Mary Elizabeth Lease in the 1890s.
Mary E. Lease has been for historians, as she was for her contemporaries, one of the most controversial leaders of the People’s Party. Rising to national fame in the Kansas campaign of 1890, Lease won the admiration of thousands of grassroots Populists and became one of the party’s most sought-after speakers, and perhaps its most effective. Populism, however, took a different direction than Lease had hoped. Her opponents in the party, both in Kansas and at the national level, made fusion arrangements with Democrats and marginalized those, such as Lease, who supported Prohibition and women’s suffrage. Lease then became an outspoken critic of her former allies.

A number of historians have blamed Lease for the decline of the People’s Party, criticizing her egotism and “exaggerated sense of her own importance.” Lease has received particular censure for her bitter public dispute with the administration of Kansas Governor Lorenzo D. Lewelling in 1894, when she accused the governor and his staff of blackmailing her with concocted evidence that she and General James B. Weaver, the Populists’ presidential candidate in 1892, had carried on an extramarital affair during their national campaign tour. Lacking a clear explanation for Lease’s statements during this controversy, historians have resorted to psychological diagnoses. According to one recent account, Lease’s “mental stability . . . showed signs of erosion,” an echo of longstanding claims that she “lost her balance wheel.”

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Such analyses of the Lease-Lewelling conflict have contributed to a broader view of Lease as “bizarre,” “mercurial,” “tempestuous,” and “erratic.” Scholars have contrasted her with other Populists who were supposedly more “hard-headed, practical, [and] conscious of political realities.” Most famously, Lease was the main figure cited by Richard Hofstadter in his 1955 *The Age of Reform*, when he characterized Populist leaders as “agitators with paranoid tendencies, who [made] a vocational asset out of their psychic disturbances.” Lease has thus been seen as an eccentric, possibly unbalanced, woman whose only claim to fame was telling Kansas farmers to “raise less corn and more hell.”

In its inaugural issue, *Kansas History* offered a more nuanced assessment of Lease, written by the late Dorothy Blumberg. Nonetheless, mysteries remain. Did Lease lie about her family background, and if so, was this a symptom of her grandiosity? What was the basis for her steadfast opposition to fusion with Democrats? Did she take Republican bribes? Setting aside the unlikely verdict of temporary insanity, is there an alternative explanation for her statements during the conflict with the Lewelling administration in 1894? Answering these questions helps clarify Lease’s role in Populism. It also sheds light on the diversity and complexity of Populism and suggests how fleeting its “moment” really was.

After she became nationally known, Lease told journalists interested in her background that her father, Joseph P. Clyens of County Monaghan, Ireland, had “belonged to the aristocratic landed gentry,” while her mother was an “accomplished scholar” and descendant of the Scottish Clan of Moray. She claimed that after Joseph Clyens protested British injustices toward his oppressed countrymen, his “vast estates were confiscated” and he became “an exile to America.”

Historians have been skeptical about this story, since Joseph and Mary Clyens left Ireland at a time when millions of impoverished immigrants fled the Great Famine. Mary, the couple’s firstborn child in America, grew up on a hardscrabble farm in the Allegheny mountains of Pennsylvania.

Lease’s account of family history seems, however, to have been largely accurate. Irish land records show that her father and grandfather’s family ranked among the Catholic gentry. Due to British occupation of Ireland, this class held a vexed position: claimants to the land for many generations, they nonetheless paid rent to English landlords who had received grants from the British crown. The Clyens family lived in Donaghmoyne Parish in southeastern Monaghan, on an estate held by the Marquess of Bath. Their rental totaled sixty acres, in an area where most families labored on one or two acres and a well-to-do farmer might hold ten. Subtenants worked the Clyens’ land; several sources report that Mary’s father kept a prized stable of horses.

2. Nugent, “How the Populists Lost in 1894,” 249, 251; Ross E. Paulson, “Mary Elizabeth Clyens Lease,” in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950*, ed. Edward T. James, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/ Harvard University Press, 1971), 381; Clanton, “Intolerant Populist?,” 190, 192, 194–96, 199; Gerald W. Johnson, *The Lunatic Fringe* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1957), 153; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 71–72. Lease denied credit for the “less corn and more hell” statement, but said she thought “it was a right good bit of advice”; see O. Gene Clanton, “Intolerant Populist?,” 190n2. The mystery may be solved by a report in the Lyndon, Kansas, *People’s Herald*, February 6, 1891, which quotes Populist speaker Ralph Beaumont telling a joke about Michigan Congressman Roswell G. Horr. During a controversy over Civil War issues, the impotent Horr allegedly “jumped up and yelled out at the top of his voice: ‘What you rebels in the south want to do is to raise more corn and less hell!’” Beaumont continued, “There are a large number of agricultural laborers who have come to the conclusion that it is for their best interest to raise less corn and more hell, and this fall they have devoted a great deal of time to raising political hell.” At some point soon afterward, this quotation seems to have been attributed to Lease.


5. “Lease, Mary Elizabeth,” handwritten manuscript, signed “Ja’s [James] Arnold,” [January 1984]. Misc. Lease Coll., State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; also available online at kansasmemory.org/item/225914. Gene Clanton proposes Lease as the author of this manuscript (“Intolerant Populist?,” 97–98). It is in her handwriting, but a note at the end identifies it as “a few points from the biography written by Mrs. Ford.” It is drawn from a lengthy interview published in *Chicago (Ill.) Herald*, December 18, 1892.

6. On farm sizes, Peadar Livingstone, *The Monaghan Story* (Enniskillen, Northern Ireland: Clogher Historical Society, 1980), 288. In 1823 Joseph Clyne or Clynnes (Lease’s grandfather) was listed as holding rentals in the Knockears Upper and Corrinshagh Cope/Corcuiliamlish. See Tithe Applotment Books 1823–1839, Microfilm 83, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin. In the will index for County Monaghan, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Joseph Clynnes’s death in 1835 is recorded as occurring at Carrickalisnulawny, which may suggest an additional landholding there. He left a will, but unfortunately it is not extant. On rental payments, Kate Harris, librarian and archivist to the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Wiltsire, to author, November 25, 1997, author’s possession. On Clynes family history, see in Richard Stiller, *Queen of Populists: The
Mary Murray Clyens received an advanced education at a finishing school in Scotland. She wrote poetry, taught mathematics to her children, and apparently read Latin, Greek, and French.

