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A Hero for All Time?

Robert Lowe

Marquette University, robert.lowe@marquette.edu

Published version. *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter 2006). [Publisher Link](#). © 2006
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Reviews

Winter 2006

Books

A Hero for All Time?

Citizen Teacher: The Life and Leadership of Margaret Haley

By *Kate Rousmaniere*

(State University of New York Press, 2005)

271 pp. \$25.95

By *Robert Lowe*

I am struck by a photograph of Margaret Haley that appears near the end of *Citizen Teacher*, Kate Rousmaniere's fine biography of the most famous organizer of elementary school teachers. Standing on a stool and smiling as she addresses a packed room of teachers, Haley evokes numerous smiles in return, as well as the close attention of those present. Rousmaniere, like other commentators, points out that Haley was petite and charming, but before seeing her picture, I could never quite square these qualities with the fearless and relentless woman whose intimidating rhetorical brilliance was more than a match for Chicago's corporate moguls and the elite male leadership of the National Education Association a century ago. What is most poignant about the photograph, however, is the knowledge that by the time it was taken in the 1920s, Haley's influence in the nation — and even in Chicago — had dramatically declined. She retained the loyalty of a shrinking group of mostly Irish-American, generally older teachers, a group that perhaps extended little beyond those present in the picture.



Margaret Haley, 1915.

One of the strengths of Rousmaniere's book is that she traces Haley's marginalization among organized teachers in part to Haley's own flaws: her tendency, for example, to be autocratic, her desire to be the head of all efforts at teacher organizing, and, in later life, her penchant for lecturing at length on the good old days when the Chicago Teachers' Federation (CTF) was in its prime. Throughout this engagingly written book, in fact, Rousmaniere tries to resist the sort of hero worship some scholars have evidenced and Haley's autobiography promotes. Nonetheless, Haley seems to exert an understandable, powerful pull on Rousmaniere, who at times struggles a bit around what to do with what she has uncovered that does not support a heroic image of the famous teacher-leader. In the end, this is relevant to how we interpret Haley's legacy. Rousmaniere, at any rate, does a wonderful job of relating how important the work of Haley and the CTF was early in the 20th century.

Elementary school teachers formed the CTF in 1895, primarily to defend the pension they had recently won. Haley, who had begun teaching in 1886 at the age of 16, organized teachers in her school to support the pension work of the CTF. Soon thereafter, with Catherine Goggin, she took a leadership role in the CTF. The two became paid, full-time staff of the organization and vigorously looked after the interests of teachers. Most famously, when the Chicago School Board did not have the resources to pay a long overdue raise, Haley, who was the public face of the organization, took the lead in forcing tax-dodging utility companies to turn over a substantial sum of money to the school board. When the board then chose to use it for purposes other than paying the teachers, the CTF leadership took it to court, ultimately winning the raise. The episode made clear how important it was for teachers to be organized in the face of a power structure that otherwise would have yielded nothing. Consequently, in a move perhaps even more unprecedented, the CTF enhanced its organizational clout by entering an alliance with the Chicago Federation of Labor. Later the CTF briefly became Local One of the newly formed American Federation of Teachers.

In addition to advocating for higher wages and benefits, Haley was influential locally in opposing what she often rightly perceived as anti-democratic reforms, including centralizing power in the hands of the superintendent, industry-controlled vocational education, and platoon schools. On the national stage, Haley influenced the National Education Association (NEA) — then an organization led by college presidents along with state and big-city superintendents — to begin to address the material interests of classroom teachers and to give women a voice in the proceedings. Haley was the first woman to speak from the floor at an annual convention — where she confidently took on the formidable philosopher and former commissioner of education William Torrey Harris. Subsequently she was influential in developing organizations of classroom teachers within the NEA and in promoting Ella Flagg Young, who became the first woman president of the organization. Haley also spread the word about teacher organizing through many speaking engagements — traveling some 7,500 miles in 1903 alone, according to Rousmaniere — and she influenced the development of other organizations after the model of the CTF, including the Milwaukee Teachers Association, which was led for decades by Ethel Gardner, an unsung figure who had the tenacity and skill of her mentor.

In 1904 Haley's rhetorical power and democratic vision were most prominently displayed in her still famous address "Why Teachers Should Organize," at the annual convention of the NEA, in which she denounced the "factoryization of education" (p. 111) and argued for the vital role of teachers in protecting and advancing democracy.

