

Laying Aside Vanities: Neil C. Macdonald and the Nonpartisan League

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Abstract

The Nonpartisan League was an agrarian political movement founded in North Dakota in the early twentieth century. The League was characterized by its radical rurally-minded platform and its passionate leadership. Neil C. Macdonald, the League nominee for Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1916, was one of the leaders, but was voted out of office in 1918 before the generally accepted peak of the Nonpartisan League. Very little Nonpartisan League scholarship has included Macdonald and this work examines Neil Macdonald and his understated importance in the study of the Nonpartisan League. In this examination, Macdonald proves to be a valuable figure in the study of the Nonpartisan League and its downfall.

Laying Aside Vanities: Neil C. Macdonald and the Nonpartisan League

The Nonpartisan League was a unique movement in twentieth century American politics and a major chapter in the history of North Dakota. An agrarian political movement born out of the North Dakota experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Nonpartisan League took the state by storm in the late 1910s. It created a membership outside of the two-party system in the state and hijacked the Republican Party structure through its direct primary election system and established itself as a strong political entity in the state. Ignoring party lines, the League nominated and sponsored anyone willing to adopt the League platform and cause, regardless of party. Under the leadership of figures such as League founder Arthur Townley and League attorney William Lemke the League spread across the northern Great Plains and the American West by 1920. In the presence of high profile leaders like Townley and Lemke, other important leaders in the movement are overlooked.

One such leader was Neil C. Macdonald, a product of North Dakota and a leading figure in rural education in the early twentieth century. In his own time Macdonald was hailed as the “leading expert on Rural Education in the Country” and worked in education in the state for decades.¹ As a leader in the effort for improved rural schools, Macdonald was a valuable asset for the League as it searched for candidates. The League, which highly valued rural education, found in Macdonald a passionate figure in the pursuit of high standards for teachers and the consolidation of rural schools. He was nominated by the League and elected in 1916, but was voted out of office in 1918, the same year of the

¹ A.S. Mackenzie to Katrine Macdonald, November 19, 1923, Neil C. Macdonald Papers Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota.

League's greatest election successes. Although the League's decline began in earnest in 1920, Macdonald's loss in 1918 illustrates the flaws that lead to the decline of the League.

Neil Macdonald is an underrepresented figure in the study of the Nonpartisan League, an institution which has been a mainstay in the study of North Dakota history from the time of the League's creation even up to such recent scholarship as Michael Lansing's *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*². Books such as Elwyn Robinson's *History of North Dakota* and Robert Morlan's *Political Prairie Fire: Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*, as well as a wealth of journal articles, detail the history of the Nonpartisan League.³ However, the larger works often neglect Macdonald and even the more generous works like Robinson's *History of North Dakota* only devoting a page to his contributions.⁴ Outside of Janice Ginger's *Neil C. Macdonald: Schoolman* from the State Historical Society of North Dakota's 1986 Mini-Biography Series very few works on his life and role in the League exist.⁵

Origins

The Nonpartisan League, although unique in its execution, was hardly born out of a vacuum. The nineteenth century had no shortage of agrarian movements. Many of these organizations, such as Farmer's Alliance and the Grange, had been represented in

² Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³ Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1995); Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985).

⁴ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 305.

⁵ Janice L. Ginger, *Neil C. Macdonald: Schoolman* (Bismarck, ND: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1986).

North Dakota in the past, but most were ineffective in the grand scheme of the state's politics.⁶ While some of the roots of the Nonpartisan League existed in the national movements of the nineteenth century, the rise of the League was attributed to specific circumstances that existed in North Dakota in the decades leading up to its inception.

The railroads were the chief political forces after North Dakota was granted statehood, which drove and controlled the movement of settlers into of North Dakota, particularly in the 1880s-1890s. In particular, the Northern Pacific Railroad held extensive control over the state because it was granted almost a quarter of the land that became North Dakota in its 1864 charter; it was the driving force behind much of the region's early settlement.⁷ These companies controlled most of the transportation infrastructure into and out of the state. This monopoly was especially relevant to the farmers of the state, who were forced to rely on the railroad to bring their products, primarily wheat, to market. One employee of North Pacific, Albert S. Parsons, spoke at the 1889 Constitutional Convention in North Dakota. He emphasized that the railroad and other corporations in the state had "a stronger influence than they have anywhere else" and that "we must beware the day when they will shackle us and control our people."⁸

The shackle began to weigh heavily on the farmers of the state in the years that followed. In conjunction with the grain markets in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the railroads conspired to rig the markets against the wheat farmers of the state. One Federal Trade Commission investigation found that North Dakota wheat was being under-graded

⁶ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 205.

⁷ Ibid., 125; Ibid., 198.

