The Correspondence of Mother Jones.  
Edited by Edward M. Steel.  

This meticulously-compiled volume contains the extant letters of "Mother" Mary Jones (1836-1930), a colorful figure who rose to prominence around the turn of the century mainly in connection with the struggles of coal miners in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Colorado. A United Mine Workers organizer and sometime socialist, Mother Jones had no permanent address. She lived on the move and, as Edward Steel's introductory essay tells us, by her tongue, not her pen. Her speeches "moved thousands of people to action or inspired them with a vision of the future" (p. xxxvii).

Her surviving correspondence represents but a fragment, perhaps only a small fragment, of the whole. Steel informs us that Mother Jones would come into a union office, obtain the assistance of a secretary, and dictate letters. After taking care of her accumulated correspondence she would throw her answered mail into the waste basket. Presumably many of her correspondents did likewise. This collection illustrates one of the difficulties of recovering the history of working people: that of building a "round" picture of even so well known an individual as Mother Jones. We learn nothing from her correspondence of her early development: she wrote the first surviving letter in 1900, when she was sixty-four and already rising to prominence in the thick of the labor movement.

Yet we can be grateful for what remains, and for the painstaking care with which it was gathered from scattered archival sources into this collection. Although Mother Jones was preeminently a spellbinder, her wit and vivid style leap and sparkle from her letters as well. The correspondence is a window on the "other America" of the turn of the century, "other" in terms of values as well as economic conditions. "Here I am in this God Cursed Monopolistic State," she writes from Sewall, West Virginia, in 1902 (p. 21). Or again, from Trinidad, Colorado, in 1913: "They are sending me all sorts of threats here. They have my skull drawn on a picture and two cross sticks underneath my jaw to tell me that if I do not quit they are going to get me. Well they have been a long time at it" (p. 119).
Steel's transcription of Mother Jones' erratic spelling, grammar, and punctuation is a marvel of precision. Comparing a few samples from my own collection of xeroxed Mother Jones letters, I found no errors. (Despite the lack of standard English the letters are easy to comprehend.) Further, Steel provides each letter with notes, including short descriptions of persons and events referred to.

The University of Pittsburgh Press is to be commended for a superlative job of design and production. In this age of slipshod book manufacture, The Correspondence of Mother Jones stands out for its pleasant and readable design and its notable lack of typographical errors.

Steel's introduction summarizes the main events of Mother Jones' life in so far as they are now known. The biographical essay makes this a complete work on Mother Jones, which stands by itself. Yet his non-interpretive approach leads him to falter, I think, in estimating this organizer's significance. Many of the strikes in which she became embroiled were lost, and she left no "institutional monument." (She became disillusioned with the UMWA at the onset of the John L. Lewis era.) Therefore Steel evaluates her career mainly in terms of its minor achievements, such as her success in bringing about Congressional investigations of two major strikes. Her significance to American history lies elsewhere. Hers was an authentic voice reflecting working-class experience, and it was a female voice at that. As such it is important both in itself and as a window on a still-emerging part of the American past.

This well-achieved work goes a long way towards bringing to completion a body of work on Mother Jones that will lift this intriguing organizer out of the realm of legend and speculation and into that of history.

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*Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century.* By Laura Shapiro.


For the last quarter-century, the United States has been inundated with food awareness. First came French cooking, popularized by Julia Child beginning in 1962, followed by, in more recent years and in