Mother Jones, the Miners Angel. A Portrait. By DALE FETHERLING.
Photographs, bibliography, notes. $11.85.)

William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, was quoted in the extensive New York Times obituary published upon the death of Mary (Mother) Jones as saying that "the death of Mother Jones would bring sorrow to millions of working men and women." He noted that "her name and her personality had been a great influence in public life and an inspiration to the men and women of organized labor. During her entire lifetime she had been in the forefront of labor struggles, cheering and inspiring men and women to fight for the cause of organized labor."

Dale Fetherling, a native of West Virginia and currently a newspaper reporter with the Los Angeles Times, writes in the preface to his book, Mother Jones, the Miners Angel. A Portrait, that the book "is an attempt to chronicle her major actions, to sketch her personality, to begin to distill her legacy . . . the work seeks to present a portrait of Mother Jones of interest to the academic and general audience alike."

Mary Harris Jones (Mother Jones) died in 1930 at the age of 100. For the latter sixty years of her life, since the 1870s when she had joined the Knights of Labor, she had been active, in Fetherling's phrase, as a "labor agitator." Her service on behalf of labor took her through many states. She was in Pittsburgh during the labor riots of 1877, in Chicago at the time of the Haymarket disturbance, in the coal fields of West Virginia and eastern Pennsylvania in the 1890s, in Illinois, Idaho, Colorado, and Michigan. Here in Western Pennsylvania, Mother Jones spent much time in Westmoreland County in 1911 and was again in the Pittsburgh area during the Steel Strike of 1919.

Although she worked principally as an organizer for the United Mine Workers, she enlisted her services on behalf of the cotton-mill worker, the steel worker, the child laborer, the Mexican refugee, and the economically, socially, and politically exploited. She herself was the target of the innuendo of having been a prostitute — a charge which she apparently did not challenge — either directly or vociferously and one which did not destroy her effectiveness in rallying the miners.

"Mother Jones was not important to the labor movement in an
institutional or intellectual sense,” Fetherling notes. “She did not shape organizations or fashion movements or create new concepts.” Her skill, as characterized by Fetherling, “was the invaluable but in- calculable one of tending to men’s spirits, of buoying them, of goading them to fight even though the battle seemed hopeless.”

Mother Jones was an “ideological butterfly”; she was an individualist who chafed either at the guidance of a John Mitchell or at the doctrinaire attitudes of a political belief. “She was a revolutionary only on impulse and not upon reflection.” She was a “socialist” but not a Socialist; she sought no formal association with the Socialist party, and she remained aloof from the IWW after having helped found it.

Although a female activist, she had an aversion to woman suffrage. She said that women were out of place in political work. Her chief contention, as quoted in the New York Times, was that “if the industrial problem were solved, men would earn enough so that women could remain at home and attend to their duties.”

Fetherling’s book is traditional biography with a start towards analysis and interpretation. The latter is the book’s main value. If Fetherling had expanded his critical insight, for example, in examining the mutual wariness, distrust, and confrontation of the union leadership and Mother Jones (and what she represented), he could have provided added perspective to a fascinating chapter in the American labor movement. The book expands and gives dimension to the biographical detail provided by the essays in the Dictionary of American Biography and National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (it is interesting that there is no entry for Mother Jones in Who’s Who in American Labor published in 1925). While fulfilling the intention of the author “to begin to distill her legacy,” the book remains that — a beginning.

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