⁸ Ibid., 198.

as Grade 2 or lower when bought from farmers at elevators in North Dakota, but then upgraded and sold as Grade 1 when it was sold in Minneapolis and other eastern exchanges.⁹ The grain buyers and the railroads shorted the farmers for their product. There was little farmers could do as frustrations in the state grew. Many farmers' publications decried the Minneapolis State Grading and Inspection Board as a puppet of "grain gamblers," "crooks," and "vultures."¹⁰

The primary political agent for out-of-state interests during the late 1880s through the early 1900s was Alexander Mackenzie. Originally coming to North Dakota to work on the Northern Pacific Railroad, Mackenzie was the political boss of the state for more than two decades.¹¹ Andrew Bruce claimed that the state under Mackenzie's rule was "a province of St. Paul and Minneapolis, rather than an economically and politically independent state."¹² Except for a brief lashing out against Mackenzie with the election of Eli Shortridge as governor in 1892, Mackenzie's power remained mostly intact until the early 1900s.¹³

The election of 1906 marks the logical beginning of the direct political build-up to the Nonpartisan League. In 1906, a coalition of Democrats, Independents, and Progressive Republicans elected Democrat John Burke as governor, an election victory that represented the crossing of party boundaries for issues common across the states.

⁹ Lowell K. Dyson, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions: Farmer's Organizations* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 257-258.

¹⁰ Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks. *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 136.

¹¹ Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 223.

“The Democratic Party in North Dakota has never been strong enough to cement party ties,” wrote Lewis F. Crawford in 1931, “Republicans vote for Democrats, not because of their sympathy for Democratic principles but to slap their own party for some fancied high-handed measure.”¹⁴ This unusual coalition was not entirely unheard of in North Dakota. A similar alliance in 1892 had split the State’s Electoral College votes between three candidates.¹⁵

The so-called “Progressive Revolution” marked the decline of Mackenzie as the driving political force in North Dakota and eventually ended his control over the majority of the Republican Party. In his article “John Burke and the Progressive Revolt,” Charles Glaab wrote that Burke’s time as governor marked a change of “North Dakota from a ‘colonial possession’ of wealthy plutocrats...into a free democratic community.”¹⁶ Glaab quotes Burke himself as saying that he “put him [Mackenzie] out of business in North Dakota politics.”¹⁷ The Burke administration established an electoral precedent for the League to take hold a few years after Burke left office in 1913.

Precursor Organizations

Aspects of many different movements in North Dakota’s history contributed to the formation of the Nonpartisan League, but the most immediate predecessor was the American Society of Equity and its offspring, the Equity Cooperative Exchange.

¹⁴ Lewis F. Crawford, *History of North Dakota Vol. 1*. (Chicago: American Historical Society Inc., 1931), 400.

¹⁵ Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, *North Dakota: A Guide to the Northern Prairie State*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 55.

¹⁶ Charles N. Glaab “John Burke and the Progressive Revolt,” In *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard, 40-65. (Iowa City, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

Beginning in 1907, the American Society of Equity sponsored efforts in North Dakota to try to force a better price for wheat such as holding grain and waiting to sell until prices went up, thus laying the groundwork of a new cooperative movement.¹⁸ The ASE was broad in its scope, including many areas of agricultural production across the United States from tobacco to grains to dairy products. Its offshoot, the ECE, came to focus on the spring wheat growers which made up the vast majority of North Dakota farmers.

The ECE was a wheat holding company created to compete with the Minneapolis grain markets. It acquired local elevators in North Dakota and created cooperatives to improve buying and selling power for farmers.¹⁹ The ECE lobbied for the long-proposed state elevator in the years leading up to 1915. The proposed state elevator would serve as a terminal market and address the issue of under-grading grain and other problems. The idea for a terminal elevator had been a goal of farmer's organizations in North Dakota as far back as 1887, but was never brought to fruition due the difficulty in passing a law. An amendment that allowed the construction of a state elevators would need to pass "both houses of two successive legislatures and then be ratified by popular vote."²⁰ Not until February 1915 were these conditions met and the state elevator appeared likely to become reality. The proposed amendment to the constitution, which had been ratified overwhelmingly in the popular vote and approved by the legislature in 1912, would allow the state to construct terminal elevators.²¹

¹⁸ Saloutos, *Agricultural Discontent*, 126.

¹⁹ Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 8.

²⁰ Morlan, *Prairie Fire*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

The elevator bill, however, was not meant to be, failing in the final vote. A discouraging report on terminal elevators by the State Board of Control combined with the antagonism of legislators by George Loftus, the sales manager of the ECE, in a speech the night before the vote led to the bill's defeat.²² Many angry ECE members remained in Bismarck after the vote to agitate and demanded explanations from the legislators who had killed a bill that was years in the making. The agitation and protests supposedly prompted Treadwell Twitchell, a leading legislator who had voted against the elevator bill, to retort "Go home and slop the hogs!"²³ Though Twitchell denied having uttered the phrase, historians generally agree that this powerful phrase was a catalyst for the Nonpartisan League, a spark that fueled anger and served as a rally cry.²⁴ With newfound outrage at the defeat of the elevator bill and a new slogan to rally behind which showed the disregard for farmers found in the state government, the time was right for a man to come and mobilize the rural discontent. The man in question was Arthur C. Townley.

Arthur C. Townley

Townley was the right man at the right time to spur the creation of the Nonpartisan League. Before he became the leader and virtual autocrat of the League, Townley was variously a businessman, a "flax king," and a Socialist Party organizer who had the skills needed to mobilize the frustrated rural population in North Dakota.²⁵ Prior

²² Dyson, *Farmer's Organizations*, 258.

