



# THE FIERCE LIFE OF GRACE HOLMES CARLSON

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History | Women's & Gender Studies

## The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson

Catholic, Socialist, Feminist

BY DONNA T. HAVERTY-STACKE

### Instructor's Guide

On December 8, 1941, Grace Holmes Carlson, the only female defendant among eighteen Trotskyists convicted under the Smith Act, was sentenced to sixteen months in federal prison for advocating the violent overthrow of the government. After serving a year in Alderson prison, Carlson returned to her work as an organizer for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and ran for vice president of the United States under its banner in 1948. Then, in 1952, she abruptly left the SWP and returned to the Catholic Church. With the support of the Sisters of St. Joseph, who had educated her as a child, Carlson began a new life as a professor of psychology at St. Mary's Junior College in Minneapolis where she advocated for social justice, now as a Catholic Marxist.

*The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson* examines the story of this complicated woman in the context of her time with a specific focus on her experiences as a member of the working class, as a Catholic, and as a woman. Her story contributes to recent historical scholarship exploring the importance of faith in workers' lives and politics. The long arc of Carlson's life (1906–1992) ultimately reveals significant continuities in her political consciousness that transcended the shifts in her particular partisan commitments, most notably her life-long dedication to challenging the root causes of social and economic inequality. In that struggle, Carlson ultimately proved herself to be a truly fierce woman.

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## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Examining the life of Grace Holmes Carlson in the context of her times, Haverty-Stacke illuminates the workings of class identity in relation to various influences over the course of a lifespan, explores the importance of Catholic faith in shaping a politics of social justice, and uncovers the possibilities and limitations for working-class and revolutionary Marxist women in mid-twentieth century America. *The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson: Catholic, Socialist, Feminist* should be of interest to scholars of labor and working-class history, left-wing political history, women's history and gender studies, Catholic history, and women's biography.

For those interested in labor and working-class history and left-wing political history, Carlson's story illuminates both how working-class subjects come to understand their class position and how class operates in the spaces between occupation, politics, life experience, social networks, and culture. Her life also shows how and why, for some workers, Marxist political solutions were appealing. For those interested in women's history and gender studies, Carlson's career in the SWP (and her activism after she left the party) illuminate both the possibilities and limitations for women in the period between the "Lyrical Left" of the 1920s and the New Left of the 1960s. Carlson's life was thus also part of the less familiar history of an alternative struggle for equality during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s among working-class women more generally and revolutionary Marxist women more specifically. Carlson's evolving understanding of the woman question, specifically her critique of patriarchy that she articulated by the 1960s, speaks to the often overlooked connections between Old Left and New Left feminist concerns. And for those interested in Catholic history and the social history of religion, different moments in Carlson's life exemplify what "lived Catholicism" looked like for a woman from the working class. Her story contributes to recent historical scholarship on the importance of understanding the role of faith in workers' lives and speaks to how religion shapes working-class political consciousness and can sustain different types of political action. In particular, during her years at Saint Mary's Junior College in Minneapolis from the mid-1960s until 1984 Carlson embraced a unique form of Catholic activism that drew from the liturgical and Catholic Action movements, the ideas espoused by Catholic Marxists in the English Slant movement, and, ultimately by the reforms of Vatican II to fuel her critique of the root causes of social and economic inequality.

*The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson* could thus be used in a range of courses across various disciplines, including: History (courses on women's history; women's biography; religious history; social history; labor and working-class history; radical political history/Marxism; local St. Paul/Minneapolis history); Political science (courses on radical political movements/Marxism in c20 US; women in politics; Old Left/New Left); Women and gender studies (course on c20 US feminisms; Marxist feminism; women in politics; women in SWP; gender and sexuality in the Old Left); and Religious studies (courses on lived Catholicism in c20 US; social teachings of the Church; Catholic Marxism in US; role of the parish; history of women religious).

## INTRODUCTION

The Introduction provides an overview of the study, situates its place within the relevant historiography of biography, working-class and radical history, women's history and the history of religion, and articulates its main contributions to these fields. It explains how Carlson's life illuminates the workings of class identity within the context of various influences over the course of a lifespan, contributes to recent historical scholarship exploring the importance of faith in workers' lives and politics, and uncovers both the possibilities and limitations for working-class and revolutionary Marxist women in the period between the first and second wave feminist movements. It also lays out how the main themes will be covered in the chapters that follow.

### *Discussion Questions*

- How have developments over the past few decades in the fields of both biography and working-class and radical history opened up the way for inquiries into the lives of revolutionary Marxist women and into women's struggles for equality between the first and second waves of feminism?
- How have those developments opened up lines of inquiry into the role that faith and organized religion have played in the lives of workers?
- How can biography be a tool for uncovering how working-class subjects have defined themselves in both their public and private lives?

