



Angie Debo



Kate Barnard

Angie, Kate *and Me*

BY CONNIE CRONLEY

How a biographer's promise to one historical Oklahoma figure compelled her to write a book about another.

I first learned about Kate Barnard in the mid-1970s from my friend and mentor, historian Angie Debo. I was a young woman of 32 when I met Dr. Debo (I never called her Angie) and she was an old woman of 85. We were friends until she died in 1988. We exchanged letters, talked by phone and I visited her in her tidy, little white house in her hometown of Marshall (population then 400).

The two women were near contemporaries; Debo was born in 1890 and Barnard 15 years earlier. Both were daughters of settlers, both taught in Territorial schools, both chose a career akin to a calling over marriage, and both were uncompromisingly independent. Barnard was an orator of exceptional talent, a tiny woman but with a voice that could be heard easily by audiences of 5,000 or more. Debo was a 17-year-old teacher when she first heard Barnard speak. She had a rare power over an audience, Debo told me, "FDR had it and [evangelist] Aimee Semple McPherson." She remembered that speech and Kate's charismatic personality for the rest of her life.

How I came to write Barnard's new biography, *A Life on Fire: Oklahoma's Kate Barnard* (OU Press), is a path from Barnard to Angie Debo to me, but all along the way, roads circled back to the University of Oklahoma. Much research material is available from the Western History Collections in OU Libraries. To my surprise, I discovered Barnard's own involvement with the University as an activist and guest lecturer in the classroom of a young, progressive sociology professor.

My mentor, Dr. Debo

Debo's OU roots went deep. She earned a bachelor's degree in 1918 and a Ph.D. in 1933—both in history—and most of her books were published initially by the OU Press.

I was not the only writer Debo encouraged. Throughout her life she supported many scholars and writers, but especially women, and this was because of a painful and pivotal personal history. She wanted to be a college history professor and, in 1924, she earned a master's degree from the prestigious University of Chicago with an award-winning dissertation. She seemed on the brink of a brilliant career. Thirty colleges applied to the University of Chicago seeking history teachers; 29 said they would not take a woman under any circumstance, and the other school said it would only if no man was available. Debo's chosen career field was "shut, locked and barred against women." She found no sex discrimination in academic writing, though, and so writing scholarly books became her real job.

At first, that, too, seemed a failed dream. She had two unpublished manuscripts and was so desperately discouraged, she remembered saying, "I don't even want to live anymore." Pioneers are survivors, though. Debo was chosen along with Native American author, editor and journalist John M. Oskison to edit *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State* in the Federal Writers Project series and soon her books began to be published. Awards and acclaim followed.

I was among those who jammed into a church hall in Marshall in 1983 when she was awarded the University's highest award, The Distinguished Service Citation. Since she was too frail to travel to Norman, OU President William S. Banowsky broke tradition and traveled to Marshall with an entourage to present the award to her.

In 1985 when her portrait was installed in the rotunda of the state capitol, I saw hundreds of people crowd in to witness what she called her "public hanging." Artist Charles Banks Wilson told me from his Miami, Okla., studio that he wanted to paint, more than a likeness, a portrait that depicted her



Angie Debo's portrait by Charles Banks Wilson was the first of a woman to be placed in the Oklahoma State Capitol rotunda. A sampling of her 13 books can be seen in the background.

achievement and authority as an example for young girls and women of future generations. He rejected several studies "that could have been any woman whose highest accomplishment was picking beans in the summer."

In his final version, Debo is seated in her favorite chair with a backdrop of her books arranged behind her like a rugged landscape. He said it captured her essential characteristic—drive. She was deeply honored that hers was the first woman's portrait hung in the state capitol, but she said the tribute should have gone to Kate Barnard.

The Good Angel

Kate Barnard is regularly forgotten and just as regularly rediscovered, usually by the young and hopeful. Most Oklahomans would ask, "Why have I never heard of her?"

Generally, Barnard is a historical footnote, known for what she was—the first woman elected to state office in Oklahoma—rather than for what she did, which was a lot.

Barnard was a political powerhouse who stumped for Williams Jennings Bryan (she called him "Billy"), skirmished with her nemesis Oklahoma Gov. Alfalfa Bill Murray ("To

use a Western term, Bill Murray was literally skinned alive and the wounds salted," she crowed), and corresponded with muckraking reformer Ida Tarbell and celebrated Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White.

Barnard was influential in creating a state constitution so progressive, Oklahoma was described as "a new kind of state." She created laws for compulsory education and a juvenile court, introduced penal reform and modern mental health care to the new state, campaigned for safety regulations and the eight-hour workday. Always, always she championed child labor laws.

OU sociology professor Jerome Dowd was a local colleague. He joined the faculty in 1907, the year of statehood, at the age of 33 and retired in 1947. Balding, walrus-mustached and 11 years older than Barnard, he was a progressive kindred spirit, writing and teaching about prison reform, juvenile delinquency and race relations.

Barnard was a frequent guest lecturer to his classes and a guest in his home. He admired her knowledge of social reform and her eloquence. "One of the best public speakers I ever heard," he said. She fired up his students "with vibrant words" to work for the improvement of social conditions. In



OU President William S. Banowsky presents what was then OU's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Citation, to Debo in 1983.

1908 Dowd was a witness to her acrimonious investigation of the state mental hospital in Norman. He said she found hospital conditions so primitive and treatment so barbaric that she was pale and shaken.

