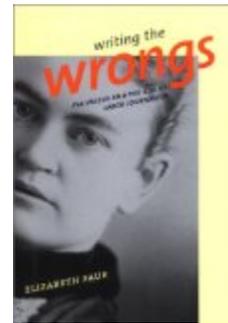


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Faue. *Writing the Wrongs: Eva Valesh and the Rise of Labor Journalism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. x + 249 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3461-7.

Reviewed by Linda Hudson (Department of History, East Texas Baptist University)  
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## Mong Girls Who Toil

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Elizabeth Faue has resurrected one of the Progressive Era's more important historical figures, to tell a story of gender and class politics. During her public career, Eva McDonald Valesh (1866-1956) was a working girl, a Populist lecturer, an organizer for the American Federation of Labor, and a journalist for William Randolph Hearst. She also advised William Jennings Bryan, and edited magazines. At the end of the Progressive Era, Valesh became a copyeditor for the *New York Times* and faded from public view. The red-haired, cigar-smoking, twice-divorced Valesh promoted union causes in the press and on the lecture circuit from 1888 to the 1920s.

Ironically, *Writing the Wrongs* contains few quotes from Valesh's writings, and only tells of her role in labor journalism. The title is as descriptive of Faue's analysis of the wrongs (i.e. gender discrimination) that Valesh experienced, as of the discrimination against working-women in her day that Valesh exposed. While writing on the wrongs of workingwomen, Valesh seemed oblivious to the gender politics she encountered. More a sketch than a definitive biography, Faue exposes readers to this most important woman, and to the working conditions of her time. Mary Eva McDonald was the daughter of a Minneapolis carpenter. The eldest of four children, McDonald studied to be a teacher, but lacked the aptitude to deal with children. She first worked as a society journalist for the *Saturday Evening Spectator*. However, the pay was poor, and she soon learned the better-paying trade of typesetter in a non-union shop from another woman.

McDonald later obtained her union card, and along with her father, became involved in local Knights of Labor politics.

Speaking at labor meetings and writing freelance articles in the *St. Paul Globe*, in 1888 McDonald caught the attention of Minnesota Knights leader Ignatious Donnelly. Leaving her typesetting career for investigative reporting, she dressed in rags and worked in various local factories and shops. Her exposes of working and living conditions, including "Mong Girls Who Toil," under the pen name Eva Gay, led to the 1890 Alliance and Populist campaign lecture circuit throughout the Midwest and New York. McDonald shared the podium with Donnelly, "Sockless" Jerry Simpson, Mary Elizabeth Lease, and other Populists. While on the lecture circuit she edited the *St. Paul Trades and Labor Bulletin*, and published articles in the *St. Paul Globe*, and the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

In 1891 Eva married Frank Valesh, President of Minnesota State Federation of Labor and a member of the cigar maker's union. Even after the birth of Frank, Jr. in 1892, Eva continued lecturing and writing. At the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 she spoke before 25,000 unionists attending the National Labor Congress. It was clear that Valesh had abandoned the utopian Knights of Labor for the "pure and simple" trade unionism of the AFL. Her speech impressed AFL President Samuel P. Gompers, who became her advisor.

In 1895, Valesh and her husband visited Europe where she wrote on factory and living conditions for the Ameri-

can newspapers. The poverty astounded her and she was appalled at the number of mothers working outside the home. After their return to the states, she and Frank separated. He started a small cigar factory in Minnesota, while Eva traveled to Washington in the spring of 1897, and lived with Gompers and his wife Sophie, working at the AFL national office. She interviewed President William McKinley and published the article in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*.

As a result of her interview with McKinley, Valesh became a reporter for Hearst, and in summer 1897 moved to New York. Her son lived with her and was cared for by her younger sister until he was placed in boarding school at age six. Valesh received menial assignments until she wrote on the Suicide Club of the Florence Crittenden Mission for fallen women. Then, when the textile workers of New Bedford Massachusetts went on strike in January 1898, Hearst sent Valesh to make it news.

She was involved in hearings before the Massachusetts labor committee when the U.S.S. *Maine* exploded in Cuba and Hearst reassigned Valesh to Cuba. Along with interventionist U.S. Senators and Representatives and their wives, