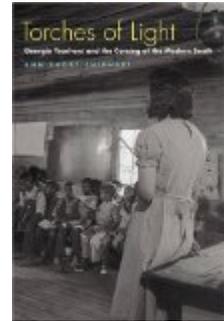


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ann Short Chirhart. *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xv + 334 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2446-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2669-6.

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Published on H-South (September, 2006)



## Modernization and Agency: Questions of Definition and Evidence in *Torches of Light*

Ann Short Chirhart's *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South* examines the modernization of Georgia's school system from the turn of the century to just before *Brown v. Board of Education*. In doing so, she analyzes changing values as revealed in educational reformers and politicians and also in teachers, both black and white. Her story is told both by using traditional political history, and by examining oral history accounts. Rather than separating the two, Chirhart weaves these accounts together in a chronology. This is an ambitious attempt to find change working from below as well as coming from above, and it is not entirely successful.

For Chirhart, modernism is the antithesis of that which is local, traditional, tied to church and family, and communal in nature. Communities that determined what children should be taught according to church and family standards, and that chose teachers based more on teachers' ties to the community rather than on their professional qualifications, are pre-modern. How Georgia moves away from this pre-modernism is the subject of Chirhart's book. That it was a struggle is beautifully detailed in the text, with the continuing hold tradition had on education in the state generously detailed.

Chirhart's narrative pulls the reader along convincingly and effortlessly when describing efforts by reformers and politicians to wrestle Georgia into conformity with other states regarding education. She does a fine job of showing the racial and gender tensions that com-

plicate the efforts of reformers. For example, Walter B. Hill in 1899 was appointed chancellor of Georgia's state universities. He brought needed funds to the system, and worked on issues including teacher training and institutional accreditation. While Hill genuinely sought improved education for both African Americans and whites, he believed that education for blacks should follow the Tuskegee model of industrial training. Although Hill thought that most black students would continue to work in the fields, he urged higher levels of literacy and believed that higher education for African American professionals, such as lawyers, was also needed. Hill was followed by George Godard who also promoted industrial education, but who was not a racial moderate. Godard apparently was content with the least amount of education possible for African Americans.

Chirhart analyzes the paternalist values that both Hill and Godard adhered to while distinguishing between the progressive tendencies of Hill and the more traditional views held by Godard. Throughout *Torches of Light*, this delving into values is used to help define who moved toward modernity and who, in contrast, tried to hold on to older community beliefs. This approach works best when Chirhart highlights educational reformers such as Hill, or when she compares Eugene Talmadge and Ellis Arnall, Georgia governors in the 1940s, who clearly marked the difference between opposition to modernism and the endorsement of change. Talmadge fought educational reform, viewing with suspicion and hostility any attempt to move the locus of authority from the county, and in

particular from local school boards, to a centralized state bureaucracy. Talmadge both insisted on maintaining his power base at the county level and on preventing the intrusion of state and federal regulations that, among other reforms, were beginning to address Jim Crow issues, such as attaining equivalence in black and white salaries.

Black teachers in the 1940s worked through the Georgia Teachers and Education Association (GTEA) to address educational problems. Because the GTEA was viewed as a professional organization for teachers, educators could also cautiously address social issues involving race without incurring the wrath whites visited on the NAACP. The GTEA is an example of modernity in that its goals and overarching perspective was statewide rather than merely local in interest.

The second major component of *Torches of Light* is the use of oral history to show how individual teachers moved toward modernization, both making use of reforms and applying pressure to change education for the better. Chirhart especially focuses on African American Beulah Rucker Oliver and her daughter, Dorothy Oliver Rucker, whose combined teaching careers spanned from 1910 to the 1970s, and on white educator Leona Clark Williams, who was born in 1911 and who taught from the 1930s into the 1960s. While Chirhart adds a number of other teachers' stories to the text, she refers most often to Oliver, Rucker, and Williams.

Oral history is marvelous for bringing texts to life, and Chirhart recounts her subjects' lives with respect and warmth. However, I found that the oral history component was problematic for two reasons, first in regards to interpretation and second as to structure. First, I agreed with Chirhart when she pitted reformer against reformer, or politician against politician, as to their attempts to either foster or prevent educational reform. Because the explicit task of the Hills (father and son), Godard, Arnall, Talmadge and others was to address the future of education, here the case for modernity was clear. It was not so clear with the oral history accounts.

Chirhart states in the introduction, "All in all, teachers sought to translate a core of traditional values such as interdependence and self-sufficiency into new beliefs in respectability and personal success that were believed to ensure students' accomplishments in the changing world" (p. 5). Were teachers less interested in respectability before modernization? Were they less interested in personal success? Once modern, were they less self-sufficient? I saw more continuity regarding values in the oral history accounts, and was never

fully convinced that the teachers themselves were strong agents for change. The records Chirhart uses suggest that teachers made modest changes generally as opportunities arose. I did not see clear evidence for teachers shaping education to the extent that Chirhart claims they did.

Modernization was apparent in the oral histories with regard to teacher training, the acceptance of married women teachers, and salary improvements (which were excruciatingly long in coming). Even here, though, the changes came as a result of decisions made from administrators, and sometimes as a result of historical forces that teachers themselves did not or could not initiate. For example, regarding married white women regaining positions in the 1940s, the force for change here was scarcity of teachers, not simply a teacher's desire to work.

Values are harder to identify as evidence for modernization. Chirhart gives it a good try, relating family values as to how future teachers were raised with strong work ethics and with a clear sense of absolute values. But the changes in these areas are not convincing. At one point, Chirhart discusses how a generation of teachers following Beulah Rucker Oliver, ostensibly more modern, punished their students. It comes down to the fact that some of them whipped their students and some did not. Where is modernity? I would have been more convinced if Chirhart had as evidence a teacher's training manual from the 1920s or 1930s that discussed appropriate punishment and did so in the context of moving away from the old-style reliance on corporal punishment. But this sort of evidence linking behavior and belief to change is lacking.

The second problem with the text is mechanical, reflecting problems in how the oral history material is interwoven with the rest of the narrative. The text is flawed organizationally due to Chirhart's analyzing black and white experiences separately in the same chapter, and then doing the same for the following decade in the next chapter and so on, often unnecessarily repeating information. Some of the oral history information might work well in a text that more closely follows social changes, but is awkward when combined with a narrative on institutional changes. For example, a discussion of dress codes for teachers-in-training is better fitted to a more leisurely-paced narrative and, in the context of the state of Georgia education, seems trivial. Redundancy also slows the reader; for example, we learn that black women earned less than white women in chapter 3, then again in chapter 4. In addition, the oral history material is not seamlessly woven into the text. Awkward cuts oc-

cur when in betwixt reading about individual teachers' experiences, Chirhart abruptly switches to one of the reformers and then back to teachers. It makes for unnecessary frustration in following the narrative.

Ideally, the book would have primarily followed the efforts of reformers to tug Georgia into the modern era. The information on individual teachers could have served to illustrate change over time with less emphasis riding on their experiences as agents of change.

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**Citation:** Mary Waalkes. Review of Chirhart, Ann Short, *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

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