When she was pushing a juvenile court bill through the 1909 Legislature, Barnard wrangled OU students, along with those at the state's other university and five normal schools (teacher colleges), into a letter-writing campaign. Soon legislators were drowning with mail. "Miss Kate, what do you want?" one senator beseeched her. "I'll vote for anything you want, but for God's sake stop this flood of letters."

Audiences of thousands cheered her as the "Good Angel" of Oklahoma, but the Department of Charities and Corrections she led was known as "the hell-raising department." Then, she took on "The Indian Problem," as it was known, trying to protect the estates of Indian orphans from corrupt authorities and guardians. It was her downfall. Grafters closed forces and destroyed her department. It ruined her health and her life.

When Barnard died in 1930, Gov. William J. Holloway and the state's seven former governors were honorary pallbearers. Professor Dowd was one of the active pallbearers.

Debo's Pioneering Indian History Books

Debo came to know Barnard as an inspirational and reliable source for her own academic research. A pioneer in the field of Indian histories, Debo never set out to write sympathetically about Native Americans. She was searching for a topic for her doctoral dissertation when her mentor, Edward Everett Dale, OU history professor and department chair from 1924 to 1942, suggested she write the history of the Choctaw Indians. "It was no more romantic than that," she said, but she wrote an award-winning book and began her life's work.

Debo would go on to write and edit 13 books and hundreds of articles, all but one about Oklahoma or Indian history.

"I love good writing," Debo told me. "It gives me a lift, like looking at a rose or hearing a mockingbird." She was scrupulous about historical accuracy, publicly excoriated John Steinbeck for his "shoddy" physical and historical background in *The Grapes of Wrath* and pronounced Edna Ferber "just plain ignorant of her subject" for *Cimarron*. Ferber said she spent 13 days researching in Oklahoma. "I think she could have learned more in 13 days," Debo said, "but perhaps she was a slow learner."



“On my desk, I keep a photo of Debo beside her ‘notoriously unreliable’ car to remind me of the effort it took her to travel to research sites.”

She still railed—40 years later—about an editor who changed her text without her permission and, even worse, inserted erroneous facts. “Just remember, my dear,” she told me, “you can’t have a battle of wits with an unarmed man.”

“I believe truth is the most important thing,” she said of her writing. “I do a great deal of research for my books.” She worked eight hours a day, six days a week, researching or writing. She was proud of the large knot on the first knuckle of the second finger of her right hand, which came from years of writing research notes in longhand. On my desk, I keep a photo of Debo beside her “notoriously unreliable” car to remind me of the effort it took her to travel to research sites.

She opened the filing cabinets in her home office to show me some of her notes. Meticulously written on half-sheets of typing paper, they were so detailed, she mined some of them from research and interviews done decades earlier to write her last book, the biography *Geronimo*, published when she was 86.

It was during some of my visits to Debo that she urged me



Still vibrant at age 95, Debo and fellow historian and author Glenn Shirley greet the public at a 1985 OU Press book exhibit.

to write the biography of Kate Barnard, whose original findings provided many footnotes for one of Debo’s most celebrated works. *And Still the Waters Run*, published in 1940, is the seminal story of the liquidation of Oklahoma’s Five Civilized Tribes, as they were known at the time, and the resulting criminal conspiracy among social, governmental and religious organizations to divest the Indians from their land. “Everything I touched about that story was slimy,” Debo said.

Working alone in the dark basements of courthouses, Debo read the names of powerful and prominent people linked to crime so pervasive, she said, she felt fearful. Her fear was justified. She had witnessed the political destruction of her heroine, Kate Barnard, for involving herself with Indian rights.

And Still the Waters Run was not published by the OU Press, and that was Debo’s decision. Her manuscript was incendiary because she documented unscrupulous actions and named names, including influential people still alive at that time. Some legislators called for the OU Press to be shut down if they honored her contract, said the late Indian law scholar Rennard



OU Western History Collections

“Oklahoma’s good angel,” Kate Barnard was a mesmerizing public speaker who helped make the state’s 1907 constitution among the most progressive in the nation.

Strickland. He described Debo as a “warrior historian.”

“She said the state needed a press more than they needed her book,” Strickland said, so she withdrew the manuscript. When OU Press Director Joseph A. Brandt, former city editor of the *Tulsa Tribune* newspaper, moved to the Princeton University Press, he took Debo’s Indian exposé with him and published it four years later in 1940.

Brandt was a man of integrity who would soon take another courageous stand. In 1941, he was persuaded to return to Oklahoma as the first OU alumnus to become president, but he said that if the state government ever meddled with the University, he would quit. It did, with a drastic budget cut, and he did. In 1943, he became head of the University of Chicago Press, dedicated to making “scholarship readable,” and ultimately to Henry Holt Publishing Co. in New York.

Barnard Biography

I began research on the Barnard biography in the 1970s with all best intentions and worked on it for several years, but



OU Western History Collections

Seen in a 1908 portrait, Barnard instituted laws on child labor, education, juvenile courts and mental health as Oklahoma Commissioner of Charities and Corrections.

life and jobs interfered and I set the project aside. When I retired, I pulled out my nine baker’s boxes of research material, updated myself with newer works and, at long last, completed the book. It will be published in September. I feel it is timely to remember both the “Good Angel” and the “warrior historian” as the year begins with a record number of women in political office, a Supreme Court ruling that recognizes the original borders of the Creek Nation and the recent popularity of the book and upcoming movie *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which retells the story of Osage murders for oil.

I am an old woman myself now, and more than 40 years have passed since Dr. Debo asked me to write about her role model, Kate Barnard. It feels good to keep my promise. 🍷

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