Labor activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was no stranger when she arrived in Duluth on July 11, 1916. As early as 1907 Flynn had advocated for the rights of Minnesota workers, and she was nationally known as an orator with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an industrial union committed to overthrowing capitalism. In 1916, Flynn returned to Minnesota to support an IWW strike on the Mesabi Iron Range. Eight thousand iron ore miners—a mixture of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—had walked away from their jobs in early June. The IWW stepped in to organize the workers and helped draft a list of strike demands that included higher wages, a shorter work day, payday twice per month, and eradication of a labor system that paid miners not by a daily rate, but for the amount of ore produced. Commenting on the demands shortly after her arrival, Flynn declared that mining companies were “taking millions of dollars worth of ore from Minnesota every year, and it seems to me they should be willing to leave just a little of their enormous profits here among the working men.”

Over the ensuing months, Flynn became the most visible face of the strike, ardently tackling the challenges confronting the miners. Mining company officials refused to recognize any of the strike demands and hired over 1,000 armed guards to protect their properties and monitor the strikers’ actions. Just prior to Flynn’s coming, fatal clashes between strikers and mining company police had provided county law enforcement authorities an excuse to arrest and jail the IWW’s chief organizers. Undeterred, Flynn traveled back and forth across the Mesabi Range, tirelessly canvassing its 20-odd cities and many mining “locations,” smaller settlements sited within easy walking distance of mines. She delivered forceful speeches at each stop, promising the strikers that “the I.W.W. is...
going to see you through . . . until the great end is gained.” By August, an observer from St. Paul would marvel that “Miss Flynn is at present the power behind the strikers. She controls them and keeps order and is always ready to give wise counsel.”

Yet the mining companies’ tactics ultimately proved too difficult to overcome even for an organizer as skilled as Flynn. In an effort to discredit her leadership, local newspapers attacked Flynn for not fitting proper gender roles. The editor of the Chisholm Tribune-Herald, Walter Brown, argued that there were “higher ideals for a woman to cultivate,” and assured readers of the IWW’s demise since Flynn, who was divorced, “was even unsuccessful in her one attempt at domestic life.” For her part, Flynn campaigned passionately on behalf of the strikers, while conceding with a smile that “my marriage and divorce have given my enemies the chance they were seeking to malign and vilify me.” In the end, it was not Flynn’s defiance of gender norms that caused the strike to fail but insufficient relief funds. Miners desperate to feed their families gradually returned to work, and union officials called off the strike on September 17. Flynn continued to fight for the strikers’ cause through December, devoting most of her time to raising legal funds for the IWW organizers still held in a Duluth jail.

Today Elizabeth Gurley Flynn figures prominently in accounts of the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916. A rich body of scholarship connecting the conflict to radical working-class and ethnic politics celebrates her importance. She remains, however, an anomaly in a male-driven narrative in need of reconsideration. Aside from Flynn’s role, histories of the strike mostly ignore the contributions of women. Studies of radical politics, in general, have long overlooked women’s participation, assuming their political inclinations to be primarily conservative or citing the male chauvinism of organized labor.

Violent encounters

Nearly all historical accounts cite two deadly skirmishes between striking miners and law enforcement officials as the most significant events of the Mesabi Range strike. The first clash took place in the city of Virginia on June 22, and ended in the death of a Croatian immigrant miner named John Alar. The tragedy spurred an increase in the number of mining company police and induced an order by Minnesota governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist to snub out strike activity. On July 3 a second violent encounter near the city of Biwabik led to the deaths of sheriff’s deputy James Myron and a Finnish soda pop deliveryman named Tomi Ladvalla. It was immediately following this incident that St. Louis County sheriff John Meining arrested the most prominent IWW organizers, stifling the strike’s momentum and prompting the call to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The existing historical narrative suggests that men were the main actors in these two events, Women’s exclusion from mining work on the Mesabi Range meant that they were not strikers in 1916, as was the case in labor conflicts elsewhere. Working-class women did, nonetheless, express their class consciousness in other forms. Through actions that extended far beyond the role of any one individual, women contributed to the strike by confronting mining company abuses, participating in meetings, parades, and industrial sabotage, setting up pickets, and skillfully managing limited strike-time resources.