Though the full story awaits the opening of additional records, overwhelming evidence shows that Joseph and Mary Clyens left Ireland for political reasons. Family stories, from sources other than Mary Lease, portray Joseph Clyens as a “revolutionist.” Mary Clyens’s brother, Alexander Kindelan, was also politically active, leading local protest meetings to protect tenant rights. The Clyenses left amid the suppression of violent protests against British rule, which occurred in many parts of Ireland in 1848. In July of that year, a panicked official in Monaghan warned that local people, with aid “from Dublin and other places,” had “organized so as to be ready for insurrection at any time—they have their processions at night, marching to the Music of Fife & Drum, carrying flags and in fact assuming a military aspect in every way.” “Great numbers” of pikes were reportedly being made in the vicinity of Carrickmacross, only a few miles from the Clyens home. It is unclear what role Joseph Clyens played in the events of 1848, but the following spring, the Bath Estate agent paid him the staggering sum of £100 to emigrate to New York. The agent noted in his account book that “the example which this tenant’s remaining on the land would have afforded to others would have been objectionable in the extreme.”

Lease’s mother, Mary Elizabeth Murray Clyens, came from a prominent Catholic family with close ties to Scotland. Though Lease’s maternal grandparents remain unidentified, her great uncle, the Reverend Alexander Kindelan, received a college education in preparation for the priesthood. He served as pastor of nearby Inishkeen Parish. In a region where most women were illiterate, Lease’s mother, Mary Elizabeth Murray Clyens, came from a prominent Catholic family descended from the Scottish Clan of Moray. She was an “accomplished scholar,” who wrote poetry, taught mathematics to her children, and read Latin, Greek, and French. Along with her husband, Joseph, and two of their five children, Clyens sailed from Liverpool to New York in 1849. Thinking they were purchasing “an estate,” the Leases ended up in “a little log cabin” on “a stony plot of ground” near Ceres, Pennsylvania.

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Joseph and Mary Clyens and two of their five children sailed from Liverpool and arrived in New York in June 1849. According to an account by the daughter of Mary Lease's older brother Joseph, the Clyenses "left their home suddenly because my grandfather was in trouble with the English government." This memoir reports on the extraordinary dislocation that followed:

[My father's] parents left three older children on their estate to be cared for by relatives and servants . . . . After landing in the U.S. . . . they were met by a real estate man who sold them land in Ceres, Pennsylvania—he told them it was an estate and when they arrived in Pennsylvania they found a little log cabin and a stony plot of ground that my father told me barely eeked out a meager crop of potatoes. The family suffered much, not being accustomed to hard labor. . . . A brother Patrick, sister Jennie and another brother Alexander were the children left in Ireland.

Joseph recalled that he and the other "children would gather around . . . [to hear] about the home in Ireland, called Bath Hill—in County Monaghan, about the stables and the grooms and beautiful Ireland. They heard too, that if they could go back they might claim the estate that and the grooms and beautiful Ireland. They heard too, that if they could go back they might claim the estate that had been confiscated by the English government."

This background explains a good bit about Mary Lease's sense of noblesse oblige toward the poor, which some observers have found peculiar. Her childhood in Pennsylvania reinforced the complexity of her identity. Though raised Catholic, she grew up in a rural community surrounded by Quakers and Methodists, including next-door neighbors who boycotted slave-made sugar and may have served as conductors on the Underground Railroad. Two daughters of the Clyens' nearest neighbor were active in the temperance and antislavery movements; in 1853, one was employed as a paid public lecturer for the New York State Woman's Temperance Association. Mary's beloved grade school teacher Maria King, whose family was locally prominent in Underground Railroad work, taught from schoolbooks that condemned slavery and questioned U.S. involvement in the Mexican-American War. In later years, Lease often quoted such abolitionist writers as James Russell Lowell and Lydia Maria Child.10

Mary's strong Republican loyalties were strengthened in the crucible of the Civil War. Her oldest brother, Patrick, joined the early volunteers who formed the Forty-second Pennsylvania Regiment, the famous Bucktails. He was killed eighteen months later at the Battle of Fredericksburg. Mary's father enlisted in 1863; he was captured at the Battle of the Wilderness and died of dysentery at the Confederacy's notorious Andersonville Prison. In a Decoration Day address in Wichita, years later, Mary Lease offered a vivid description of "days of weary waiting" on the wartime farm, followed by "nights of frenzied weeping" after the news of loss. "Tears and toil the portion of a soldier's widow," Lease concluded; "love and gratitude and patriotism the inheritance of a soldier's daughter." From fife and drum corps in Ireland to sacrifices in the U.S. Civil War, the Clyens' family fortunes were bound up with struggles for nationhood. This is confirmed by the name of Mary's eldest brother, who died at Fredericksburg. Rather than naming him for his paternal grandfather, according to Irish custom, her parents called him Patrick Henry Clyens, in honor of the fiery American Revolutionary whose father was a Scot.11

The war years taught harsh lessons in economic inequality. When Mary's father enlisted, he did so as a substitute for Nelson P. Wheeler, the eighteen-year-old son of an extraordinarily wealthy local lumberman. (Having paid Clyens to take his place in the draft, Wheeler went on to become a millionaire and a Republican


cousin farmer from 1907 to 1911.) Though Mary Murray Clyens received a small widow’s pension after 1866, the loss of both husband and eldest son wrought severe hardship. Lease recalled her labor on the farm, where women “yoked the brown oxen and drove the furrowing plow” and made homespun clothing because they could not afford calico. Family friends paid to educate Mary and her sister Eveline at a local Catholic girls’ academy, but her older brother Joseph never received much schooling at all. At some point during the war, at least two of Mary’s older siblings came over from Ireland. Alexander died soon afterward of epilepsy. Jennie, her niece recalled, “never seemed to fit into the family... There was always some doubt on my grandmother’s part if she was the same child they had left behind.” In her public speeches Lease did not dwell on this bitter history, but she told interviewers, “my whole life was a struggle with poverty because of that cruel war.”