²³ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁴ Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 21.

²⁵ Bill G. Reid, "Arthur C. Townley: A Study in Success and Failure," *Red River Valley Historian* (Fall 1980): 19-20.

to creating the League, Townley worked for the Socialist Party as an organizer, traveling the state to give speeches and deliver socialist literature.²⁶ He was an effective speaker and organizer, and although one associate claimed that he once spoke “along such straight socialistic lines” that an audience member called for someone to “get a rope,” he connected well with farmers in the western part of the state. According to Saloutos he was dubbed “After Cash Townley” for his ability to sell a platform and collect dues.²⁷

The Socialist Party began to believe, however, that Townley was not bringing in any real “dyed in the wool” Socialists at all. According to Dale Baum, the party believed he was a “yellow belly” advocating his own “state program” and thus canceled Townley’s organization department and kicked Townley out in December 1914.²⁸ The bitter feelings toward Townley only grew stronger after the rise of the League. Eugene Teutsch, one of Townley’s enemies from his Socialist Party days, wrote in 1916 that there was “no adjective in the English language strong enough to apply to myself and my comrades for letting men of the Townley stripe denude us of our senses to the extent of allowing our organization to be used as a stepping stone to deceive and defraud our fellow men.”²⁹ He continued to rail against Townley, saying that one could “scratch a reformer and under the desire for reforms would be found the desire for boodle and

²⁶ Jackson K. Putnam, “The Socialist Party of North Dakota, 1902-1918” (Master’s Thesis. University of North Dakota, 1956), 144.

²⁷ Saloutos, *Agricultural Discontent*, 152.

²⁸ Dale Baum, “The New Day of North Dakota Politics: The Nonpartisan League and the Politics of Negative Revolution,” *North Dakota History* 40 (Spring 1973): 6.

²⁹ Putnam, “Socialist Party of North Dakota,” 159.

power.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the North Dakota Socialist Party declined after the rise of the League because the majority of Socialist Party members moved to the League.³¹

The connection between the Socialist party and the League is undeniable, but the membership of the League was not purely socialist and the League not a purely socialistic organization. Not all farmers who wanted a state elevator were socialists; they simply wanted a government defense against what they saw as a monolithic business interest in the East, particularly in Minneapolis. Socialism was a “bad word” to most people in North Dakota³², especially farmers, who had little in common with the national Socialist platform or the urban workers it championed. When Townley was traveling the state for the NDSP, it became clear that the socialist party label was the part that drove people away. For the most part, farmers supported the NDSP platform because it had been tailored towards rural agricultural interests. By 1912, the NDSP had adopted the long standing call for a state elevator into its platform, as well as other long-standing farmers’ issues, such as a state bank and state hail insurance, among others.³³

Townley used the farmers’ platform adopted by the Socialists, his experience in door-to-door recruitment, and the anger in the state surrounding the elevator bill to build the League. With the help of fellow League founders A.E. Bowen, often credited as the true founder of the Nonpartisan League, and Fred Wood, the former director of the ECE,

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Robert Carlson, “An Interview with Henry R. Martinson,” In *The Centennial Anthology of North Dakota History Journal of the Northern Plains*, eds. Janet D. Lysengen and Ann M. Rathke, 320-328. (Bismarck, ND: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1996), 326.

³² Baum, “New Day,” 6.

³³ University of North Dakota Bureau of Governmental Affairs, eds. *A Compilation of North Dakota Political Party Platforms 1884-1978*, (Bismarck, ND: North Dakota State Library, 1979.), 74-75.

Townley began to recruit in the spring and summer of 1915. Membership grew quickly in the first summer and soon caught the eye of national observers. Unlike many previous agrarian movements, the Nonpartisan League was “explicitly a political group from its inception.”³⁴ The League’s “state level radicalism,” as Richard Valelly observed, would use “third party or nonpartisan tactics to help shape public policy” with what he called a blend of “populism, Debsian Socialism, and middle-class progressivism.”³⁵ The League’s tactics, however, were not third-party efforts during the first era of the Nonpartisan League. The League instead took over the Republican Party from the inside and used its structure and majority to pursue office in elections. The League nominated its candidates at its own convention apart from major parties and the nominees ran in the primary for whatever party each candidate preferred, which was possible due to North Dakota’s primary system. The League then directed its members to “enroll on local primaries as they always had” and vote for the League candidate.³⁶

The first summer of the organization represented the beginning of an outburst that was decades in the making. “In that commonwealth as in so many others in the United States,” Lewis Crawford wrote, citing an outside observer, “the ruling political class have had a narrow vision. It is another case of building a political dam without a spillway, and when the break comes it seems dangerous.”³⁷ This observer also wrote that the movement was “part of the whole renaissance of Republican Liberalism which is again

³⁴ Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 94.

³⁵ Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 28.

³⁶ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 33.

³⁷ Crawford, *History of North Dakota*, 424.

coming out of the West,” harkening to the agrarian movements that had preceded it. After years of straining behind the political dam, the breach was finally unfolding in North Dakota.