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but a closer examination shows that women played critical roles in both instances.

The woman at the center of the June 22 conflict was Lucija Rosandich—a Croatian immigrant, miner’s wife, and mother of a baby girl. She lived in Virginia near the Alpena mine. At a meeting on the evening of June 21, the IWW decided to shut down mining operations at the Alpena. By 3:30 a.m. the next morning, a crowd of 100 picketers had lined up on vacant lots near the mine and awaited the arrival of the morning shift. Located at the edge of Virginia’s North Side, the site of the impending confrontation was a maze of workers’ homes, industrial machinery, and mounds of ore and waste rock. Beside the picketers were piles of rocks and bricks that they had collected during the night. Ten mining company guards watched from across the street. When Oliver Iron Mining Company chief of police David Foley eventually arrived at the scene shortly before 5:00 a.m. he ordered the picketers to disperse. A striking miner yelled back, “You have no business here.” Fighting broke out soon after.5

As picketers and company guards battled in the street, Rosandich suddenly ran out of a nearby house carrying a Winchester rifle. She was one of several women in the fray. Other women bearing firearms poked out their heads from windows and doorways of adjoining buildings. After her initial rush, Rosandich ran into Foley and dropped the rifle momentarily. When the chief of police turned toward another part of the fight, Rosandich unloaded three rounds at the company guards. A shot whizzed by Foley’s head and he later inferred the woman’s deadly intentions, claiming “it was one of those—wasn’t fine buckshot—one of those slug, round bullets, fit any 18-gauge shot gun.” The shots set off a fury of gunfire, and it was at this time that Alar emerged from another house, also carrying a Winchester rifle. He took a shot to the abdomen and died almost instantly. Although the coroner failed to determine who killed Alar, accounts blamed Rosandich for setting off the firestorm that led to his death.6

The events that led to the deaths of James Myron and Tomi Ladvalla similarly placed a woman at the center of the storyline. On July 3 Myron and fellow St. Louis County deputy sheriffs Edward Schubisky, Nick Dillon, and Edward Hoffman traveled to the Chicago Location near Biwabik. The men had orders to arrest Philip Masonovich, a striking miner accused of violating a local liquor law. When the deputies arrived at the Masonovich home around 3:30 p.m. they found Philip’s wife, Milica, cooking in the kitchen. The Montenegrin immigrant and mother of five children greeted the men and explained that her husband was asleep in an adjacent room. Deputy Nick Dillon replied that “they had not come to sit down” but to take Philip and another man to jail. With no evidence of a warrant presented, Milica interpreted the raid as a pretense to harass strike supporters and answered back, “You fellows will not take my husband to jail before Old Man O’Hara comes from Biwabik.” William O’Hara was the city’s chief of police.7

Despite the activism of both Rosandich and Masonovich, comments by male participants minimized the women’s significance.

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Montenegrin immigrant Milica Masonovich, wife of striking miner Philip Masonovich, was arrested for her role in a melee.

At this moment, Philip Masonovich emerged from the other room and asked for his shoes. As his wife started to retrieve them, Dillon threw her violently across the room. Milica later recalled her reaction: “I told Nick [Dillon] to get out of the house and I chased him out. I went outside after Nick and one of those fellows with him hit me over the head with [a] club.” Fighting ensued between the deputies and Philip, who was backed by three Montenegrin immigrants boarding at the house. Milica participated in the melee as well, delivering a blow to deputy Edward Schubisky’s head that knocked him down and badly injured him. IWW activist Harrison George would later say that the Montenegrin woman came from a nation “where women go to battle with the men.” During the fighting, Myron took five shots to the back. Another bullet killed Ladvalla who, with his wagon, stood innocently outside the house. The local coroner again offered no conclusion as to who shot the men, but most accounts agreed that Milica Masonovich’s rush at the deputies instigated events.8
Despite the activism of both Rosandich and Masonovich, comments by male participants minimized the women’s significance. Oliver Iron Mining Company chief of police Foley said of the shot that Rosandich aimed at him, “No, I wasn’t hit. Been a man, might have hit me. It was up a little high, didn’t get it on her shoulder right.” Foley also emphasized that he ordered the other company guards not to harm Rosandich. “I would rather be killed than have a woman hurt,” he testified. In Masonovich’s case, deputy Schubisky played dead after Milica knocked him down because “I could not attack a woman.” Pro-labor accounts further depicted Milica as receiving male protection. The Finnish American IWW newspaper Sosialisti failed to mention Masonovich’s assault on the deputies while claiming that Philip and “[the] other men who were inside naturally came to help her.” The newspaper later added that Philip gallantly carried his injured wife a mile and a half to see a doctor. He apparently never did get his shoes, for he made the trek in stocking feet.9