Mary’s loyalties were complicated further after 1871 when she moved to Kansas to teach. Three years after settling in Osage Mission she married Charles Lease, a local pharmacist from a strikingly different background. Born in Pennsylvania, Charles had moved to Illinois with his parents in 1854. The Leases were staunch Democrats, and like his father and brother Charles seems to have been “extremely liberal in his religious ideas.” Charles most likely introduced Mary to the work of freethinker Robert Ingersoll, whom she quoted in some of her first political essays. Mary remained a practicing Catholic for almost two decades; in the 1880s she took up paid lecturing, in part, to pay her children’s tuition at Catholic schools. But it was perhaps due partly to Charles that, as a fellow Populist reported in 1892, Mary Lease “thought herself out of [the Catholic] communion, and is now not over-weighted with reverence for the clergy of any sect.”

The Leases’ fluctuating fortunes show how difficult it is to categorize the family as part of either the working class or middle class. The couple had a dramatic romance: when Mary was struck by a near-fatal illness, probably pneumonia, Charles went for a wedding ring while the “angel hovered very near.” Mary recovered, and the couple’s prosperity seemed certain. Charles was a successful businessman, a well-connected Mason, and director of a local bank. Not long after the wedding, he was elected mayor of Osage Mission. But when the severe economic depression of 1874 hit Kansas, Charles’s drugstore collapsed. As it did, Charles went to a “cash only” basis with his customers and began pocketing proceeds, at a time when he owed his creditors $3,000. This may have helped the couple avoid starvation, but it destroyed Charles’s credit and business relationships. When the sheriff put the contents of City Drug on the sidewalk for auction, the Leases moved down the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad (MK&T or Kat) line to Denison, Texas, to start again.

Having married into the middle class, Mary Lease found herself again in dire poverty. Denison was a rough cattle town full of dangerous men and desperate tramps; local newspapers deplored the constant gunfire. Charles found work as the pharmacist for a Denison doctor while Mary kept boarders at their home. She also took in laundry—grueling work that was reserved for working-class women who, in the South, were usually African Americans. During the nine years the couple was in Denison, Mary bore five children; two died in infancy of disease. During the same years, Lease’s mother died and her youngest brother Frank came to live with the Leases. He found a job on the MK&T Railroad, hoping to save money for law school. In 1879 Frank died in a gruesome accident that illustrated, as a local newspaper wrote, “The Perils of the Rail.” While Frank’s train waited on a side track, linked to another engine, his conductor sent him underneath to clean out ashes. The other engine started to move; Frank “attempted to crawl from under the engine but was caught by the wheels which passed over one of his arms and his breast,

On Mary’s father’s enlistment at Portville, N.Y., as a substitute for Wheeler, see “Clyens, Joseph P.,” enlistment record, New York State Library, Albany, N.Y. On Wheeler’s subsequent career, “Wheeler, Nelson Platt,” National Cyclopedia of American Biography (New York: James T. White, 1949), 35:292; Roth manuscript. On Alexander’s death, see Ellen L. Pensinger, family history manuscript, Park Forest, Illinois, author’s possession; Lease on her family’s war service in Topka Advocate, July 27, 1892. On Kate, Lease’s third sibling left in Ireland, see n. 9 above.


On Charles Lease’s politics see Osage Mission Transcript, the editors of which were good friends of Charles and affectionately called him “The Old Man”: for example May 24, 1872; June 7, 1872; and November 8, 1872; Annie L. Diggs, “Women in the Alliance Movement,” Arena 32 (July 1892): 166.

On Osage Mission Transcript, January 17 and 24, 1873; on the local epidemic of pneumonia at this time see January 10, 1873; and (Neosho Neosho County Journal, February 5, 1873. The clearest picture of Charles Lease’s financial problems is in the records for “Kansas, Neosho County,” in R. G. Dun & Company Credit Report, R. G. Dun & Co. Collection, Harvard Business School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 17:211, 228; see also Neosho County Journal, October 1, 1873; and May 6, 1874. The latter carries a notice of the sheriff’s sale for Lease’s equipment.
Lease committed herself to multiple causes, placing equal stress on Populist economic reforms, Prohibition, and women's suffrage. Lease worked, for example, with Frances Willard, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and other sympathetic Prohibitionists who were pushing their party to take up Populist economic planks. Willard is pictured here among Prohibition Party leaders in 1884, seated in the second row up from the bottom, third from the right, in conversation with former Kansas Governor John P. St. John, who ran as the party's presidential candidate that year. Print courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

one of Mary Lease’s great and enduring concerns was women’s paid employment and entry into professional life.17

Mary had long published poems in local newspapers, but her political writing began in Texas. Like thousands of other American women Lease was inspired by Frances Willard, president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). It is hard to think of a place where temperance and “moral uplift” seemed more urgent than in Denison: the small town had over a dozen saloons, and local papers regularly reported on gambling disputes, drunken gunfights, and the suicides of prostitutes. Willard made two tours through Texas, including a Denison stop in February 1882. A month later, the national WCTU paper identified “Mrs. C. L. Lease” as an “able” officer in the local chapter. As secretary, Lease was helping organize a new WCTU chapter in Gainesville, forty miles away.18

From the beginning of her work with the WCTU, Lease emphasized women’s rights. What appears to have been her first political essay, “Are Women Inferior?,” was written in response to a particularly nasty attack on Frances Willard, in which a Denison editor told women to “be silent and learn wisdom from their husbands,”

killing him instantly.”16 Frank was apparently buried in Denison. Mary had, by this point, endured not only rural hardship, the deprivations and losses of war, the shock of a severe economic depression, and the heartbreak of lost children, but now also the tragic consequences of industrialization.

