

Famous New Yorker Dorothy Thompson

As a young activist Dorothy Thompson helped give women more influence over government with the right to vote. She then made herself one of the most influential people in the country as a reporter and media star.

Dorothy Thompson was born in Lancaster, Erie County, on July 9, 1893. When her widowed father remarried, Dorothy quarreled with her new stepmother. In 1908 Dorothy was sent to live with an aunt in Chicago. After attending the Lewis Institute she enrolled at co-ed Syracuse University as a junior. Dorothy graduated in 1914 but didn't qualify to become a schoolteacher. She had to find other work.

At first, Dorothy's work for the women's suffrage movement in New York State was just a job stuffing envelopes in Buffalo. The campaign for voting rights inspired her to become an organizer and aggressive public speaker for suffrage. The efforts of many suffragists paid off when New York granted women the vote in 1917. Now Dorothy had to find work again.

Dorothy Thompson was fascinated by international politics. After World War I she went to Europe to become a freelance reporter. Competing with ambitious young writers of both sexes, she sought out every possible lead for a story. Her report on a conference of Jewish leaders earned her work as a stringer with the International News Service. She wrote stories "on spec" while the INS had the option to buy them or not.

Sometimes Thompson was in the right place at the right time. Sometimes her tenacity earned her "scoops" no one else could get. She soon found regular work as the Vienna correspondent and European Service chief of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. In 1927 she became the *New York Post's* chief correspondent in Berlin. Now an expert on German politics, she was one of the very first American reporters to interview Adolf Hitler.

In 1931, Thompson didn't think an obnoxious "little man" like Hitler could gain power. Once he did, she quickly recognized the threat he posed. The new dictator resented the unflattering portrait in Thompson's book *I Saw Hitler!* and expelled her from Germany in 1934. The incident made an American celebrity of Thompson, who now became a leading anti-Nazi writer. Her marriage to the novelist Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, only magnified her new fame.

Back in the U.S., Thompson became a columnist for the prestigious *New York Herald Tribune*. "On the Record" ran three times a week in hundreds of newspapers across the country. Her weekly radio broadcasts for NBC by the same name reached millions of listeners. She was the first woman invited to address conventions of powerful organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. In 1939, *Time* magazine named her the second-most influential woman in the country, after the President's wife.

Dorothy Thompson's fame endured through World War II. Although her influence declined in the postwar years, she continued her column until 1958. She was working on an autobiography when she died on January 30, 1961. While she made history as a trailblazer for female columnists and commentators, her place in public consciousness was inevitably filled by new generations of opinionated and influential women.

For more information about female war correspondents, including Thompson, go to <http://nojobforawoman.com>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2015.



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Lancaster sits about 15 miles east of Buffalo in Western New York State.