**Strike activities**

While the deaths of Alar, Myron, and Ladvalla were the summer’s most sensational moments, the majority of Mesabi Range residents experienced the strike through day-to-day activities implemented by the IWW. To coordinate the workers, the IWW held organizational meetings. These events attracted crowds in the hundreds and usually took place in Finnish workers’ halls, which also provided space for administering the strike. The union planned frequent marches to publicize the miners’ cause. The largest of the processions immediately followed John Alar’s death, when as many as 3,000 people paraded down Virginia’s main street. And, to disrupt mining operations, the IWW advocated industrial sabotage. Reports surfaced of strikers damaging mining equipment, blowing up railroad bridges used for ore shipments, and placing tacks on roads to disable mining company guards’ automobiles. Women were committed, if often unrecognized, participants in each of these activities.

Touring the Mesabi Range in late August, Leonora Austin Hamlin of the Women’s Welfare League of St. Paul, a reform-minded women’s

![Three women and a boy carried a 12-foot-wide red banner with the words “Murdered by Oliver Gunmen” at the funeral procession of John Alar.](image)
club, praised the prominent role that women played in the strike. “They are good soldiers,” she reported. “The women there are appreciating the opportunity for co-operation and fellowship that has come from the struggle.” Women’s enthusiastic participation derived in part from well-established traditions of communal activism amongst immigrants. Hamlin observed, for instance, that Finnish immigrants “stand for equality between men and women. They bring that idea with them from Finland where men and women enjoy equal political rights.” The IWW also encouraged women’s involvement, having sought from its founding to organize all workers regardless of race or sex. In July 1916, the IWW newspaper *Solidarity* even published a “Woman’s Special Edition” that included an article in which Elizabeth Gurley Flynn countered charges of women’s political conservatism and called for “a new and perfect womanhood.”  

Mesabi Range women’s participation in the strike almost always involved grassroots activities such as attending union meetings and picnics. Local women rarely filled leadership positions, although IWW attorney Judge O. N. Hilton noted a rare exception when he described a woman—her name lost to history—serving on the Virginia local’s strike committee. To attract women to union meetings and gatherings, the IWW staged events specifically intended for them. Immediately following the formation of a Central Strike Committee in mid-June, the union hosted a for-women-only meeting at strike headquarters in Virginia. The purpose was to identify ways in which miners’ wives could assist the strike. “It was not a meeting for the mothers, wives and sweethearts of the masters,” IWW organizer Sam Scarlett proclaimed. “The poodle dogs of the masters’ wives would take up too many seats in the hall, and, besides, they wouldn’t care to come anyway.” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn coordinated a second for-women-only meeting in early August, urging the assembled crowd to join the picket line.  

Another way in which women supported grassroots activism was by participating in parades. On June 15 a recently-married couple, reportedly on their honeymoon, joined more than 320 strikers in a procession between the cities of Aurora and Virginia. The bride wore a hat trimmed with a showy red feather and marched alongside her husband. Women were again among the 1,200 protestors who participated in a massive parade on July 28. Walking two abreast, the marchers started out from Virginia for the city of Eveleth and sang spirited refrains in their native tongues. The procession in due time ran into armed deputies blocking the route. Several women rushed to the head of the line, hurled insults at the officers, ripped open their blouses, and tempted the men to shoot. The deputies backed down,
causing the official strike bulletin of the IWW, Strikers’ News, to boast that the women “were supported by the strikers to a man and the thugs hesitated, at a loss how to meet the solidarity of the workers.”