A little more than a decade later, the influence of Haley and the CTF began to wane. In 1916 the school board refused to hire 38

leaders of the CTF, all of whom had higher than satisfactory ratings. In return for restoring those jobs and granting a tenure provision, the CTF supported a centralization scheme, disaffiliated with both the CFL and AFL, and shortly after departed the NEA as well. Over time Haley's reputation lost luster. Part of the problem, Rousmaniere points out, was Haley's anti-democratic leadership style: "She dominated meetings with long speeches and allowed little discussion from the floor. Relying on her skill of interpreting rules, she called out for points of order as elections were taking place and weighed in with long diatribes about parliamentary procedure. In the NEA, she became so notorious for clogging proceedings that when she stood up to be recognized, other members called the vote to question, hoping to avoid a lecture" (p. 198). In addition, in Chicago she supported the corrupt "Big Bill" Thompson for mayor, a politician she had reviled in the past, and her unwillingness to share power isolated her organization. Haley had claimed that she wanted all the teachers in Chicago to be united, but when the Chicago Teachers Union gathered all other organizations of teachers in the city, as well as most of the elementary school teachers, the CTF kept to itself. After Haley's death in 1939, Rousmaniere notes, the group became increasingly irrelevant. Ultimately espousing conservative causes, it sputtered along until the late 1960s.

Haley was a woman of action whose voluminous autobiographical dictations revealed next to nothing about her inner world. One can only speculate about how various experiences influenced Haley's development, and Rousmaniere speculates quite a bit in the early part of the book. Nonetheless, although a number of historians have paid attention to Haley, Rousmaniere's study, built on a prodigious research effort, presents the most complete picture of the educator's life and work. She leaves no stone unturned, determining, for instance, the years two Haley siblings died by visiting their graves.

More pertinent to understanding Haley's experience, Rousmaniere not only documents her attendance at various normal schools that constituted the haphazard training typical of teachers in the late 19th century, but she even excavates the less typical progressive program of studies at the Morris Normal School that Haley first attended. According to Rousmaniere, "The program rejected old-fashioned rote memory learning and instead promoted problem-solving and close analytical work. Science classes took frequent trips to study nature; in mathematics class students explored the structure of mathematical problems; history classes studied the nature of law and citizenship as well as historical events; and students studied debating and composition to encourage active participation in society as citizens" (p. 15).

The capacity of Haley and other to teach as they had been taught at the Morris Normal School was compromised, however, by the conditions under which they labored. Rousmaniere evocatively captures the way the smell and noise of the back-of-the-stock yards Chicago neighborhood infiltrated the Hendricks School, where Haley taught for 16 years:

"(E)ven the slightest western breeze would blow the infamous aromas into open school windows, and the unpaved 43rd St. was busy with commercial traffic, the almost continual construction of new buildings, tourists en route to view the infamous Stockyards, and workers going to and from work or the hundreds of saloons that surrounded the yards.... Adding to the bustle from the street was the clatter of the three major railway lines that passed within five blocks of the school, carrying passengers to and from Chicago or doomed animals to slaughter. Church bells clanged from the Methodist church two blocks west and from the 160-foot bell tower of St. Gabriel's Catholic church two blocks south. And in the distance, the noise of the Stockyards itself infiltrated the school windows: Thousands of cattle bellowing... hogs squealing, and so many men roaring" (p. 21).

The school itself had a surplus of 300 children, forcing a number of them to sit two or even three to the 48 bolted-down desks in each classroom, and additional noise came from the repairs that were constantly in progress to combat students' harsh treatment of a building that "strained under the energetic romping that teachers could not completely control: Stairwell banisters were bent from children leaning on them, window sashes were broken from too much yanking on them, drains were clogged with children's dirt, classroom desks were broken from some childhood fracas" (p. 23).

In addition to the crowding and environmental distractions, Rousmaniere notes that teachers had to grapple with an imposed curriculum as well as the "problems raised by students' poverty and linguistic diversity," and concludes that "it is hard to imagine how any Chicago teacher devised anything but the most mechanical rote lessons for her students" (p. 24). In detailing all this, Rousmaniere helps put in perspective Haley's absence of interest in improving the practice of teaching as she sought instead to improve teachers' material circumstances, an effort that could make teaching a more viable long-term career.

The depth of Rousmaniere's research also enables her to convey how brilliantly and exhaustively Haley could pursue teachers' interests, particularly around the tax case. At the same time, it permits a thorough documentation of shortcomings that Rousmaniere readily acknowledges. Even so, Rousmaniere sometimes appears to go too easy on Haley who, for example, was willing to achieve her goals through underhanded means. In an election for head of the CTF that pitted the sitting president Elizabeth Burdick against Haley's friend Catherine Goggin, "Haley spread scurrilous gossip about the married Burdick corresponding inappropriately with another man. This was not the last time that the shrewd Haley would color her opposition with innuendo" (p. 53). The word "shrewd" here puts a positive spin on sleazy behavior. (This is not to suggest that Haley's opponents operated on a higher moral plane.)

A second example of an insufficiently critical stance has to do with Haley's attitude toward the professional preparation of teachers. As indicated above, teachers in Chicago faced daunting circumstances that would have severely tested even highly educated teachers. Yet most elementary teachers had achieved no more than a high school education at the turn of the last century and their limited training also limited what they could do in the classroom. Early in the book Rousmaniere asserts that Haley "regarded teaching as a highly skilled profession that demanded advanced education and extensive preparation" (p. 27). But she does not provide support for this assertion. There is no evidence, for instance, that Haley took issue with a patronage system in Chicago that privileged who teachers knew over what they knew. There is evidence, however, that Haley supported a scheme that enabled teachers during the academic year to take five Art Institute courses at the same time in order to get a raise — a harbinger of the degrees-R-us approach to educational credentials for practicing teachers that is so common today. Ultimately, Rousmaniere allows, "Haley was not opposed to extra studies for teachers but she believed they should be optional

only, and provided free of charge for teachers" (p. 153). Not exactly a brief for "advanced education and extensive preparation."

