

## VISIONARIES • ANITA RODDICK

AM OFTEN ASKED, “Who inspires you?” It’s this woman. The story of Mary Harris’s life leaves me stunned and inspired. Oh, to be half of this woman! How can you lose all your children and your husband in one week and still find the fire within you to dedicate your life to action?

She worked with miners and took an early interest in the labour movement in America. Her radical politics led her to activism and she was, by all accounts, a superb orator. This minute woman would stride about the stage in a towering rage, or bring the audience to laughter or tears. Harris was the greatest woman agitator of her time.

When it comes to passion, dedication, and focus to a single cause, few women in history can rival Harris. She was not simply a leader of a revolutionary labour movement in America, but a self-made symbol of that movement. She intentionally cast herself as a matronly old woman with a trademark black hat and lied about her age. (She routinely added a decade or two to enhance her motherly image.) Initially, she was disregarded by the establishment as harmless, but she was trusted by coalminers and textile-factory labourers as a mother figure.

Positioned in this way, Mother Jones, as she became better known, was able to defeat violent and unfair bosses and reform exploitative labour laws in the American East before the powers-that-be knew what had hit them. The movement she led eventually gave Americans the forty-hour working week, the minimum wage and workplace safety laws. Yet her name has practically disappeared from history books and popular memory, except as the title of a progressive magazine in America.

What drove Mother Jones was her Catholic faith, which she viewed as a mandate to stand up against injustice. If nothing else, she was a survivor, and she discovered in herself a gift for leading others through the darkest times. Born Mary Harris in 1830, she was raised in poverty in Cork, Ireland, in a strict Catholic family. As young as ten years of age, she witnessed the horrors of the potato famine, which drove her family from their homeland to Canada, where she trained as a teacher. She wanted to travel, and in her early adulthood she taught in

## MOTHER JONES

She was once “the most dangerous woman in America”.



Mother Jones, painting by Robert Shetterly  
COURTESY: <[www.americanswhotellthetruth.org](http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org)>

many cities around America — until she met and married George Jones, a skilled foundry worker and a member of the International Iron Moulders Union. They had four children.

The first three decades of Mary’s life were a desperate personal struggle marked by tragedy. In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic struck Memphis, killing her husband and their four children. Left a widow while still in her thirties, Jones went to Chicago and set up a small dressmaking shop, which was burned down in the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871. Luckily, she escaped. Alone, and with every reason to be angry with her god, she searched for a purpose above her own trials.

By the turn of the century she had found a new voice. Strengthened and educated by her own tribulations, she fashioned herself as the matriarch of the working class in America. No-one called her Mary any more, but always “Mother”. She emerged from nowhere in her antique black dresses and massive silk hats to lead the poor

and exploited.

This new role freed Mary Jones. Most American women at that time devoted their lives to their families and their homes; they weren’t supposed to have opinions and certainly shouldn’t have been speaking out publicly.

Mother Jones took to the road and roamed America for twenty-five years; she had no home but said, “My address is like my shoes; it travels with me wherever I go.” She helped workers in the garment, steel and mining industries fight for better pay, better working conditions and twelve-hour days and spoke out for labour activists imprisoned in California and Arizona.

One of her best-known actions was leading a 125-mile march (known as the March of the Mill Children) of child workers from Pennsylvania textile mills to President Theodore Roosevelt’s vacation home on Long Island to publicise the cruelty of child labour. For those two months, Mother Jones and her street theatre and speeches made front-page news.

Mother Jones wasn’t known for subtlety, but rather for her rousing speeches and a gift for what today we call the ‘sound-bite’: “I’m not a humanitarian. I’m a hell-raiser!” Her weapons were her stories and her experiences of strikes she had led, the prisons and convict camps she had visited, her encounters with government officials and presidents.

She became one of the most famous women in America, frequently appearing in magazines and newspapers. She was an icon and a legend in working-class America. A district attorney in West Virginia once called her “the most dangerous woman in America”. She took it as a compliment.

Mother Jones died in 1930, shortly after celebrating her 100th birthday. Her funeral was attended by more than 20,000 people. For me, her life offers a vivid reminder of what remains among the most under-acknowledged issues of our day: that we have become a class-driven society — and not just in America. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. She embodies the activist spirit. She once said, “Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.” ●