Women’s involvement in IWW parades took on a distinctly gendered character. Children regularly accompanied their mothers during marches, and women pushed baby carriages along procession routes. Women and children also carried signs that framed the strike as a struggle not over mining conditions but the well-being of miners’ households. At a late July parade in Hibbing 50 women and children hoisted signs bearing the mottos “Don’t Scab Against Father,” “Don’t Take the Bread Out of Our Mouths,” and “Citizens We Want Your Sympathy.” For a parade in Aurora, children designed homemade placards painted in red, with the S’s endearingly turned backwards. The signs read “Our Fathers Strikes For Us,” “We Are Human Beans,” and “We Want Milk.” These actions by women and children shamed strikebreakers and heartened striking miners to carry on the fight. By generating public sympathy for strikers’ families, they increased union membership and aided fundraising.

There is one documented instance of women supporting the IWW through industrial sabotage. On July 17 the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad reported that a vandals had cut the air hoses on 50 railroad cars at the Miller and Hudson mines near Aurora. The cars held full loads of iron ore and awaited shipment. Over the next three nights, yardmasters discovered an additional 120 air hoses slashed around Aurora. “The air hose cutter is still busy on the East Range,” a local newspaper announced after one incident. “A woman living near Aurora is suspected of doing the work but nothing has been discovered which would

fasten the offense on her.” On July 21 a sheriff’s deputy finally apprehended Hulda Jamback after finding her standing between two railroad cars in the D. & I. R. railyards. Jamback was a Finnish immigrant, miner’s wife, and mother of three young boys. Railroad officials conceded that her actions did not create considerable expenses, but they were a nuisance that delayed ore shipments.

The IWW’s most common strike activity was establishing pickets outside the mining workplace. Striking miners lined up at the entrances of operating mines for each shift change. As men choosing to work walked past, the picketers intimidated the strikebreakers by screaming verbal insults, calling them “scabs,” and hurling rocks. They also commonly wrestled away strikebreakers’ dinner pails, dumping out the contents or smashing the pails to pieces. In the most extreme cases, there were reports of picketers beating up strikebreakers. Because picketing brought pro-labor and pro-mining company factions into direct contact, it became the site of greatest conflict during the strike. In an effort to defuse tensions, Governor Burnquist authorized suppression of pickets used to intimidate strikebreakers. More than any other strike-related activity, picketing involved women in prominent roles. When historians have mentioned women’s involvement in the Mesabi Range strike of 1916, they have invariably focused on the picket line.

The arrests of the IWW organizers following the Biwabik killings on July 3 severely curtailed strike activities, and it was women who revived picketing was a way to support husbands and family members. As picketer Martha Karakaš explained, “You go work in mine work hard like everything get dollar or maybe dollar an’ half a day, you go on strike pretty quick your own self an’ your wife go picket too just lika me—I know!”

On the picket line, women used strategies that men did not. Observers most frequently commented on the fact that women not only threw rocks at strikebreakers but also pelted them with rotten eggs, spit in their faces, and tossed pepper or sand into their eyes. On August 1, for example, the night shift at the Genoa mine near Eveleth faced a barrage of eggs as they boarded a streetcar to go to work. Two miner’s wives—Angela Krivz, a Slovenian immigrant and mother of three, and Frančiska “Fan-nie” Podlogar, a Slovenian immigrant and mother of five—had lain in wait with the “ancient and odiferous” missiles. Eveleth chief of police Robert Mitten apprehended the two women, but refused to accommodate a third
woman, Frances Sterle, a Slovenian immigrant and mother of four, who vehemently insisted that Mitten charge and arrest her for the assault as well. Making light of the situation, a local newspaper joked that “judging from the large number of eggs of doubtful age and reputation which have already been thrown at officers and men going to work, these incidents must have been in the planning many, many years ago.”

When law enforcement officials cracked down on pickets, women resisted in ways that were again gender specific. On the morning of July 31, crowds of picketers, including 50 women with children, gathered outside of the Kitzville Location near Hibbing. They lobbed rocks and eggs at men attempting to work the Albany, Laura, and Nelson mines. Deputy sheriff Peter Wring arrived at the scene with two carloads of deputies and had his men clear a path for the strikebreakers by brandishing riot sticks. To the officers’ surprise, women picketers thrust their infant babes forward as shields, effectively negating the deputies’ attempts to protect the strikebreakers. Wring ordered a retreat and expressed disgust. “I have been fair,” he protested, “and these women pickets have not.” An outraged Hibbing businessman exclaimed, “A mother dog has more consideration for her pups than have many of the miners’ wives for their children.” The women were even more aggressive when picketing resumed the next day, singling out officers and strikebreakers and beating them up.

