

A Woman through the Berkshires Ceiling

Rebel Cinderella: From Rags to Riches to Radical, the Epic Journey of Rose Pastor Stokes by Adam Hochschild. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 303 pp. USD\$30.

Reviewed by David Swick, University of King's College, Canada

Adam Hochschild was looking for something else when he bumped into a photo of Rose Pastor Stokes in a U.S. delegation to Moscow in 1922. Why, he wondered, was a member of one of the wealthiest families in the United States celebrating the fifth anniversary of the Soviet Union? The answer to that question is his tenth book, *Rebel Cinderella*. To write it, he read thousands of letters, a diary, two memoirs, and dozens of surveillance reports by agents working for what would become the FBI.

Hochschild is fascinated by character, by the jumble of influences that guide motivation and action. Often his books feature a great number of compelling people; this time he focuses primarily on Rose. She deserves a book of her own.

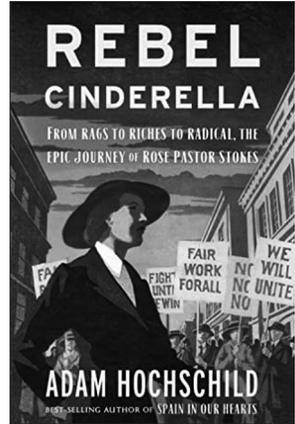
Rose Pastor was born in czarist Russia in 1879; her family emigrated to the United States, settling in Cleveland. When her father abandoned the family, Rose, the eldest child, became the breadwinner for her mother and six siblings. Her job: rolling cigars, for sixteen hours a day (139). This hard work lasted twelve years. When it started, she was eleven.

Despite having only two years of schooling, Rose was smart and spunky. At about twenty she sent a letter describing her work to a New York newspaper—and was asked to start an advice column for young women. A couple of years later, the paper asked her to move to Manhattan. At twenty-three, she did.

Her interviews included Graham Stokes, the scion of one of the richest families in the country, and a rare wealthy man expressing support for the working class. They dated, then in 1905 married, shocking the East Coast Protestant establishment, and thrilling the popular press. The media embraced this unexpected couple—especially Rose. For several years, at the peak of her fame, U.S. newspapers wrote about her more than any other woman.

Hochschild's voice is avuncular, even grandfatherly. He sounds like a wise man, just down from the mountain, revealing discovered wisdom. His voice—touched with small asides, and never making the focus himself—makes his storytelling intimate and profound.

Rose's in-laws' one-hundred-room Berkshires summer home was at the time the



largest private house in the country (4). Rose was not comfortable there or in the family's Madison Avenue mansion, next door to J. P. Morgan, so Graham's mother bought the couple a smaller home of their own, at 88 Grove Street in Greenwich Village. (The house still stands, across the street from the Stonewall Tavern.) Greenwich Village was an activist hotbed, and the couple moved in a circle that included Emma Goldman, John Reed, and Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs.

Between 1905 and 1920 the United States was torn by a mighty struggle to decide its direction. How democratic, and how capitalist, would it be? Would power be shared by many, or remain in only a few hands? Rose and Graham started speaking at labor rallies—at a time when rallies filled Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden. Early in their relationship Graham was the obvious leader. But it was Rose, overcoming shyness, who best connected with crowds. A poised and powerful speaker, she had the ability to make every listener feel she was talking directly to them. She also had a nose for hypocrisy and no fear of breaking convention. “How can you love God, whom you have not seen,” she asked one audience, “if you do not love your fellow man, whom you have seen?” (145).

Many young idealists at the time joined the Socialist Party; Rose and Graham did too. Its platform sounds mild today: a ban on child labor; an inheritance tax; unemployment, medical, and old-age insurance; a living wage (134). Still, opposition was fierce. Millions of dollars were spent by powerful people—including some of Rose's relatives. Much of the money went to private detectives and goon squads; the result was violence and murder. Even so, Debs in 1912 received more than 900,000 votes. Supporters of an egalitarian society had reasons to believe that history was moving their way. Then came World War I.