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Beginnings*

This chapter explores the various factors that shaped Carlson's identity as a working-class Catholic young woman who was committed to social justice. These included her natal family and childhood neighborhood, her local parish, her women religious teachers, and the impact of World War I and the 1922 shopmen's strike. Through her experience of World War I, as a working-class Irish and German girl, she had come to question government authority and the 100% Americanism that vigilante groups imposed on the community in St. Paul. As a result of her father's experiences during the shopmen's strike she had deepened her understanding of the importance of worker solidarity. And Carlson came to appreciate early on the importance of education for the development of her autonomy. It was not only her mother, Mary Holmes, who instilled that lesson, but also her women religious instructors in high school. The Josephites reinforced the value Carlson placed on higher education as a route to economic independence for women and set her feet on the road to a professional career.

#### *Discussion Questions*

- How did Carlson's natal family's economic circumstances and their Rice Street/North Frogtown neighborhood contribute to her working-class identity?
- How were families of Irish and German ancestry (like Carlson's) living in St. Paul affected by the outbreak of World War I?
- What role did women religious play in the lives of their students in parish schools like St. Vincent's?
- How did the priests and the parish life at St. Vincent's cultivate Carlson's respect for racial diversity? For workers' rights?
- How did Carlson's Catholic faith influence the way she understood her experience of the 1922 shopmen's strike?
- How did the Josephites at St. Joseph's Academy instill in their female students a commitment to social justice and to serving others?

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Conversion*

This chapter examines Carlson's undergraduate years at the College of Saint Catherine during the mid-late 1920s and then her gradual conversion to socialism during the 1930s. Included among the various factors that led to this shift were her experiences at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where she went in 1929 to pursue a doctorate in psychology. Carlson maintained her commitment to social justice that she had developed in her youth as a working-class Catholic in St. Paul, but now channeled it in a revolutionary direction in a new city. Both her encounter with the 1934 Minneapolis Teamster strikes and her first job as a vocational rehabilitation counselor in the Minnesota Department of Education that she began in 1935 intensified Carlson's evolving view that a socialist society was the only way to address the needs of workers and the exploited. In 1938 Carlson entered the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a delegate to its founding convention in Chicago. By September 1940 she left her job at the Department of Education—in part because of redbaiting during the “little red scare”—to work fulltime for the party, leaving the Church (and her husband Gilbert, whom she had married in 1934) behind.

### *Discussion Questions*

- In what ways could the female students at the College of St. Catherine during the 1920s be considered Catholic flappers? How did their faith tradition set them apart from other flappers?
- How could the women religious at the College of St. Catherine serve as feminist role models for their students? In what ways could they not?
- How did Carlson's experience of the 1934 Teamsters strikes in Minneapolis contribute to her conversion to socialism (specifically to Trotskyism)?
- How did the little red scare of 1939 – 1941 play out at the local level in Minnesota? How was Carlson caught up in the red-baiting that was part of this reactionary moment?

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Sisterhoods*

This chapter first traces how Carlson built a public career for herself in the SWP, working as Minnesota state organizer and running for U.S. Senate in 1940. The chapter also examines how Carlson became one of the eighteen Trotskyists who was convicted of violating the Smith Act in 1941. Of vital importance to Carlson's experiences within the SWP and to her survival at Alderson prison in 1944 was her sisterhood of women comrades, which included her biological sister Dorothy Schultz. Carlson's rich correspondence during the year she spent in prison reveals not only the connections and concerns shared by her and her women friends, but also Carlson's relationship with the mostly poor and very young women incarcerated with her at Alderson. Both these experiences served as the inspiration for the working-class Marxist feminism that Carlson came to articulate in her writings for the *Militant* and in her 1945 "Women in Prison" speaking tour. Carlson's experiences and writings were part of the left's answer to the woman question during the 1940s. Her story adds to the history of feminisms on the left during the 1940s and early 1950s, the period between the first and second waves.

#### *Discussion Questions*

- How did Carlson build a public career for herself in the SWP? What does her experience reveal about the place of women in the SWP?
- What was the Smith Act and why were the Trotskyists the first group to be prosecuted under this law in 1941?
- How was Carlson able to survive her time at Alderson prison?
- How did Carlson's connections with other women Trotskyists and her experience with young and poor women in prison shape her working-class Marxist feminism?
- How did Carlson's 1945 speaking tour and her writings for the *Militant* contribute to the Trotskyist answer to the woman question at mid century?
- What did Carlson's working-class Marxist feminism share in common with contemporary labor feminists? With women in the CPUSA? In what ways were they different?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Politics and Love on the Left*

This chapter focuses on Carlson's ties with men in the SWP. In addition to platonic friendships and work relationships she forged with men like James Cannon, Farrell Dobbs, and her brother-in-law Henry Schultz, Carlson also engaged in a romance with Vincent Raymond Dunne for over ten years. Both Carlson and Dunne were married to other people at the time: Carlson had separated from her husband Gilbert sometime in the late 1930s, but Dunne never left his wife Jennie. As a result, only a few party insiders knew for certain about the affair. But Carlson's and Dunne's dedication to the SWP, among other factors, drew them together. Their relationship was just one of many within the SWP in which couples enjoyed sharing in the common work of the party. Private relationships became intertwined with public commitments and helped build and sustain the radical politics of those involved who otherwise faced a world hostile to their beliefs. Of particular importance to Carlson's political career in these years was her run for vice president of the United States in 1948, the press coverage of which included deeply entrenched biases against women running for such high office—some of which still remain today.

