

Writing the Wrongs: Eva Valesh and the Rise of Labor Journalism. *By Elizabeth Faue*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. xii + 249 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-801-43461-0.

Reviewed by Annelise Orleck

Elizabeth Faue knew she had found a juicy subject in pioneering woman journalist Eva MacDonald Valesh. Faue informs us on the book's very first page that Valesh "dyed her hair red into her eighties, smoked black twisted cigars, and wore green silk pajamas." An abundantly talented writer, labor activist, and social climber who played up her authentic origins as "a daughter of toil" to win friends and influence thought in the highest circles of New York society, Valesh is no easy-to-categorize working-class heroine. Faue was clearly intrigued by the complexities of Valesh's character. The journalist's lifelong commitment to organizing women workers was matched only by her seemingly limitless narcissism—leaving an ailing husband to pursue her career in the big city, raising her son mostly in boarding schools where he would not interfere with her daily work. Valesh's calls for labor solidarity did not stop her from making consistently racist characterizations of immigrant workers. And the flamboyant wordsmith was an ideological chameleon, leaping from farmer-labor coalition-building to simple trade unionism to Socialist-bashing elite reform politics. Faue, a sophisticated historian who has in previous work deftly sketched the ambiguities of labor movement gender politics, clearly enjoyed recounting and puzzling through Valesh's contradictions. The pleasure she takes in her subject is contagious. This book is a good read.

Still, tracing the convoluted pathways of Eva Valesh's character development is only part of what Faue does in this book. People move from one locale to another over the course of their lives, change careers, refashion or rethink their politics. Good biographies are animated by a sense of movement, expansiveness, and a thread of analysis that makes sense of how and why people's lives and politics change over time and how they don't, how political movements coalesce and come apart, how cultural and economic trends influence those changes and continuities. As Faue notes in her introduction, two generations of historians have developed the genre of feminist biography as a vehicle for unifying ambitious historical narratives that span many decades and touch on a wide array of important social, political, and economic themes viewed through the multiply refracting lens of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class. *Writing the Wrongs* is a dynamic and complex book that fits well with and advances that genre.

Eva Valesh's life story takes the reader from Minneapolis in the 1880s and 1890s, when technological revolution and mass migration from the East were creating boom towns on the midwestern plains and the Populist dream of a farmer-labor alliance still seemed viable, well into the newspaper and labor struggles in the first decades of the twentieth century. A skilled journalist who cut her teeth going undercover to write exposés of the conditions under which women workers lived and labored, Valesh succeeded in carving a niche for herself within the singularly masculine world of late-nineteenth-century journalism. Faue's writing is particularly vivid in this part of the book, evoking the ways that the development of the profession of journalism, with its high priest the swashbuckling hypermale reporter, affected the packaging and sale of information in the twentieth-century United States. A keen observer of trends and social changes, who understood before most the importance of rallying public opinion behind the causes that mattered to her, Valesh was also a highly successful political barnstormer. She learned the art of public speaking on the Populist hustings, absorbing tricks about how to read and how to work an audience from such master manipulators as People's Party presidential hopeful Ignatius Donnelly and, in the end, outdoing the masters in her ability to work up a crowd.

Valesh jumped adroitly from one powerful male mentor to the next, from Minneapolis newspaper editors to leaders in the Knights of Labor and Populist movements who sought to use her skills as a writer and speaker to appeal to an increasingly organized and informed population of young women. Her skills at public relations gave her a measure of freedom from all the men who "made" and would later try to "unmake" her when she moved beyond them in her political views. As Faue makes clear, this was more than an important dimension of Valesh's complicated character. Valesh's biography, Faue argues convincingly, illustrates the ways that the cresting of reform sentiment in the late nineteenth century opened up new career paths for women as journalists, scholars, social workers, and labor activists. It was a liminal cultural moment, when those who leapt on the reform bandwagon found unprecedented opportunities for class mobility.

Whether one wants to read Valesh as wise or opportunistic, the ambitious journalist knew how to take advantage of the possibilities that Progressive Era politics created. In the devastating battles between the Knights of Labor—with their vision of broadly conceived labor party politics—and the pragmatist bread-and-butter unionists who built the American Federation of Labor, Valesh cast her lot with the simple trade unionism of Bohemian immigrant cigar-maker Samuel Gompers. Gompers welcomed the power of her pen, making her editor of the American Federation of Labor's national publication, the *Federationist*. This post gave Valesh a nationwide audience for her views about how the labor movement should pursue its goals—by organizing

native-born workers and steering clear of any taint of Socialism. It was a heady moment in the career of the woman who had worked her way up from daily reporter.

Still, Faue makes poignantly clear how much gender and class limited the influence Valesh could really wield. Few of Valesh's writings in the *Federationist* appeared under her byline. At the peak of her career, she bore the title of Samuel Gompers's "right hand man." Ultimately she left Gompers's employ because she grew frustrated at his unwillingness to let her write in the *Federationist* in her own name. Yet again she sought powerful allies, in part because she felt she belonged in their company and in part to further her own influence. This time she befriended New York society women and rallied them in support of the cause of unionizing women workers. But she challenged their old-line views only so much. In fact, their suspicion of Socialists and immigrants echoed her own xenophobic and increasingly conservative politics.

Faue does not shy away from describing the repellent aspects of Valesh's character. But she interprets rather than judging. In the flashy clothing that Valesh wore, the powerful company that she compulsively kept, the rapid shifts in her political leanings, Faue reads the difficulties Valesh faced as a working-class woman attempting to move beyond the world into which she was born. In a moving conclusion, Faue reflects on the sense of exile and vulnerability that Valesh must have felt. As in the rest of this book, Faue uses Valesh's life to provide insights into phenomena far larger than the individual life she is chronicling. "The good clothing and leather shoes that enable a working-class woman to migrate through the class structure," she writes, ". . . are intimately bound up with the desire not so much to be a member of the elite but to protect one's self from the vagaries and hazards of class transition" (p. 195). Faue, a confessed "narrative junkie," admits that part of her purpose in writing this book was to tell a good story. She achieves her goal even as she weaves that story into a complex and insightful chronicle of a fascinating period in American history.

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