Neil C. Macdonald

Neil Carnot Macdonald was a product of North Dakota, having lived there almost his entire life. His parents farmed near Hannah, ND in Cavalier County, and Macdonald spent his early years working on the farm and living in his family’s sod house.³⁸ His passion for education seems to have begun when he was forced to travel nearly thirty miles to Langdon for schooling, working for room and board while there. He shared the plight of many rural children in the sparsely state, having to travel and be away from his family at a young age for a high school education due to the large districts needed to provide for a high school.³⁹ After graduating, he began teaching in the area before attending the Mayville Normal School. The Mayville Normal School, though it had only just been opened a few years prior to Macdonald’s arrival, was one of the chief schools in the state for the education of teachers.⁴⁰ Despite his family’s financial difficulties in the mid-1890s, he was able to graduate.

For most male graduates at the time, the degree and teaching certificate were just a stepping stone on the way to a more prestigious career field than teaching. Macdonald, however, decided to pursue a career in education. He had witnessed firsthand the hardships of North Dakota’s rural youth. As he furthered his education at the University

³⁸ Ginger, *Neil C. Macdonald*, 5.

³⁹ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 476.-477.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

of North Dakota, North Dakota's education crisis continued. Teaching was predominantly a female profession. Careers were short and the turnover for teachers was rapid. "No more perplexing problem confronts us today than that which has to do with the supply of well-trained teachers for our rural schools," Superintendent of Public Instruction Walter Stockwell wrote in 1910. "Our records show that an almost entire change in the personnel of the teaching force of a county takes place almost every three years."⁴¹ Stockwell had earlier written of the problem in 1906, pointing to the fact that the state did not have its own "corps of teachers."

Drawing attention again to gender roles and their effect on teaching, Stockwell wrote in 1910 on the "problem with marriage," noting that most teachers were "young women to whom matrimony proves a much greater attraction than the school room."⁴² The female teaching personnel of the state and the stance the League took on women early in its existence became a contentious issue that plagued Macdonald and later the League as a whole. Macdonald no doubt saw the teacher turnover in his own experience growing up and later teaching in Cavalier County, and it contributed to his decision to remain in education.

Macdonald's first major undertaking on the road to statewide prominence came in 1903 when he was hired as superintendent in Lidgerwood in the southeast of the state. Macdonald wasted no time in enacting change in the "lawless" and "wide-open" town⁴³. At the time of his arrival, the town had two teachers and one ungraded school, but in the

⁴¹ Vito Perrone, *Johanna Knudsen Miller: Pioneer Teacher* (Bismarck, ND: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1986), 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴³ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 8.

first year of his term as superintendent, Macdonald increased the staff to six and established a high school.⁴⁴ It was in Lidgerwood that he gained statewide recognition for his rural school improvement efforts. An associate from Lidgerwood, A.L. Parsons, later wrote that Macdonald was a “gentleman of exceptional character, of fine education...and while here brought the schools up to a high standard of efficiency.”⁴⁵ During his first years at Lidgerwood Macdonald married Katrine Belanger, a fellow teacher and administrator who became a key member of his administration at the Department of Public Instruction.

In just over two years the new high school had been upgraded to a first-class institution in the eyes of the State High School Board.⁴⁶ Part of the rapid rise was the aggressive school consolidation which was in Macdonald’s eyes the only way forward for rural education. Macdonald defined consolidated schools, his chief passion, as “the school that serves the general educational needs of a fair-sized rural community...immaterial as to how it is formed, whether it be by petition, election, or common consent.”⁴⁷ In Macdonald’s mind consolidated schools were the only schools that could provide opportunities on par with city schools. In his “Consolidated Schools in North Dakota,” Macdonald listed more than thirty reasons why consolidated schools were superior to one-room schoolhouses, including better attendance, increased teacher

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ A.L. Parsons to whom it may concern, April 11, 1910, Neil C. Macdonald Papers Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota.

⁴⁶ Ginger, *Neil C. Macdonald*, 12.

⁴⁷ Neil C. Macdonald, *The Consolidated School in North Dakota* (Bismarck, ND: State Board of Education of North Dakota, 1915), 3.

training, and “much greater and better results in every way.”⁴⁸ When not administering the schools in Lidgerwood, Macdonald was making a name for himself nationally, speaking at conferences across the country promoting his rural education ideas.

Macdonald’s zeal for the cause brought his time at Lidgerwood to an end. Janice Ginger, who wrote a small biography on Macdonald, relates that “once set upon a path he had determined necessary and correct, Macdonald zealously strove for immediate accomplishment” and that he “neither accommodated his opposition nor was he diplomatic, and his straightforwardness of purpose inevitably hindered his relationship with his constituents.”⁴⁹ The constituents, mostly rural, may have questioned why the pursuit of such relative opulence was necessary for a school. They thought there was no need to spend so much money on a high class school when most of the children grew up to be farmers.