Finally, there is the matter of race. Rousmaniere acknowledges that Haley was both ethnocentric (she referred to new Eastern European immigrants in the area she taught as "Huns and Vandals") and distinctly not progressive on issues of race. Although the evidence on this matter is slight, what there is indicates that Haley was not "ambivalent about African-American political and economic rights" (p. 50) as Rousmaniere claims, but rather that she acknowledged no such rights. In fact Rousmaniere quotes Haley as denying "the Negro's equal right to work" (p. 104). Rousmaniere hardly condones Haley's perspective on race, but she not only seems to soften it, but also makes it appear more inevitable than it was. There is no question that working-class Irish Americans had long been identified with particularly virulent racism going back to the Civil War, when vicious Irish gangs took the lead in attacking blacks during the draft riots in New York City. More pertinently, Irish Americans were prominently guilty of similar violence during the 1919 race riot in Chicago, and did not necessarily win the approval of other working-class ethnic groups. "[M]ost Poles and Lithuanians," according to historian William McGreevy, "refused to participate, and indeed disparaged the Irish for doing so."¹

Rousmaniere is in good company when she accounts for Irish working-class racism as part of an effort to escape "their own racialized identity" (p. 13), but it seems like it is stretching a bit to include Haley in the working class. While Haley's father apparently had working-class roots and suffered financial reverses later in life, he also owned a patent, and for a time accumulated considerable wealth and was a partner in a business that employed 160 workers. Moreover, despite the corrosive effect of societywide, virulent racism early in the 20th century,² Haley was close to three Irish Americans who to some degree pushed against this ideology. First there was her father, who once had been a member of the racially inclusive Knights of Labor. Second was her close friend and CTF leader Catherine Goggin, who, according to Rousmaniere, taught in a black school and "worked both with and for people of color" (p. 48). Third was her colleague John Fitzpatrick, for many years the head of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Although some historians probably exaggerate his anti-racism, he nonetheless supported the unionization of black workers in contrast to the practice of many American Federation of Labor unions to exclude them.³ In addition, within the ranks of Chicago educators, Mary Herrick welcomed black teachers into the Federation of Women High School Teachers. Haley, however, apparently was immune to all these potentially benign influences on the way she considered African Americans.

Softening these flaws — though by no means erasing them — perhaps is meant to help rescue Haley for posterity. In the final pages, at any rate, Rousmaniere emphasizes that Haley was "tragically polarizing" (p. 214) but otherwise drops a critical stance as she expresses the hope that Haley's democratic vision might reinvigorate teacher activists today. The evidence Rousmaniere brings forth in the book, however, demonstrates that Haley's vision was compromised by a failure to embrace racial equality, a limitation the author acknowledged more forcefully in an earlier essay,⁴ and it shows that Haley's anti-democratic practice often violated her vision. In essence, Haley's narrow focus on teachers' economic concerns, her dictatorial and divisive behavior, and her racism can serve at best as a counter-model for teacher unions that today, albeit haltingly, are sometimes trying to be more attentive to improving education for children and promoting racial justice.⁵

Nonetheless, Rousmaniere helps us understand that Haley remains an inspiring example of one who stood up to power with limitless courage, attacked elite control of public education, and understood the oppositional relationship between labor and capital in a way that current language blurs by representing business as merely one "community" among many. At bottom, it seems fairer to assess what an individual meant in her own time rather than how well she may play a century later. As Rousmaniere amply demonstrates, Haley was a hero who defied a deeply ingrained, restrictive ideology of female teachers as selfless, and for a time she fought imaginatively and brilliantly to improve their conditions while inspiring teachers across the country to do the same. If Rousmaniere's book is not the last word on Haley's legacy, it is and is likely to remain the definitive study of her life and work.

Footnotes

1. John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 30.

2. To illustrate briefly, during the World War I era the *Chicago Tribune* could unabashedly refer to African Americans as "darkies." Haley, Rousmaniere notes elsewhere, used the same word. See Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 235; Kate Rousmaniere, "White Silence: A Racial Biography of Margaret Haley," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 34 (September 2001): 10.

3. See David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (Basic Books, 2005), p. 86; L. A. O'Donnell, *Irish Voice and Organized Labor in America: A Biographical Study* (Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 144.

4. Rousmaniere, "White Silence," pp. 7-15.

5. See, for example, Bob Peterson, "Survival and Justice: Twin Goals for Teacher Unions," in Linda Christensen and Stan Karp, eds., *Rethinking School Reform* (Rethinking Schools, 2003): 305-314.

Robert Lowe (robert.lowe@marquette.edu) teaches at Marquette University.