Like many westerners, the Leases partly recovered their financial fortunes through land speculation. By 1878 they had saved enough to begin purchasing lots in Denison, which they sold in 1883 for a solid profit. They then briefly tried homesteading in Kingman, Kansas, before Charles found a job at a pharmacy in Wichita. The family remained vulnerable: despite the income Mary began to earn from a variety of jobs in the mid-1880s, Charles’s attempts to reopen his own drugstore led to repeated business failures. It is not surprising, then, that


17. On the Leases’ poverty before 1878 and their subsequent purchase and sale of lots at an apparent profit of $1,025, see Assessment Roll of Property Situated in Grayson County, 1876–1882; and Grayson County deed records, Book 56, pp. 159, 311, and Book 57, pp. 490, 303, Recorder of Deeds Office, Grayson County, Texas. For evidence of the rise of Charles Lease’s drugstores, see for example, Eighth Annual Directory of the City of Wichita for 1892 (Wichita, Kans.: The Leader-Printing and Publishing Co., [1892]), 214, 474; Fourteenth Edition, 1903–04, City Directory of Wichita and Sedgwick County Kansas (Wichita, Kans.: W. H. Burche, [1904]), 222; and others covering the 1890s and early 1900s. On the Leases’ 1902 divorce, granted on grounds that Mary Lease’s “husband did not support her,” as well as details of her bankruptcy, see Topeka Capital, May 31, 1901; Wichita Eagle, May 24, 1902; National Advance (Milwaukee, Wis.), August 7, 1897.

claiming no woman had ever achieved anything except by raising children and “making home happy.” In the first of several rebuttals, Lease vehemently disagreed. “Woman has taken rapid strides in every branch of science and industry,” she declared. “One by one the fetters which bound her for centuries have dropped off.”

She republished this essay after the Leases moved to Kansas and followed up with additional letters and essays on similar themes. She hailed the “brilliant and noble company” of women in history who had “cast aside the conventional trammels of custom” and shown what women could do. “There is no difference,” Lease often declared, “between the mind of a smart man and that of a smart woman.”

Like other women’s rights advocates, Lease struggled to reconcile the ideal of selfless female benevolence with the urgent need for income. (“Rewards come not often,” she wrote privately, “to those who struggle for bread.”) In the late 1880s Lease pursued many avenues for employment in Wichita. She read law with a local attorney and briefly opened a law practice. After editing a column in a reform-oriented local paper, the New Republic, she was hired as editor of the Wichita Independent but soon quit in a dispute over pay. In 1886 she ran on the Prohibition Party ticket for superintendent of schools. But her greatest talent turned out to be public speaking. Such work was part time and flexible, well suited to a mother who, when she gave her first paid lectures in 1885, was caring for three children—ages eleven, five, and three—and expecting another baby. At the same time, with extraordinary energy, Lease founded a women’s literary club, assisted in a statewide campaign for women’s municipal suffrage, and hosted Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton at a local suffrage convention in Wichita.

These multiple commitments show a cross-fertilization of ideas and causes typical of women involved in late nineteenth-century reform. Lease’s background gave her a particularly complex outlook. Although a Catholic, she joined the temperance movement, often described as a Protestant crusade. In the same year she organized middle-class women into the Hypatia study club, she also won acclaim for “Ireland and Irishmen,” a lecture she delivered to local Irish-American men’s groups. Lease helped preside over the Wichita women’s suffrage convention just fifteen months before she briefly worked as a paid organizer for the Knights of Labor, representing working-class Irishmen who built railcars at a Wichita factory. This blend of influences may have helped make Lease a particularly effective orator. In addition to having a resonant voice, ready wit, and extraordinary memory for everything from statistics to Shakespeare, she was an astute judge of audiences. She could pitch appeals to struggling farmers, poor laborers, middle-class businessmen, radical reformers, old-line Democrats, pious Protestants, and devout Catholics—all groups with whom she was intimately familiar.

Lie most women who became Populist leaders, Lease emerged from the party’s labor wing. She made her campaign debut in 1888 working for the Union Labor Party, an important precursor to the Populists. Throughout her public career, Lease remained focused on women’s rights, both economic and political.

19. Attack on Willard in Denison (Tex.) Democrat, February 12, 1882; and anonymous response, “Are Women Inferior?” Gate City (Tex.) Gazette, n.d., both in Willard Scrapbook; the latter is certainly by Lease, because she republished it after moving to Kansas, Kingman Citizen, January 24, 1884. See also New Republic, January 9, 1885; and Wichita Beacon, April 22, 1886. On Lease’s role in the Denison WCTU see also Gate City Gazette, February 19, 1883, clipping in Willard Scrapbook; and “Mary Elizabeth Lease” in Elizabeth Brooks, Prominent Women of Texas (Akron, Ohio: Werner Co., 1896), 202–3. On Willard’s Texas tour see also Willard Scrapbook: Temperance and Prohibition Papers, 1830–1933, ed. Ruth Bordin, Reel 32, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus.


22. Wichita Daily Eagle, March 6, 1885; speech repeated in the Wichita Daily Eagle, July 2, 1885; for notices and excerpts from the speech, and requests for repetition in nearby towns, see Wichita Beacon throughout late February and March 1885. For a repetition of this speech in Newton, “under the auspices of the ladies of the Equal Suffrage Society,” see Kansas Commercer (Wichita), February 1, 1889. For context, Thomas N. Brown, Irish-American Nationalism, 1870–1890 (Philadelphia, Penn.: Lippincott, 1966).

23. On Lease’s Union Labor campaign speeches see, among other accounts, Labor News (Laramie), September 13, 1888; and Plain-Dealer (Pratt), October 26, 1888. Historians have paid far less attention to the Union Labor Party than to the Populists, but U.S. Senator Preston Plumb, an experienced Republican, saw the party as a serious threat. See, for example, his private letters to Republican editor Marsh Murdock of Wichita. On August 21, 1888, he wrote, “I honestly believe that if the Democrats & U.L. people were to put $50,000 into the canvass they could carry the legislature in the present condition of affairs. They may be able to do it even without that.” On September 6, 1888, he wrote, “we have no margin to spare.” Marshall W. Murdock Papers, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.
and political. Her fierce opposition to Republican U.S. Senator John J. Ingalls, for example, seems to have been grounded less in economic questions than in Ingalls’s dismissal of women’s suffrage claims. Arguing that women should not vote because they could never serve as soldiers, Ingalls added rather gratuitously, “women have made no important contribution to any of those great subjects of thought with which the science and practice of government are concerned.” In a scathing response, Lease wrote that such arguments rested on “the crumbling ruins of the feudal age when ‘might made right.’ . . . You are making of yourself a spectacle,” she told Ingalls, and “the women are laughing.”