Macdonald’s superior attitude was a characteristic for which the League itself was later criticized for displaying. While Macdonald drew objections in Lidgerwood by coming to the school with his high-minded education ideas, League organizers were accused of taking advantage of the education of rural constituents. The League was attacked at almost the beginning of its time in the legislature for holding secret meetings in which Townley and other League leaders instructed the “inexperienced farmer-legislators” on how to vote and how to legislate.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴⁹ Ginger, *Neil C. Macdonald*, 12.

⁵⁰ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 338.

Macdonald's most important stepping stone to state office and League affiliation was his time as state school inspector starting in 1911 and his "Square Deal for the Country Boy" campaign. His focus was, as always, on the rural populations, and he was sure to include "the country girl, the city girl, and the city boy" when advocating his square deal.⁵¹ But Macdonald focused in particular on the "country boy" and wrote that the country boy had been "overworked," "jeered," and "hounded."⁵²

With the power of the state government behind him, Macdonald's fervor only increased. In the time he was state inspector, the number of consolidated schools had more than tripled from 114 to 401 and had put the state second in the nation for number of consolidated schools.⁵³ High school attendance and rural school aid also rose sharply during his tenure. In his "First and Second Annual Reports of the State Inspector," Macdonald commented on the deprivation faced by rural children. In the same report, however, he heavily criticized the subpar teaching, insufficient materials, and unattractive grounds.⁵⁴ His comments drew complaints from members of some of the communities he visited, who saw no problems with the existing schools, which were far superior to those that they or their parents had attended.

⁵¹ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴ Neil C. Macdonald, "Report on North Dakota Schools in 1911-1912," In *The Legacy of North Dakota's Country Schools*, ed. Warren A. Henke and Everett C. Albers, 36-49. (Bismarck, ND: North Dakota Humanities Council, Inc., 1998), 43.

Macdonald for Superintendent

Near the end of 1915, incumbent Superintendent of Public Instruction Edwin Taylor announced that he intended to resign at the end of his term.⁵⁵ Immediately there was talk that Macdonald was the logical successor and Macdonald announced his candidacy shortly afterwards and the news spread across the state. After reprinting his humble statement and his credentials, Macdonald's hometown paper, the *Hannah Moon*, wrote that it only seemed "the proper and logical thing" for Macdonald to ascend to the office.⁵⁶ "He is in sympathy with all movements tending to make farm life more profitable and congenial," the paper continued, "and to make the lot of all that labor a more pleasurable one."⁵⁷ Macdonald's aims were aligned with the Nonpartisan League, which had been expanding rapidly since the spring of the same year. Macdonald originally ran independently, but appears to have postured himself for League support. It is unclear whether Macdonald explicitly pursued League support or if League representatives sought him out.

Little evidence exists to shed light on Macdonald's 1916 campaign, but he was handily elected along with almost every other League candidate on what his associate L.M. Rockne called "the most progressive platform in the history of the state."⁵⁸ Investigation shows, however, that Rockne's statements should be qualified. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party both introduced provisions for the state

⁵⁵ "McDonald Enters Race as Successor to State Superintendent Taylor Who Retires End Present Term," *Hannah Moon*. December 10, 1915.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ J.M. Rockne to whom it may concern, March 4, 1920, Neil C. Macdonald Papers Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota.

elevator, state hail insurance, tax exemptions for farm improvements, and other farm demands into their platforms by 1916, additions possibly prompted by the rise of the League.⁵⁹ Despite the fact that both parties adopted the same tenets found in the Socialist platform, only the League was strongly attacked for its Socialist ties in later years. The platform alone was not the only reason for Socialist accusations against the League, but nonetheless represented a direct tie.

Macdonald wasted no time in exercising the powers of his new office. One of his first acts was to appoint a Deputy Superintendent, a position for which he chose Katrine Macdonald, his wife.⁶⁰ While she was highly qualified for the position, having been a school administrator for years, the appointment invited accusations of nepotism. Similar charges became common as the League's time in power continued. A major talking point among League opponents was the undemocratic nature of the League, which came to rely more and more on appointed, rather than elected, positions to maintain power as its tenure continued.

Macdonald soon set forth guidelines for his improvement plan, emphasizing what he had been advocating for years, such as higher teacher qualifications, improved facilities, and consolidation of one-room schools. One of his more novel ideas to improve the conditions of schools centered on the school calendar, which for Macdonald's was the "chief cause" of the efficiency differences between city and rural schools.⁶¹ He believed that the school year had been a "cow-path" left over from New

⁵⁹ *Party Platforms*, 81-84.

⁶⁰ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

England and he sought to create a North Dakota school calendar, which started school in October and ended it in late June or July with breaks for spring planting and Christmas.⁶² While Macdonald's efforts improved school attendance in many of the schools that adopted the new calendar, but the move won him few friends in the few major urban centers in the state. Once again, Macdonald's straight-forwardness and aggressive attitude antagonized constituents.

