and hanging wall paper” were quite beyond her, suggesting an independence from traditionally feminine occupations.⁹

Written two years into the Great Depression, Warner's letter was full of references to the national economic crisis on both the average citizen level and on the international level, and her comments revealed the debt-crisis behind the Depression. Following mention of the conversation with her husband, Warner went on to say that after the stock market crash of 1929, the ultimate event that launched the country into the Great Depression, when all of Mason's investments lost seventy-five percent of their value, Mason humbly gave her credit for her previous insight, which he had so disregarded at the time. “Mary, you were absolutely right in your size up of the investment market. Every dollar has sunk seventy-five cents, and no telling when, if ever, it will

⁷Ibid.

⁸ Paul Buhle, Socialist Party," *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*. Ed. Robert S. McElvaine. Vol. 2. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. 893-895. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3404500481&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 07 April 2012.

⁹ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

come anywhere near back.”¹⁰ Warner attributed the foundation of her doubts about the market to her reading *Economic Consequences of the Peace Treaty* by John Maynard Keynes, a member of the British Treasury staff who was a delegate at the Paris Peace Conference and a widely respected economist. “We cannot loan cash and buy foreign securities to the tune of some 40 or 50 billion dollars without playing the very devil with our country, even if our big bankers did make a handsome commission on the deals. Someone said that if our bankers were called to cash tomorrow, not a bank in the country would be solvent.”¹¹ During World War I, the United States became the world's leading creditor, loaning over ten billion dollars to foreign powers to help them finance payments due to the U.S. for war-related purchases and a stabilization of exchange. In order to help the country support these loans, the United States in turn borrowed from citizens through war bonds, promising to pay five percent interest when the loans were realized.¹² The effects of the war in Europe, however, were so grave that the debtor countries could not easily repay their debts, and certainly could not repay them immediately. Warner's doubts about the American economy were founded upon her own reading about the subject.

While passing through Mitchell, South Dakota, Warner learned first-hand about the debt problems of American farmers. Informed by a “suave metropolitan, a representative of these same insurance companies,” that the majority of the farms between their present location at the time and Minnesota were mortgaged “from anywhere from fifty to seventy-five percent more than they would bring on the block.”¹³ Although Warner claimed that you would not be able to

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stephen A. Shuckner, "World War I War Debts," *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 8. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. 542-543. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from

http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3401804606&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 15 April 2012.

¹³ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

guess the poverty of these struggling farmers from the outside, it was indeed true that the farmers in the Mid-West were some of the hardest to be hit by the Depression in the entire country. Part of the reason for their debt problem, the cause of their farms being mortgaged out from under them, was the huge increase in crop production during the Great War, a result that was achieved through the purchase of helpful farm machinery, and the immediate decrease of production and sales after the war was over. In the 1920s, two-fifths of all farmers had taken out mortgages on their farms and three-fifths required credit and loans to produce an annual crop. Between 1929 and 1932, farm income dropped by sixty percent, leaving little hope for the farmers to pay off their debt and keep their farms.¹⁴

Warner went on to comment about the municipal debt problem. “We have certainly 'done' the middle-class and 'done 'em good'. Our school teachers are without pay since last April, and Chicago is actually broke but it isn't officially announced.”¹⁵ Across the country, cities were bankrupt, public school teachers nationwide took huge pay cuts, as high as thirteen percent, and many schools either closed altogether or eliminated any extracurricular courses and cut back on hours of operation due to the lack of funding.

The importance of automobiles in Warner's letter did not only extend to the Women's Movement, but also to changes in industry, and her observations revealed some of the effects of the increasing importance of automobiles and modern machinery on rural life. As she drove through the countryside of her youth, which she had not seen for forty years, Warner remarked on the dramatic changes she observed, stating that in some places changes were so great she

¹⁴ Adrienne M. Petty, "Farm Foreclosures," *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*. Ed. Robert S. McElvaine. Vol. 1. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. 320-322. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3404500178&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 30 March 2012.