Lease carried her women’s rights agenda into Populism. She was a leader among those who, as historian Jack Blocker has shown, pressed the party to take an anti-liquor and pro-women’s suffrage stance. In 1891 and 1892 she and her allies cooperated with Frances Willard and other sympathetic Prohibitionists, who were simultaneously pushing their own party to take up Populist economic planks. On both sides it was an uphill battle. Middle-class Prohibitionists, especially in the Northeast, considered Populist ideas heretical, while many male Populists, especially in the South, rejected both prohibition and women’s suffrage. “Mrs. Lease . . . assured me that she was heartily with us for Union,” wrote one Prohibitionist in 1892, as he worked to unite the two reform movements. “She was going to make one more fight, and if the Omaha convention would not come on union ground by accepting the principle of equal suffrage and abolition of the Saloon she would bolt and she knew many other influential leaders would bolt with her. . . . If the Prohibitionists would make room for them by adopting a broader policy and changing their name they could bring to their ranks such a host of recruits as would bring the People’s Party to their senses.”

24. John J. Ingalls, “The Sixteenth Amendment,” Forum 4 (September 1887): 1–13, quotation on 4; see also report of his speech in Abilene on the same theme, Wichita Eagle, May 24, 1887; Lease, “A Reply,” Wichita Eagle, May 26, 1887; account of Lease’s suffrage lecture, “Woman and Woman’s Work,” Wichita Beacon, April 22, 1886. Lease was still denouncing Ingalls on this issue after he had left the Senate; see “Mrs. Lease to Ingalls,” Atlanta (Ga.) Constitution, August 9, 1891.

25. G. M. Miller to T. C. Richmond, April 5, 1892, Richmond Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; on the overall merger attempt and its failure see Jack S. Blocker, Retreat from Reform:
Lease did not quite bolt: the Prohibitionists gave no ground on economic questions, and thus there was no place to bolt to. But as early as the fall of 1892 it was clear that she and her allies were not in control of the Populists’ future. Instead, both in Kansas and nationally, “fusionists” made alliances to garner Democratic votes. Lease was incensed by fusion, for personal as well as ideological reasons. Through a backroom deal in 1892, Populist leaders in Kansas’s Fourth District agreed not to renominate Congressman John Otis, an anti-fusionist who was the husband of Lease’s close friend Bina Otis. Instead, the district’s Populist convention excluded Otis and nominated a Democrat. After the election, Kansas party leaders ignored Lease’s advice and chose to conduct an armed defense of the lower chamber of the state legislature against Republicans in a public-relations catastrophe that became known as the “Kansas legislative war.” “Mrs. Lease,” one source reported later, “with a foresight not possessed by other leaders, counseled her party to give it up, even though they were in the right. She realized the Populists were going against a fixed game, to which there could be but one final outcome, the courts being Republican. . . . She knew that the fight would discredit the Populists.” It did.

Lease’s policy goals remained consistent: she placed equal stress on Populist economic reforms, Prohibition, and women’s suffrage. A multitude of less-famous Kansas women shared these priorities. While remaining firm in their support of Populist economic reforms, such women created a separate organization in 1894, the Women’s Political Progressive League. The need for such a group had by then become clear. Lewelling’s administration and the Populist state chairman, John Briedenthal, worked strenuously to appoint Democrats and promote “fusion”; they were actively hostile to Prohibition and suffrage. Meanwhile, most Republican leaders staunchly opposed women’s suffrage. Lease, like an array of other Kansas women, found herself with no obvious political home. She switched loyalties multiple times in the 1890s, not because her principles changed, but because she could find no steady political vehicle through which to carry them forward.

Lease also found her personal ambitions thwarted. She believed, rightly it seems, that she deserved the lion’s share of credit for the Kansas Populists’ stunning victory in 1890. She was in great demand leading up to the election. “There are several other magnificent speakers,” her booking agent had pleaded in the midst of the campaign, besieged by requests. “You cannot all secure Mrs. Lease.” Once the results were in, Lease was widely hailed as the “woman who beat Senator Ingalls.” As one of her party’s most effective orators and strategists, Lease hoped to be rewarded with a major appointment, but she was marginalized and assigned tasks that male leaders viewed as more appropriate for a woman than the exercise of significant political power.

The most promising opportunity opened up in late 1892, when Populists had considerable clout in the legislature and Lease was a serious candidate for U.S. Senator, a position then elected by legislative vote. A nationwide grassroots letter-writing campaign began on Lease’s behalf, with Susan B. Anthony and other nationally prominent figures offering support in Kansas publications such as the Farmer’s Wife. Lease maintained the disinterested stance then considered fitting for potential candidates. “Some of my friends (the grangers) are discussing the eligibility of a woman [for the Senate],” she wrote privately to a friend. “Altogether I am weary. Still! Stranger things have happened, and there is no telling what God and a Kansas legislature will do.”

Populist leaders, pursuing “fusion” instead, chose John Martin, a leading Democratic ally. Governor Lorenzo Lewelling appointed Lease to a far less important post as

27. Goldberg, An Army of Women, documents Briedenthal’s ruthless pro-fusion and anti-women’s suffrage efforts, for example, pp. 194, 216, 237, 244–45. Goldberg is hostile to the anti-fusionists, claiming that Lease, for example, was “crazy” and guilty of “rabid zealotry,” but he admits that the anti-fusionists “claims against the Lewelling administration and Briedenthal’s central committee were largely valid” (p. 247). For another account that treats fusionists as “practical” men and anti-fusionists, including Lease, as irrational zealots, see Clanton, Kansas Populism, especially ch. 9 and 10. While neither side ultimately crafted a winning strategy, the principled stance of anti-fusionists such as Stephen McLallin, editor of the Topeka Advocate, should not be dismissed: fusion came, as Goldberg admits, at a high “ideological cost.” “Better defeat,” McLallin declared, “than victory at such a sacrifice” (Goldberg, An Army of Women, 194).