Among Macdonald's countless efforts to redirect funding, restructure local school administrations, and improve teacher training was his most famous and widely acclaimed effort, the Better Rural School Rallies. Macdonald and a team of experts from across the state and the country intensely canvassed North Dakota for six weeks in the fall of 1917, covering every county.⁶³ The rallies drew more than twelve thousand educators and school board members. The effort was the largest of its kind in the state's history, even involving Governor Lynn Frazier, who took the opportunity to not only advocate school consolidation and improvement, but to promote the singing of patriotic songs in schools and defend against accusations of the League shirking its obligations in the war effort.⁶⁴ Macdonald seemingly had no issue with Frazier using this platform for something other than education.

The Better Rural School Rallies came at the high point of Macdonald's time as Superintendent of Public Instruction. The rallies drew national acclaim. A representative from the Bureau of Education in Washington, D.C. called Macdonald a "genius" who

⁶² Ibid., 19-20.

⁶³ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 305.

⁶⁴ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 26.

was “writing one of the most brilliant chapters in the history of American education” by the work he was doing for rural schools.⁶⁵ The rallies were not the only peak Macdonald was reaching. According to a speech given by Governor Ragnvold Nestos in 1922, between 1916 and 1918 the property tax increased levied for schools was the highest in the state and its subdivisions.⁶⁶ The increases in spending helped the League in its early years when the state was prosperous, but when the price of wheat broke in 1920 the spending increases provided ammunition for League opponents. In the meantime, however, the success of his programs and the relative success of his programs in the legislature only made Macdonald bolder.

Election of 1918

As the 1918 election approached, Macdonald’s position as Superintendent of Public Instruction seemed secure. The League’s popularity was still trending upward and Macdonald had recently come off his school improvement tour. He seemed to have a long tenure ahead of him. At the time, however, a coalition was forming across the state to oppose the League, a coalition that became the Independent Voters Association. Although the group did not gain its name until December 1918, the group came together in May 1918 to form a fusion ticket of Democrats, Republicans, and former Leaguers to oppose the solid NPL takeover that seemed imminent that coming fall.⁶⁷

The IVA had a poor showing in the 1918 primaries and in the general election. The IVA represented a new kind of opposition to the League that could connect with the

⁶⁵ J.L. McBrien, “North Dakota State-wide Education Campaign,” *Educational News Bulletin* (Bismarck, ND). October 1917.

⁶⁶ Warren A. Henke and Everett C. Albers, eds. *The Legacy of North Dakota’s Country Schools*, (Bismarck, ND: North Dakota Humanities Council, Inc., 1998), 124.

⁶⁷ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 136-137.

League voter base. Previous opposition mostly consisted of city dwellers and financiers, but in December a group of farmers led by Theodore Nelson formally organized the IVA.⁶⁸ The group of farmers gave credibility to the League's opposition. Nelson had been one of the founders of the ECE, which had advocated a state elevator a few years earlier before the League was formed. The fledgling organization did have one notable feather in its cap after the 1918 election, Minnie Nielson.

Minnie Nielson, like Macdonald, was a progressive education advocate. Although she did not have the national acclaim Macdonald possessed, she was known throughout the state for her successful tenure in Barnes County where she increased attendance and school consolidation.⁶⁹ McMillan writes that Nielson almost certainly worked with Macdonald during his time as school inspector.⁷⁰ The similarities between the two make the bitter back-and-forth between them even more striking.

Macdonald and Nielson's antagonism existed before either had entered the race for the superintendent office. According to a *Devil's Lake World and Inter-Ocean* article from May 1919, Macdonald in 1914 wrote a letter to then Superintendent Edwin Taylor to inquire about Nielson's teaching certificate, a topic he would later use against her in the campaign.⁷¹ Taylor then responded that he held "the highest regard for Miss Nielson as an educator" and that he believed Macdonald should "retire his personal peeves" and "jealousness."⁷² Such enmity renewed itself in the "particularly bitter campaign," where

⁶⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁹ Jim McMillan, "The Macdonald-Nielson Imbrolio: The Politics of Education in North Dakota, 1918-1921," *North Dakota History* 52. No. 4 (1985): 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Macdonald Loses Out," *The Devil's Lake World and Inter-Ocean*, May 21, 1919.

⁷² Ibid.

Macdonald “flooded the mails with personal attacks” and “resorted to all the well known and most effective methods to incite class prejudice...to the disadvantage of his opponent.”⁷³ The details of their attacks against each other are numerous, but a great example which showcases the major talking points of the campaign is a letter Neil Macdonald wrote to his brother Jack in September of 1918.

In the private letter, Macdonald described his opponent in frank terms. “They have a Miss Nielson after me,” he wrote, “nice dear fat old maid.” He continues, saying that she is building her campaign on three issues: “one, that she is a woman, second that she is poorly educated and therefore anything and everything can teach school if she were elected, and third that she and her friends are against the League.”⁷⁴ After sharing various remarks about other campaigns and his own work, Macdonald ends by saying that “everything looks fine for a clean sweep this fall,” referring to the race against Nielson.⁷⁵ The letter showed how Macdonald privately felt about his opponent, the 1918 race, and his public feelings were not much different.

Macdonald’s race for superintendent differed from the races of his fellow League candidates in two major ways. First, candidates for Superintendent of Public Instruction ran without party labels. Second, women could vote for Superintendent of Public Instruction.⁷⁶ Both of these points were mostly irrelevant to the other League candidates

⁷³ “Macdonald’s Hatred of Miss Nielson is of Old Standing,” *The Washburn Leader*, May 30, 1919.

