

Mary Norton of New Jersey: Congressional Trailblazer**David L. Porter****Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2013****231 pages including illustrations****\$79.00****ISBN: 9781611476095****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i1.76>**

David Porter's book, *Mary Norton of New Jersey: Congressional Trailblazer*, provides us with the first major biography of the fifth woman, and first Democrat, elected to Congress. Mary Norton served in Congress from 1925 to 1951, where she worked on the House Committees on the District of Columbia, Labor, Memorials and House Administration. Her nicknames included "First Woman Mayor of D.C.," "Battling Mary," and "Aunt Mary," which complement her determination and spirit, and expressed the language of a male dominated Congress, struggling with change and the increasing numbers of elected women.

Porter begins with the Norton's family's arrival to the United States, their settling in Jersey City, marriages, deaths, and lack of formal education. He also relates how Norton came to the attention of Jersey City Mayor and "Boss" Frank Hague. Porter states that their initial meeting was in 1918, when Norton was fundraising for the children's nursery attached to St. Joseph's Church in Jersey City. Hague "appreciated Norton's Irish heritage, tenaciousness, and political potential." Neither Protestant nor middle class, Norton was initially reluctant to run for Congress, but in 1924, persuaded by Hague, and aided by his political machine, she successfully defeated Republican Douglas Story by over 18,000 votes.

Porter's account of Norton in Congress emphasizes her work on behalf of her working class constituents, and other workers across America, during the time of The Great Depression and World War II, trying to ensure a fair and a minimum wage. Porter notes her ability to cope with,

and work around the complex committee system, leading to her chairing the House Administration Committee.

By 1949 Norton had been in Congress for 25 years. She was 74 years old. Her health was declining, and though she was inundated with requests to stay, she retired. In her farewell speech she spoke of her “pride as a Democrat in following the leadership of the Party,” and how much “she loved her work.” Though she had retired from politics her interest remained- Eleanor Roosevelt commented that Norton was “remarkable” and “interesting” as they sat together with other friends listening to Adlai Stevenson speech in March 1954. In 1956, Norton moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, to live with her sister, Loretta, and it was there on August 1, 1959 that she had a heart attack and died the following day.

In the last chapter of the book, Porter summarizes Norton’s career, noting her “traditionalism and reform,” that she was a “pioneering legislator,” “the first woman to direct a major congressional committee” and a “devout democrat.” Norton was, Porter notes, “an outsider...who proved that women could win elections, retain constituent support, and exert leadership.” Yet as Porter points out Norton has been either “ignored or underplayed” by historians.

There are nevertheless a few issues with the book, which need clarifying and would benefit from a longer explanation. One issue seems careless as Porter states that Norton’s parents both came from County Langford in Ireland – there is no such place. County Longford perhaps? Second and more importantly, in the introduction Porter is clear that Norton was “not a feminist,” yet in the first chapter Porter seems to contradict himself by noting she was “a practical rather than theoretical feminist.” Porter then, in his last chapter, recounts that by 1951 “gender discrimination

issues still troubled Norton” and she urged women to become more active in politics. A more in depth explanation of the term “feminism” would not be amiss here.

One of the more fascinating issues discussed all too briefly is that Norton’s eventually unpublished memoirs were written with the help of Lorena Hickok. Porter writes that “Hickok who moved in with Norton spent 1951 drafting the autobiography and finished it in January 1952.” Porter notes that the two women argued about what should be in the book and that it put a strain on their friendship. Porter, who was given access to a copy of the manuscript, notes it is “less candid” about Norton’s personal life. Women who have been involved in politics have long struggled with disclosing their personal lives, and giving themselves credit for their own successes. I wonder if other sources could point to the conversation between Norton and Hickok, and provide more insight into the conflict.

Finally, I am not sure that any book written about Jersey City Democrats can succeed without taking the impact of Frank Hague firmly into account. Porter does note his role in selecting Norton to run, but he also teases us with phrases such as “by 1920, Norton began building a formidable political base.” Did this political base exist separate from Hague’s? Once elected to Congress how often did Hague and Norton communicate? She was elected and re-elected for twenty-five years – none of which would have happened without the support of Frank Hague. This should not be minimized no matter how uncomfortable.

Despite these reservations Porter has not just given us a splendid biography of Mary Norton, but it will, I hope, give impetus to others of the need for further studies of other women who were elected representatives from New Jersey. Florence Dwyer is certainly deserving of a study as are Helen Stevenson Meyner and Marge Roukema.

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