28. American Nonconformist (Winfield), August 21, 1890; see also July 24, 1890. Wichita editor Victor Murdock later remarked that the Populist campaign of 1890 was a “revolution” and that “more than any other factor, the voice of Mary Elizabeth Lease made it so.” Victor Murdock, Folks (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 97–101.
opposed fusion from start to finish. Perhaps she had financial considerations in mind (such as a coveted railroad pass), but the strange circumstances of a hostile newspaper “exposé” published shortly after the meeting make it more likely that her enemies were luring Lease in and seeking to damage her credibility. The story of her “secret conference” with Rossington and Peck came out in a peculiar front-page story that hinted at a set-up and a carefully orchestrated attack.30

Though the possibility cannot be ruled out, there is no persuasive evidence that Lease received illicit payments from Republicans or anyone else. Newspapers, apparently beginning with the hostile Kansas City Gazette, circulated rumors in spring 1894 that she had received a $5,000 “inheritance” from relatives in Ireland. Amid the highly charged atmosphere of that year—when Lease's activities and views were watched closely and seldom reported neutrally—it is hard to know what to make of such claims. The only concrete evidence that can be found lies in records of the Leases’ personal finances, which show no evidence of any outside aid. Struggling, like millions of others, with the effects of the severe depression, they stopped paying the mortgage on their Wichita home sometime in late 1894 or 1895. In 1896 the bank foreclosed, precipitating a five-year legal struggle that ended in bankruptcy. These were the very same years when Lease returned to the Republican Party; given her talents, she could surely have been well remunerated for doing so, if she had sought payments or bribes. Yet the Leases lost their home to foreclosure and Mary was left bankrupt. In a 1901 proceeding, she listed debts of $8,247 and “assets” (mostly lecture fees that were due to her, but remained unpaid) of $2,293.31

Soon after the “exposure” of her 1894 meeting with Rossington and Peck, Lease gave a sensational interview claiming that Lewelling’s allies were trying to “kill me politically. . . . To destroy me they say I am working for

30. On the charges of collusion with Rossington and Peck see Clanton, “Intolerant Populist?,” 196; Pleasanton Herald, January 12 and 26, 1894; see the peculiar front-page report in the St. Louis (Mo.) Republic, January 12, 1894, which suggests that a reporter acted on a tip and “staked out” the hotel where Lease would arrive. On behind-the-scenes efforts by W. H. Rossington, see letters to Attorney General Richard Olney for 1893 and onward, RG 60, Kansas, 1893–1897, General Records of the Department of Justice; and Olney’s notes titled “Rossington” from various dates, all at National Archives, College Park, Maryland. As one example see W. H. Rossington to Richard Olney, October 14, 1893, withdrawing his recommendation of an appointment for Chauncey Flora of Leavenworth, who “had been in favor of fusion . . . and associated with that movement. . . . He assured us that he had left it . . . but subsequent to that time he acted in connection with certain populist office-holders in fomenting a miners’ strike in Leavenworth.”

Republican pay. . . . Not only that, but they paid $500 to obtain affidavits that General J. B. Weaver and I slept together at many of the leading hotels during the campaign.” Lease alleged that the governor told two officials, “If Mrs. Lease makes any fight on me I will spring those affidavits on her!” The Kansas secretary of state moved swiftly to heighten the damage caused by these startling charges. “The woman is crazy,” he declared. “I have nothing to say about it. If she wants to advertise her own shame that’s her business, not ours. The story I have heard about Mrs. Lease does not drag in the name of Weaver.”

This is the moment when historians have described Lease’s behavior as most irrational. They have not, however, considered one obvious explanation: the possibility that Lease and Weaver indeed had an affair. If so, Lease was acting with typical boldness: knowing such allegations would severely damage her, but believing exposure unavoidable, she sought to blunt the impact of the accusation by preempting the revelation and depicting the affidavits as an attempt to “kill” her career. Such a possibility is not unrealistic. Lewelling and his managers were, in fact, systematically dispatching anti-fusion opponents, convinced that Populists’ future success depended on full cooperation with Democrats. Kansas politics was exceedingly ugly in the 1890s, and political leaders were well aware of the power of sexual innuendo.

Though it is impossible to build a conclusive case, some clues hint at a Lease-Weaver affair. Such a relationship seems improbable only if we assume Lease and Weaver subscribed to the sexual mores that prevailed publicly in Victorian America. Lease, for one, did not. By 1892 she had been estranged from Charles for six or seven years and was engaged in radical conversations about sexuality and marriage reform. As historian Joanne Passet has shown, the rural Midwest was a hotbed for the discussion of marital rape, contraception, and critiques of marriage law. In the 1890s Lease seems to have read—and may have subscribed to—the sex radical newspaper

Foundation Principles, published in Topeka by Lois Waisbrooker.

33. Among many examples of dirty politics and awareness of its impact, see the warning given by Topeka’s mayor, at an 1894 convention, on the dangers of opposing women’s suffrage by broadcasting the potential role of “immoral women” in politics: “do not try to handle a keen, two-edged sword by the naked blade” (Goldberg, An Army of Women, p. 231). On fusion see n. 27, above.
34. Joanne Passet, Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women’s Equality (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 113–21; Foundation Principles (Topeka), July 1893–November 15, 1894. Scholars have not adequately explored connections between economic radicalism and sex radicalism. Waisbrooker’s other writings included a pamphlet titled The Sex Question and the Money Power (1873), and there were many other links between sex radicals and the Greenback, Populist, and other economic reform movements.

In 1894 Lease gave a sensational interview claiming that Populist Governor Lorenzo Dow Lewelling’s allies were trying to “kill me politically. . . . they say I am working for Republican pay. . . . Not only that, but they paid $500 to obtain affidavits that General J. B. Weaver and I slept together.” That Lewelling, shown here on an 1892 campaign ribbon, would attempt to “kill” Lease’s career is not unrealistic. He did, in fact, systematically dispatch anti-fusion opponents, convinced that Populists’ future success depended on cooperation with Democrats.