⁷⁴ Neil Macdonald to Jack Macdonald, September 16, 1918. Neil C. Macdonald Papers Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection. University of North Dakota. Grand Forks, North Dakota.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Women Can Vote,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 2, 1916.

of 1918, almost all of whom swept into office easily, but each would play a larger role in future elections.

The superintendent's office was a race run without party label, though the League still endorsed candidates. As was modeled by Macdonald's loss to Nielson in 1918, the 1920 election proved that the NPL could not exist independent of the two-party system. In the 1920 election, every League candidate that had a Republican nomination won, but all of the League's independent candidates lost to IVA candidates who had the Republican nomination.⁷⁷ The flaw of operating within the old party system had been highlighted years before. In a piece in the socialist newspaper *The Iconoclast* from 1915, a Socialist by the name of Grefsheim argued that the League was "bound to fail because it operated inside the old parties which could represent no one but the 'interests.'"⁷⁸

At the time of the 1918 election, women were only allowed to vote on education-related matters and in some local elections. Although the League had given some indication early on that it supported women's suffrage, it had mostly ignored women in its campaigning and instead implied that their membership could be through their husbands.⁷⁹ Women flocked to support Nielson, who was the head of the North Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs and a well-known figure throughout the state in her own right, so her position was near perfect to mobilize female voters.⁸⁰ By the time of the 1920 election, women's suffrage was in effect in North Dakota and many women in the

⁷⁷ Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 347.

⁷⁸ Putnam, "Socialist Party in North Dakota", 156.

⁷⁹ Karen Starr. "Fighting for a Future Farm: Farm Women of the Nonpartisan League." *Minnesota History* 48, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 257.

⁸⁰ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 27.

state had not forgotten the League's previous stance, despite League attempts to introduce equal privileges to women in the League.⁸¹

According to D. Jerome Tweton, Nielson was the only non-League candidate to win in 1918, representing the sole victory for the IVA.⁸² Nielson was the first blow to the League in state government from the organization that became the chief opponent of the League. While the flow of the League was reaching its peak, the beginnings of its ebb were right in its midst.

Aftermath of 1918

Two major events characterized the months after Macdonald's defeat and showcased problems plaguing the League. First, Macdonald refused to acknowledge that Nielson was qualified for the Superintendent's office. He refused to leave office, obstructing Nielson until William Langer, the attorney general for the League, intervened on behalf of Nielson. Shortly after siding with Nielson against Macdonald, Langer split with the League and began to oppose its policies. Some, like Edward Blackorby, proposed that Langer siding with Nielson was an opportunistic act that Langer was waiting to make when the "mistakes or the extremism" of the League left itself "vulnerable."⁸³ However, Larry Remele credited the Macdonald-Nielson fight with splitting Langer from the League, writing that "Langer's continuing determination to

⁸¹ "National Federation of League Women," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 5, 1920.

⁸² D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: The IVA." In *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard, 93-122 (Iowa City, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 96.

⁸³ Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 89.

support Nielson . . . led to his split with Townley.”⁸⁴ Macdonald’s action against Nielson may have caused the split of Langer and the others from the League, a large contributing factor to the League’s decline.

William Langer’s decision to side with Nielson in the Superintendent of Public Instruction fight came only a few months before he split with the League over various controversies, notably the Scandinavian American Bank and Townley’s borderline autocratic leadership as a member of the League’s unelected party leadership.⁸⁵ Along with Langer, State Auditor Karl Kozitsky and Secretary of State Thomas Hall also severed ties with the League. Langer’s split was a huge blow to the League’s image and operations. Although they still supported many parts of the League program, the nature of the League’s leadership prompted the three men to leave. According to Theodore Pedeliski, they charged the League’s leaders “with corruption, graft, bank-wrecking, authoritarianism, and socialist radicalism.”⁸⁶

The second major event that defined Macdonald’s last months with the League was the creation of the Board of Administration. Leadership in the League was essentially concentrated on a few individuals, most importantly Arthur Townley. After Macdonald’s removal from office, Townley and other League members of the state government, most importantly Governor Lynn Frazier, created the Board of Administration to “simplify the educational system” and to replace the State Board of Education, the Board of Regents, and the Board of Control of Charitable and Penal

⁸⁴ Larry Remele, “Power of the People: The Nonpartisan League,” *In The North Dakota Political Tradition*, edited by Thomas W. Howard, 66-92. (Iowa City, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 87.

⁸⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 198.

⁸⁶ Theodore B. Pedeliski, “The German-Russian Ethnic Factor in William Langer’s Campaigns, 1914-1940,” *North Dakota History Journal of the Northern Plains* 64, No. 1 (1997): 6.

Institutions.⁸⁷ The Board was created in part to remove power from Nielson, the only IVA state officer.