¹⁵ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

hardly knew where she was. “They had so cultivated the country with graded roads and drained swamp lands that I was completely lost.”¹⁶ With the rise of travel by automobile, many rural areas required better roads for smoother travel, and the distance of surfaced roads in the country increased from two hundred thousand miles in 1914 to over five hundred thousand miles by 1924. In 1921 the Federal Highway Act provided for a road system that would connect about seventy percent of all American roads, covering over ninety-six thousand miles by the early 1930s.¹⁷ The better roads not only improved ordinary automobile travel, but also promoted the rise of the motor truck industry. “What I mean is that nearly all business supplies are shipped by truck... one can see this motor truck running parallel with the railroads taking all but the heavy duty shipping from them.”¹⁸ Although the first motor wagons were invented in the 1890s, the industry did not really take off until World War I, during which trucking became crucial to transport goods from the factories in the Mid-West to the ports in the East. As the railroads were private industries, owned by elite financial leaders, the motor truck was seen as a lower income form of transportation, gaining popularity in that respect, and it also provided a way of advertising as well. Improvements made in truck designs made them faster and more efficient, and by 1920 over a million trucks were registered.¹⁹

The rise of automobiles affected not only industries but also the rural life-style. “The small railroad village is dying and the larger centers are growing, slowly to be sure, but some

¹⁶ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

¹⁷ James M. Rubenstein, “Roads,” *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 7. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003. 175-180. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3401803627&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 12 April 2012.

¹⁸ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

¹⁹ Don H. Berkebile and Christopher Wells, “Trucking Industry,” *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 8. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003. 230-231. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3401804287&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 29 March 2012.

growth.”²⁰ What Warner was noticing was the towns whose prosperity was directly linked to business brought by the railroads were slowly decaying, especially with the decrease in passenger rail travel. The cities themselves were growing and Chicago, a mere sixteen miles from Warner's home in Winnetka, was a perfect example of the rapid urban growth during the early decades of the twentieth century with a growth of over a million people between 1880 and 1920.²¹ With the rise of modern farm machinery, which lessened the amount of labor needed on farms, people were leaving rural areas in large numbers to take advantage of the jobs available in the urban areas, which were building up around the factories of booming industries. With the telephone and radio, electrical expansion of cities was made easier, and the motor bus and tram systems provided for city-wide transportation.

As were many women in her day, Warner was concerned about immigrants and the treatment of Native Americans, and her open-mindedness towards these different populations showed a progress in the American mentality, lead by the Women's Movement, towards “the other.” In revisiting the countryside of her youth, Warner reconnected with some of her old neighbors and schoolmates, many of whom were Norwegian immigrants. She described how some of them still spoke only broken English and recalled how she herself had helped those her age when they were girls to learn English as they were too shy to ask questions of the teachers, who seemed to discriminate against them because of the language barrier. She described the Norwegians as warm, hospitable people, with “an ox-like patience and a gentleness combined.”²² She imagined that the reason for their large and cheerful presence in the States was due to the

²⁰ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

²¹ John C. Teaford, "Chicago," *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. 131-133. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3401800771&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 14 March 2012.

²² “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

fact that their homeland was both small and “icy.” In fact, when Norwegians first started arriving in the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was due to over population in their country and a need for work. As many of them had farming backgrounds, when the Homestead Act of 1860 guaranteed one-hundred-sixty acres to anyone who could work it for five years, a legislation which Warner's parents themselves took advantage of, the Norwegians started coming to America by the boatload. By 1910 eighty percent of all Norwegian immigrants lived in the upper Mid-West areas.²³ Warner claimed that they seemed to be the dominant nationality in the area as the British and German presence seem to be “passing out,” a circumstance she jokingly, as a mother of five herself, attributed to “either they are too progressive or practice birth control, perhaps both.”²⁴

In fact the British element had been growing less and less noticeable for some time since the British had stopped immigrating to the United States in large numbers after the depression of 1893, which was already after Warner had left South Dakota. The German population, on the other hand, was still quite large throughout the country, especially in the Mid-West, but after World War I and the discrimination and violence German Americans faced, they made their appearance less noticeable by fully assimilating into American culture, obscuring any traces of their German heritage or culture, and even Americanizing their names.²⁵ Although many were prejudiced against the Germans after their role in the war, Warner remained un-embittered and in recalling a visit made to a German settlement in Ohio at the end of the summer said that it was

²³ Odd S. Lovell, “Norwegian Americans,” *Every Culture* [online]; available from <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Le-Pa/Norwegian-Americans.html>; Internet; accessed 20 March 2012.