In 1893 Lease issued an enthusiastic endorsement of Waisbrooker’s novel A Sex Revolution. The book called for a new era of women’s political leadership, particularly in opposition to war and militarism; Waisbrooker defended women’s right to control their own bodies, denouncing prostitution, marital rape, and other abuses caused by “the masculine organ of generation.” “I wish every woman in the land could read your book,” Lease wrote to Waisbrooker. “You gave expression to my thoughts so clearly it almost startled me.” Given the controversial nature of A Sex Revolution, it seems unlikely that Lease
wanted her letter published, but Waisbrooker seized the opportunity for a high-profile endorsement. Lease’s interest in sex radicalism persisted. She joined the birth control movement, and years after her Populist fame, a Wichita reporter found her in New York in the company of her close friend “Tenney”: Tennessee Claflin, a free-love advocate and sister of the famous Victoria Woodhull.

James B. Weaver’s point of view is far more difficult to ascertain. No biographer has given more than passing attention to his marriage—though his wife Clara was an accomplished reformer and suffrage advocate—much less to his views on marriage and sexuality, to the extent any evidence remains. Few of Weaver’s papers from 1892 exist, but among those that do, two documents are intriguing. One is a handwritten statement signed by Weaver, defending Lease from charges of collusion with Republicans. It has been folded carefully, with a poem penciled on the reverse and signed, “Weaver.” The poem is difficult to decipher but appears to be a love poem in the same hand as Weaver’s signature, with a reference to “We two.” Lease clearly wrote the public statement: it is in her handwriting, and Weaver’s signature, at the bottom, is written in another style with a different pen. Presumably, then, Lease wrote the statement and mailed it to Weaver, who signed it at her request, scribbled the poem on the reverse, and sent it back to her. Lease seems to have returned it in September 1894, after the “affidavits” affair, attaching her own dated, handwritten poem, “Life.” A verse of loss, it ends with this stanza:

God sends to mortals no sadder fate  
Than to fold our hands, and silent wait,  
Wait by the sands of the cold gray shore  
And know that your ship will come no more.

A Lease poem that surfaced later, “At Pensacola Bay,” is also suggestive, since Lease and Weaver visited the Florida panhandle when they stumped Alabama in early September 1892. It depicts “a cloudless sky and a perfect day” when “I sailed, I sailed with you.”

None of this evidence is conclusive, and the truth will probably never be known. It is telling, however, that Lease spoke publicly about the alleged affidavits. She was keenly aware of the extraordinary risks posed by any hint of female sexual indiscretion. In interviews, she took care to dress tastefully and emphasize her devotion to her children and to gardening, quilting, and other homemaking arts. Without doubt, she understood that the statement she made in January 1894 would expose her to fierce criticism and stigmatization—which, in fact, it did. Perhaps Lease had other reasons for lashing out, but it seems most likely that she urgently needed to address a damaging accusation before others deployed it against her.

If accurate, this interpretation helps make sense of Lease’s sudden and almost complete isolation in Populist ranks, despite her talent and charisma. In the wake of

on 94; on Lease’s friendship with Tennessee Claflin, *Wichita Eagle*, February 17, 1907; and November 5, 1933.


37. Among numerous interviews in which Lease emphasized her motherliness and homemaking skills see, for example, *Kansas City Star*,...
the “affidavits” affair, even staunch allies in the party’s anti-fusion wing began to distance themselves from her. If such leaders believed an affair had taken place, it is obvious why they saw Lease as a danger. “We do not undertake to justify all her acts,” the Kansas Commoner had written a year earlier, in an editorial defending Lease. “We believe that she is many times indiscreet [sic] and we have told her so plainly on several different occasions.” Such allies may, of course, have found Lease indiscreet for reasons other than—or in addition to—an illicit affair. But in any case, her exclusion was strikingly abrupt and thorough. In May, she suffered a nervous collapse.38

Throughout 1894 Lease also became isolated from other suffrage advocates, as Kansas women mounted a vigorous campaign for the ballot. A faction of Populist women objected to the leadership of Republican Laura M. Johns, who many believed, as Lease’s friend Bina Otis put it, was “a Republican first and a suffragist second.” Johns and other Republican women maintained close ties with party leaders during the bitter 1894 campaign, despite the fact that the Populists’ state convention had endorsed suffrage and Republicans had rejected it. Lease, with justification, criticized Johns and her allies and refused to work with them. Historians have praised other Populists, especially Annie Diggs, for cooperating with the Republican women and being more “gentle and feminine,” but it is unclear that such a strategy was any more effective than Lease’s. The suffrage amendment failed; a careful tabulation suggested that the measure had won support from 80 percent of Prohibitionist voters and 54 percent of Populists, but only 38.5 percent of Republicans and 14 percent of Democrats.39

Lease’s marginalization also coincided with fragmentation among Populists, as the party struggled with internal conflicts and the pressures of the severe economic depression that began in 1893. After November 1894, the party reeled from sharp defeats in Kansas and elsewhere. Lease harbored, of course, the same desire for patronage that she accused her enemies of having; she hoped politics would provide employment. She disliked William Jennings Bryan, a rival orator who, from Lease’s perspective, received rewards vastly greater than she did, simply because he was a man. Nonetheless, she campaigned for Bryan in 1896 in New York City. Hearing her there, labor organizer Leonora O’Reilly reported that Lease had “lost all the sweetness out of her nature. It is all bitter, bitter stories she has to tell.” Lease spent most of the campaign in Minnesota, invited there by her last major Populist ally, Ignatius Donnelley. When Donnelley failed her after 1898, she abandoned the party.40

It was logical, then, for Lease to return to the Republicans in 1900—especially since she had strong ties to that party from the Civil War era and retained a deep mistrust of southern Democrats. In interviews and speeches, Lease maintained an emphasis on economic reform and women’s rights, broadly defined, but she gave up on the People’s Party as a vehicle for accomplishing these reforms. After 1896 she decisively rejected Bryan’s leadership, arguing that Democrats were too corrupt and hidebound to change. She returned to the Republicans in part because, at the national level, she admired Theodore Roosevelt as an economic reformer and a potential women’s rights advocate. As the depression of the 1890s faded she also, like many other Americans, turned attention to new issues. She supported an aggressive American foreign policy to counter the power of the British Empire, describing herself as “an advocate of Expansion and the progressive policy of Republicanism.”41

Lease was not, however, a terribly active Republican. She largely retired from politics after the turn of the

March 1, 1896; New York World, August 16, 1896; Frank Leslie’s Weekly, September 10, 1896.