#### *Discussion Questions*

- What are some of the obstacles that historians can face when they study the intimate lives of subjects on the political left?
- How were private relationships—both platonic and sexual—integral to the lives and work of socialist activists like Carlson?
- How did the pressures of government surveillance, especially during the Cold War-Second Red Scare era, affect the personal lives of socialist activists like Carlson?
- What were some of the mechanisms of the Second Red Scare that impeded left parties like the SWP at the polls?
- How did mainstream press coverage of women political candidates undermine their chances of electoral success?



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Break*

This chapter examines Carlson's decision to leave the SWP in 1952 and to return to the Catholic Church, a choice that shocked her former Trotskyist comrades. Stemming from personal and spiritual reasons after the death of her father, Carlson's break with the SWP was not due to political factionalism; she remained a Marxist and, unlike other high profile defectors, never informed for the FBI. But because she had been blacklisted as a former high-level SWP member she could not find a job. Her experiences during the early 1950s show the impact of the Second Red Scare on individual lives, providing a case study of a woman's experience, which heretofore has been largely overlooked. With the help of a local priest, Carlson found work first as an administrative assistant at St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis and, then, as a faculty member who was deeply involved with the mission of Saint Mary's Junior College (SMJC). With Sister Anne Joachim Moore she co-wrote the St. Mary's Plan for the new college in 1964. She also soon reunited with her husband Gilbert and began to rebuild her life with a new (mostly Catholic) network of colleagues and friends.

#### *Discussion Questions*

- Why was it important for Carlson that people understand the nature of her break with the SWP and her return to the Church in 1952?
- How was her return to Catholicism different from other high profile figures who defected from the left during the Cold War?
- How did the Catholic Church provide a home for Carlson after she left the SWP?
- In what ways was Carlson able to “teach and practice social justice” at St. Mary's Junior College after her return to the Church?

## CHAPTER SIX

### *“Carlson’s Continuing Commentary”*

This chapter explores how, during her years at SMJC from the mid-1960s until 1984, Carlson embraced a unique form of Catholic activism that drew from the liturgical and Catholic Action movements, the ideas espoused by Catholic Marxists in the English Slant movement, and, ultimately by the reforms of Vatican II. She remained devoted to fighting for civil rights and for peace, now including anti-nuclear campaigns. Through her insistence on striking at the heart of capitalist exploitation Carlson maintained much of her Marxist thinking. In her continued belief in the importance of an organized political movement to effect revolutionary social change she proudly touted her Old Left loyalties in the face of what she condemned as the undisciplined approaches of New Left protests. And in her call for engagement with the pressing problems of the day as a gospel mandate for the lay apostolate she functioned as a Catholic activist. In her roles as a teacher, administrator, mentor, and friend Carlson also continued her struggle for women’s equality, now working to overthrow capitalist patriarchy by educating the masses through a variety of personal and professional interactions, particularly as she advised—and at times financially supported—women students at SMJC.

#### *Discussion Questions*

- What is a Catholic Marxist?
- What movements and teachings espoused in the Catholic Church before Vatican II supported lay activism in the modern world?
- Why did Carlson agree with the ideas expressed by the English Slant movement?
- How did Carlson represent an Old Left critique of the New Left even as she embraced many New Left causes, including opposition to the war in Vietnam?
- How did Carlson put her feminism into practice at St. Mary’s Junior College even after she retired?

## CONCLUSION

The Conclusion reflects on the significance of Carlson's life in terms of the three main historiographical interventions of the book. It argues that her story demonstrates the complexity of class identity as a social category that is forged from multiple, intertwined experiences and perceptions and that evolves over time. It concludes that Carlson's experiences reveal the vitality of working-class and left wing feminisms that existed during what has been considered the doldrums of the women's movement. It notes how her life in the SWP also provides a window into the inner workings of the Trotskyist movement, particularly for women at the branch level, and into the social world of platonic and romantic relationships that were so central to sustaining that radical community. And it draws attention again to how her interactions with women religious, priests and various institutions within the Church that informed her cosmology and activism are a rich source for understanding the contours of lived Catholicism in twentieth-century America, making the case for taking religion seriously as it is experienced by people in the past as a fundamental factor in their lives.