Law enforcement officials launched another assault against women picketers on August 11 at Virginia. The typical frenzy of jeering, pepper throwing, and smashed dinner pails broke out during the 6:00 a.m. shift change at the Alpena mine, site of John Alar’s tragic death. A newspaper reporter on the scene called it a “battle royal,” and Virginia city police began to arrest male picketers. Women participating in the picket line attempted to block the arrests and were soon among those herded into waiting police cars. One of the women apprehended, an Italian immigrant and miner’s wife named Elisa Ercoli, made a bold attempt to escape the police and run into the crowd. Patrolman Fred Kiah grabbed her and allegedly “left the black and blue mark of his five fingers on her breast.” Ercoli, in turn, struggled vainly to get away by sinking her teeth into Kiah’s right hand. A strike sympathizer later defended Ercoli’s hand-biting aggression by rhetorically asking, “What woman wouldn’t?”

Ercoli and the other women continued their resistance after arriving at the Virginia municipal jail. Outside the jail, a crowd of 100 men, women, and children demanded the prisoners’ release and tried to free the women before police turned the crowd away. The women in jail raised a ruckus of their own and relentlessly badgered the guards. “One would have thought bedlam had been let loose,” an observer stated. “The noise awoke nearly everybody in the neighborhood.”

|“It don’t look just Christianlike to us to lock women up in jail with suckling babies at their breasts and other little tots clinging to their skirts.”|
a district court later dismissed her case. She promptly rejoined the daily 6:00 A.M. picket line.19

Maintaining household

Mesabi Range women entered the public sphere when they participated in organizational meetings, parades, industrial sabotage, and pickets. At the same time, they supported the strike through activities associated with women’s traditional gender roles. The loss of income during the strike exacerbated already impoverished living standards, and efforts to maintain the well-being of families became even more challenging when the IWW’s national office delayed relief funds. Women’s ability to manage households and allocate limited resources relieved financial pressures on their husbands and enabled men to stay on strike. Historians have overlooked such activities because they are not political in the conventional sense of the word. However, the holistic nature of IWW ideology understood industrial conditions as not solely about the workplace but as a class problem that affected all of society. In this way, work and home were inseparably linked, and women were critical to the class struggle that the Mesabi Range strike represented.

The poverty of working-class households was a major motivation for the strike. Food and housing costs were expensive on the Mesabi Range, and most miners endured marginal living conditions. Journalist C. Whit Pfeiffer went so far as to compare local housing to urban slums, asserting that miners did not earn sufficient pay to maintain “a desirable family standard of living.” Such circumstances especially burdened women. An Aurora writer identified only as “A Woman of the Working Class” sent a letter to the editor of the Duluth Herald lamenting the physical hardships suffered by the miner’s wife. “We women give our health in doing many of our duties,” she stated, “which, if our husbands were given fair living wages, we could then afford to hire help.” Another woman, Hannah Rogers, wrote to the IWW newspaper Industrial Worker concerned about the frequency of funerals in Eveleth due to mine accidents. Rogers expressed frustration that following such tragedies but “a few crumbs were thrown to the wives and families of the murdered.”20

In spite of these desperate conditions, labor advocate and journalist Mary Heaton Vorse encountered women during the strike striving to maintain a sense of hope and dignity in their homes. At the Carson Lake Location near Hibbing, Vorse witnessed women who were “serious and strong-looking and neatly dressed.” She commented on windows tidily decorated with white curtains, homes enlivened by blossoming flowers, and a tarpaper shanty romantically adorned with a fragment of stained glass. At the Kitzville Location a seven-year-old girl with scarlet ribbons tying together her braids shyly greeted Vorse by whispering “I had a doll—once.” Vorse applauded the fortitude of the girl’s mother. “This woman had tried so hard,” she explained, “she

had done so much with so little. Life had set her the task of bringing up her children in this forbidding, flowerless village, to hand on to them her love of beauty and color and order. How ambitious she was, and what tireless ambition she had.”21