38. Kansas Commoner, January 12, 1893. Lease had sudden episodes of very serious illness as early as her Osage Mission days (Osage Mission Transcript, May 1, 1874); for her collapse in 1894 see Kansas City (Kans.) Gazette, May 9, 1894; and (Olathe) Kansas Star, May 17, 1894; for a later breakdown, probably caused in part by exhaustion and financial stress, see Portland Oregonian, June 3, 1898.

39. The campaign is covered in Goldberg, An Army of Women, ch. 7; quotation from Otis, p. 254; vote tabulation, p. 251. Goldberg criticizes Lease and upholds Johns and Diggs as exemplars of “the ideal of sisterhood” (p. 226). His own evidence, however, suggests that Lease and other Populist critics were correct about Johns’s loyalties and motives. See, for example, the widespread outrage over John’s rigging of a Kansas Equal Suffrage Association election, in which she instituted a stiff membership fee to block poorer Populists from voting and ensure her own reelection by wealthier Republican allies (pp. 253–55).

40. Lease and Bryan were often compared; the editor of the Topeka Capital said of Lease, for example, that “of all the speakers he ever heard only W. J. Bryan was better.” W. W. Graves, History of Neosho County (St. Paul, Kans.: Journal Press, 1949), 637–38. Leonora O’Reilly diary, n.d. (listed in a long entry under January 11, 1896, which clearly includes references through August). Leonora O’Reilly Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the Minnesota tour see Representative, June 3–October 7, 1896; on Donnelley’s crusade the following year see Representative, September 15, 1897; October 6, 1897–February 23, 1898, Even Donnelley proved of limited help. When the Leases lost their home, Donnelley undertook a fundraising appeal through his paper to help them buy a new one. Correspondence between Lease and Donnelley in July 1899, Ignatius Donnelley Papers, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and St. Paul, shows that Donnelley in fact used the money to keep his paper afloat and had nothing to give Lease when she requested the funds.

41. Mary Lease to J. L. Bristow, June 9, 1900, Joseph L. Bristow Papers, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka; Representative, July 19, 1900; Brooklyn (N.Y.) Eagle, May 20, 1914.
Beginning in 1894 Lease became increasingly isolated from her fellow Populists and by 1900 she was no longer terribly active in politics. She was still enough on the minds of national commentators, however, to make it into Puck's proposed exhibit for the 1901 World's Fair: "Let Us Have a Chamber of Female Horrors." "Mrs. Lease" stands at the center top, rake in hand, alongside other women activists, including, on the left, from front to back, Mary Walker, Belva Lockwood, Susan B. Anthony, "E. Cady Stanton," "Mrs. Lease," "Mrs. Eddy Christian Scientist," "D.A.R.," and behind them "Mrs. Faith Healer" and "Woman Evangelist." "Queen Holland of Dames" and "Carrie Nation of Kansas," hatchet in hand, stand at the right. Cartoon courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Mary Lease's story illuminates some of the formidable obstacles that late nineteenth-century women faced as they sought to enter electoral politics. They had no vote, and with anti-suffrage men largely in control of conventions and decision-making councils, it proved impossible to gain a full share of power within Populism.
or any other party. Beyond this gender limitation lay others. As fusion with Democrats became the central Populist goal, Prohibitionist men and women were also marginalized. The party gave only limited attention to the problems of women’s wage labor and independent professional work. The controversy over the alleged “affidavits,” whether or not it was based on a real affair between Lease and Weaver, showed how precarious women’s standing in politics could be, and how dependent their reputations were on proper family ties and sexual respectability.

Lease’s rapid rise and fall also suggest the brevity and fluidity of the “Populist moment.” Her difficult path demonstrates that the reform party’s agenda never satisfied many people who were publicly identified with the movement—even a leader like Lease, who had achieved national recognition as a voice for Populism. Lease’s involvement in the party lasted at most six years: joining at its foundation in Kansas in 1890, she was frustrated by 1892, and thoroughly disillusioned by 1894. Her expectations and objectives for the new party, like those of other Populists, can best be understood in the context of prior commitments—in Lease’s case, to the Republican, Prohibitionist, and Union Labor parties, as well as to Irish nationalism, the WCTU, the Knights of Labor, and women’s rights.

Historians have often sought to distinguish between “real” and “shadow” Populism, identifying certain Populists as ideologically and strategically correct and others as marginal. Lease, of course, has fared badly in such assessments because her political goals—which remained consistent from start to finish—did not align with either the strategy of fusion or the party platform adopted at Omaha in 1892. But Lease’s story suggests that, in relation to a party that existed so briefly, it is misleading to look for “the Populist Moment,” “the Populist Vision,” or “the Populist Response to Industrial America.”44 There were many Populist visions.

Despite the discouragements Lease faced—resulting in some cases, perhaps, from her own indiscretions—she left a powerful legacy. She used her talents as an orator, through both argument and example, to rebut the misogyny she first answered in her Texas essay, “Are Women Inferior?” Even in her less successful speeches, such as the one Leonora O’Reilly heard in New York, Lease presented provocative and enduring ideas. Drawing on her Irish roots in that speech, as in many others, Lease noted the waning power of the British monarchy. “The aristocracy of royalty,” she declared, “is dying out.” But she warned that “in this country we find in place of an aristocracy of royalty an aristocracy of wealth . . . far more dangerous.” She argued that Wall Street elites subverted democracy to their own ends and acted against the interests of “the common people. . . . They say ‘leave it to the financiers’ . . . . We have left it to them too long, and while we have been sinking into bankruptcy our financiers have been growing millionaires.”45 It is a mark of Lease’s boldness and insight, as well as the political failures of her day and since, that her words still ring true.  


Mary E. Lease and the Populists