Seeing an opportunity to boost the war effort while at the same time destroying unions and other progressive movements, the U.S. government created a massive propaganda machine, the Committee on Public Information. Hochschild is known for deep and thorough research and, like all of his books, *Rebel Cinderella* offers astounding facts and statistics. The Committee sent 75,000 speakers to movie houses and lecture halls and produced 77 million pamphlets. This had the desired effect. “A patriotic frenzy filled the air,” Hochschild says, “and provided the excuse to continue the war at home against organized labor and dissent” (200).

A vast, oppressive, institutional machine versus a small number of people working to create a fairer, saner world is a recurring motif in Hochschild's excellent books. In *King Leopold's Ghost* (1996) he considered the fight to end Belgium's gruesome reign in the Congo. *Bury the Chains* (2005) looked at the people who committed their lives to ending the British slave trade—and those fighting to keep it. Some writers handling such grisly topics move to sarcasm, fury, or denunciation, but that is not Hochschild's way. He is a master of tone—even when examining the muck and terror of appalling cruelty, his voice stays eminently civilized. His tone is fine, compassionate, and smooth. In staying calm, he radiates authority. His theory may be: when you are on the side of the angels, there is no need to raise your voice.

During the war many of Rose and Graham's friends were jailed, beaten, or deported. “Across the country,” Hochschild says,

vigilante groups sprang up with names like the Sedition Slammers and the Knights of Liberty. The largest was the [250,000-strong] American Protective League, or APL, which had the support of the Justice Department. . . . Its ranks filled with businessmen who hated unions, nativists who hated immigrants, and men too old for the military who still wanted to do battle. (182)

Literary journalists and literary journalism scholars will note that while Hochschild offers insights and raises thoughtful questions, he sticks to telling Rose's story, and the story of her era. He provides facts; readers can decide what they mean. During the war, the rich got richer. By its end Britain was spending half its military budget in the United States, and on every sale the company acting as Britain's agent, J. P. Morgan & Co., received a one percent commission. Wartime pressures showed in the marriage. Graham began supporting the government, to the point of betraying friends he thought might be German agents. Rose fought on, with increasing determination. After the war she even stayed loyal to the Soviet Union, long after most of her friends had denounced it for abandoning socialist ideals. Why did she stick with the Soviets, despite overwhelming evidence of atrocities and corruption? Ultimately, Hochschild believes, Rose's character included this kink: it was almost as if she was "seeking a kind of martyrdom" (137).

Brave, intelligent, and achingly idealistic, Rose was a truth teller at a time when this was dangerous and rare. She believed that the United States was built on sand, that its foundations needed repair. After she and Graham separated, but before the divorce was finalized, she was found to be involved in an affair. Confronted by a reporter, she refused to be scandalized. "Love is always justified," Rose said. ". . . The real scandal—the wife who gives herself to the husband without love and the husband who gives himself to the wife without love—the real breach is given a veneer of sanctity by the church and covered with a cloak of decency by the law" (234). When she and Graham divorced, against the advice of her lawyer and friends, Rose declined to ask for alimony (236). In her final years she was often destitute.

Rose and Graham both wrote memoirs (his was never published). Graham spent sixty pages describing generations of his family's business dealings, but never once mentioned Rose. She, in contrast, charted their relationship from happy start to disillusionment and divorce. Rose told an acquaintance that during their final years together Graham had "reverted to type." "Given her fervent belief in the Soviet Union," Hochschild says, "he might well have said the same thing of her" (238).

Was something else at play in their relationship? For years Graham called Rose "girly," and with dismay he watched her grow more confident, assertive, and independent-minded. If this is what most upset him, Hochschild says, "that was a feeling he shared with men from all classes, not just his own. In his era, a truly egalitarian relationship may have been even rarer than one across the barrier of class" (239).

The title of this eminently readable book is imprecise. The Cinderella myth always ends happily; this true story does not. When, at fifty-one, Rose was diagnosed with cancer, her friends, including Upton Sinclair, went to Graham. He refused to help.

A literary journalist and historian who has spent decades increasing awareness about both the heroic and rotten roots of U.S. society, Adam Hochschild ends *Rebel Cinderella* with a wistful look at our own time.

As this book goes to press, the number of billionaires in the United States has increased more than tenfold since the year 2000. And no nation on earth has such a staggering gulf between the salary levels of its CEOs and those of their workers. . . . The net worth of the average American family, by contrast, is less than what it was 20 years ago. You do not have to believe in either magic or communism to hope for an alternative. (245)