Women took more direct action when mining officials evicted families from company-owned housing and cut off basic services. Vorse observed, for example, women fighting to restore access to company-controlled water supplies. At one mining location she encountered an immigrant woman chopping wood, “her legs far apart, her axe heaved above her head.” Identified as a Mrs. Bresnac, the woman confidently greeted the journalist and “strode forward, strong and handsome, a handkerchief on her head.” Vorse found Bresnac imposing and described her as “an enormous Amazon of a woman.” Bresnac then recounted a struggle with a mining company guard: “They tried to keep me off water, I scratch his face good. He throw me down! I kick and scratch him more! . . . No cloud without a silver lining.” County deputies arrested women and children who fought for access to restricted water supplies. Bresnac was one of several women who claimed to have suffered miscarriages following confrontations with law enforcement officials.22

Women also challenged mining company actions that limited strikers’ abilities to feed their families. Early in the strike, mining companies pressured wholesalers in Duluth to cut off credit to Mesabi Range merchants, forcing striking miners to purchase goods on a cash-only basis. The IWW responded by opening a cooperative store in Hibbing, which women helped to manage. Other women prepared meals for the IWW organizers jailed following the July 3 killings in Biwabik. These women confronted guards who confiscated the food and who shouted insults meant to intimidate them. As the strike dragged on, women played a key role in raising relief funds. Strikers’ News reported in early August that “girls and women have been soliciting the business men of various range towns and have met with fairly good results.” The women promised to maintain commerce after the strike with those merchants who lent support to the “starving strikers,” and threatened electoral campaigns against public officials who opposed them.23

Raising food and sharing housing was another way to mitigate limited resources during the strike. Agnes Peterson, superintendent of the Minnesota Bureau of Women and Children, visited the Mesabi Range in late August to examine the conditions of women and children. She credited women’s home-keeping skills with fostering a positive environment. “We saw no real suffering among the families of the strikers,” she acknowledged, “and the homes are as good as homes of certain classes of people ever are...Most of them have good vegetable gardens.” Elizabeth Gurley

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*Woman and girl getting water at Leonidas Location near Eveleth, 1913. Women’s ability to manage households and allocate limited resources relieved financial pressures and enabled men to stay on strike.*
Flynn offered a similar assessment of an Italian boarding house. Flynn spoke admirably of the proprietress, who forced her own husband to uproot and sleep with the boarders. “The wife of the family was a fat, jolly, perspiring woman,” Flynn recalled. “She banished her husband to this masculine retreat and took me in with her in a little bedroom.” The Italian woman’s hospitality allowed Flynn to carry on organizing work after local hotels refused to lodge her.24

There are multiple explanations for why historians have ignored women’s involvement in the Mesabi Iron Range strike of 1916. A key reason is the sparseness of records left by working-class immigrant women. A clear paper trail has guaranteed a place in the historical narrative for prominent leaders like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, but reconstructing the lives of working-class women requires piecing together random accounts, usually told by male observers. The biases of male sources are a second reason for the silencing of women’s involvement.

Women like Lucija Rosandich and Milica Masonovich faced prejudices that men did not. When undertaking the same activities as men, such as parading and picketing, women acted in ways that were distinctive. Women’s responsibility for maintaining households was an experience that most men did not share.26

Still, the Mesabi Range strike shows working-class women as committed activists and it challenges conventional understandings of the role of women in radical politics. Their involvement empowered these women in exciting and influential ways. Towards the end of the strike, IWW organizer Leo Stark would proudly remark that “the rebel girls are doing great work.” His statement co-opted a phrase typically associated with the original “Rebel Girl,” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and was meant to commend women who had refused bail following their arrests by law enforcement officials. At first glance, actions like willingly remaining in jail may not seem as consequential as the fiery speeches of IWW organizers or deadly gunfights between striking miners and mining company guards. But it was the combination of grand public spectacles and simple everyday acts like rejecting bail—or confronting police, marching in parades, joining pickets, and providing for one’s family—that in 1916 fueled a strike and made history on the Mesabi Iron Range.27


21. Vorse, A Footnote to Folly, 143–144.


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