²⁴ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

²⁵ “German Americans,” *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*. Ed. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby. 2nd ed. Vol. 2: Americas. Detroit: Gale, 2009. 230-232. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX1839300162&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw; Internet; accessed 12 March 2012.

“all quaint, interesting, touching and moving as well.”²⁶

The presence of other races in the Mid-west also extended to the Native Americans. In passing the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Agencies, the Indian reservations dedicated to the Oglala and Sicangu Sioux tribes in the Black Hills, Warner was filled with contempt for the exploitation of the Native Americans, as she was well aware that reservation life was far from beneficial to them and a means of acquiring more resources on the part of the government. “Another thing that irritated me was the beautiful institutional building and ground peppering the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Agencies, fattening off 'Lo, the Poor Indian.”²⁷ At the time awareness about the exploitation of Native Americans was being raised through Native American leaders, pro-Indian organizations, and even some government officials. Although the Indian reservations had been established back in the 1880s, the harsh reality of the living conditions on them was not made known until 1928, when the Merriam Report was conducted and showed the extreme poverty and unhealthy living conditions the Indians suffered. And it was also made known that the United States had little by little taken ninety million acres of land from the Indians, reducing their property by more than half.²⁸ It is interesting, and perhaps suggestive that women were expanding their knowledge through extensive reading, that Mary chose to use the phrase “Lo, the Poor Indian” as it was a direct quote from an Alexander Pope essay, 1734, which promoted the idea of the “noble savage” and protested the unfair treatment of them, though in a condescending

²⁶ “Letter to Mrs. Nelson.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gregory Campbell, "Indian Reservations," *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. 297-302. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* [encyclopedia online]; available from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3401802046&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w; Internet; accessed 30 March 2012.

way, which did not establish that the Indians were the equals of the white man.²⁹

As a whole, Warner's letter is testimony that the freedoms and opportunities that were, slowly but surely, becoming available to women by the twentieth century as free individuals and full citizens of their country was certainly a positive change for society. Her concerns and observations about society can be considered useful to any person interested in the period in which her letter was written, whether male or female, and her intelligence and love of knowledge and understanding cannot be denied. Although she herself was personally less affected than most by much of the hardship brought by the Depression, the combination of her background as the daughter of homesteading immigrants and her newly acquired higher social status gave her a good deal of insight and sympathy regarding the effects of the Depression and gave us, the readers of her letter, a new look at the Great Depression from the point of view of an upper-middle class woman with frontier roots. Although there was genuine concern in her voice for the overall situation, she seemed able to greet the nation's crisis with an almost anxious-free approach, and she even teasingly described her state of being as "like the tramp. I eat well, and sleep well, but when I think of work I go all a-tremble."³⁰ This remark not only reflected the popular image of the tramp during Warner's day, an image that was created through popular art and music as the number of tramps increased during the 20s, but also showed that she had grown accustomed to her privileged life-style, while not forgetting the strong values with which she was raised on the frontier. Her perspective on society and the Depression was unique because of her change in pecuniary circumstances, and although, as a white, upper-middle class woman, she did not represent the majority of the female population at the time, she was an example of a model woman and citizen for her time and ours: a woman who was concerned with every aspect of

²⁹ Peter Landry, " 'Essay on Man' by Alexander Pope". *A Blupete Poetry Pick*. [online]; available from <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Poetry/PopeManA.htm>; Internet; accessed 29 March 2012.

³⁰ "Letter to Mrs. Nelson."

society whether financial, racial, or industrial, whose curiosity and intelligence prompted her to educate herself regarding social issues, and whose humor and strength of character allowed her to be brave, calm and even hopeful during a time of dramatic, national crisis.