Frazier appointed Macdonald as “educational advisor to the board and general school inspector,” a position on the Board that carried the same salary as Superintendent Nielson.⁸⁸ Frazier was Macdonald’s roommate at the University of North Dakota.⁸⁹ The appointment all but affirmed Macdonald’s complicity in the autocratic leadership scheme of the League. Macdonald left a few months later as the result of a scandal with the State Library concerning the accusations against a Dr. Charles Strangland for the supposed introduction of Socialist literature in an effort to “indoctrinate the state with socialism,” but the damage was done.⁹⁰ Critics of the League initiatives of this sort by the League to be among the worst offenses. Actions like the creation of the Board of Administration bypassed the election process in favor of appointment outside the purview of the electorate.

The fracturing of the League shortly after the 1918 election and the blatant display of the autocratic nature of the League placed the League in a bad position as 1920 election approached. The end of World War I brought a slump in the price of wheat⁹¹, driving farmer’s confidence in the NPL government lower and lower. The rise of the IVA provided the first formidable resistance to League power.

⁸⁷ Ginger, *Neil Macdonald*, 30.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰ Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, 254.

⁹¹ Brad Edin, “The Price Breaks,” *Red River Valley Historian* Minnesota Issue (Winter 1978-79): 3.

Macdonald after the League

Macdonald did not involve himself in politics after leaving the League. One incident, however, pulled Macdonald back into the NPL fray one last time and highlighted the widespread nationwide opposition to the League. In December 1920, former President William Howard Taft published an editorial criticizing the League. One of the most high profile national opponents of the League, Taft wrote about the measures being implemented to curtail the League after it lost its legislative majority.

In his article, Taft criticized Macdonald, writing that the League Superintendent of Public Instruction was a “man who abused his power and introduced as a textbook and as propaganda some very pernicious doctrine.”⁹² Taft had confused Macdonald with Charles Strangeland, the library consultant who had been removed as a result of the state library scandal the year before.⁹³ Although Taft was mistaken in accusing Macdonald of introducing propaganda into state reading lists, the accusation represented a larger problem facing the League. In the early 1920s and even before then, the League, which was already succumbing to scandals and resistance within the state, gained the ire of national leaders such as Taft, who called the League’s conduct “outrageous” in an editorial on July 1, 1920.⁹⁴

Although Taft issued an apology shortly afterwards, the criticism had taken its toll. The Taft incident is a highlighted example that shows the extent of the national opposition to the League as it tried to spread to neighboring states. The views of Taft, as

⁹² James F. Vivian, “‘Not a Patriotic American Party’: William Howard Taft’s Campaign against the Nonpartisan League, 1920-1921,” *North Dakota History* 50 (Fall 1983): 8.

⁹³ McMillan, *Imbroglia*, 11.

⁹⁴ James F. Vivian, ed. *William Howard Taft: Collected Editorials, 1917-1921*, (New York: Praeger, 1990), 432.

well those of other national figures and publications, had shifted from the praise to criticism as the League evolved from a North Dakota farmers' experiment to a National movement. Figures such as Upton Sinclair and Thorstein Veblen had "touted the democratic possibilities" of the League after its inception, but the shift in opinion began shortly afterward.⁹⁵

Already under pressure while studying at Harvard, Macdonald suffered greatly from the stress of the Taft incident. He managed to receive his doctorate, but the political harassment even after he left North Dakota contributed to his declining health. Macdonald passed away in September 1923 at only forty-seven years of age. North Dakota lost a giant in the development of the state education system, a man who "was really about twenty years ahead of his time" and "burned himself out for the rural schools of North Dakota."⁹⁶

Final Thoughts

McMillan spoke of the outcome of the 1918 election in terms of what Nielson herself did, but the simple fact of Nielson's election was far more important to the fall of the League than any action taken by Nielson in office. Similarly, Macdonald and his actions while in office were not the cause of the League's downfall, but his actions shared the key characteristics of the League as a whole that led to its collapse. His defeat by Nielson represented the first defeat resulting from the culmination of these flaws.

⁹⁵ Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 141.

⁹⁶ Ginger, *Neil C. Macdonald*, 38.

Writing in 1920, Charles Russel commented on the flaws of the League. The success of the League, he wrote, “was hardly assured before cleavage began to appear.”⁹⁷ “One of the blunders, more than once repeated, has been a too great and too careless confidence in the choosing of its nominees,” he continued. Russel commented that “however honest, able and talented a man might be” he would not be effective in the League unless he possessed “the apostolic spirit.”⁹⁸ He later remarks that an official “laying aside his vanities and his selfishness” should be required “absolutely.”

Russel was a League supporter, but his statement about League members can also be applied to government officials as a whole. Neil Macdonald was about as able, honest, and talented a man as there was in the nation at the time when it came to rural education, but he was guilty of succumbing to his own “vanities” and “selfishness.” When it came to public office, Macdonald zealously pursued his goals with little regard to the opposition, so confident in his own ability that he had few qualms against dictating exactly what he saw as “necessary and correct.” In this way, Macdonald was a microcosm of the League as a whole. He was not the cause of the downfall of the League, but his story and downfall shows that the seeds of the League’s destruction germinated far before its decline in the early 1920s.

⁹⁷ Charles Edward Russel, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920), 230.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 230

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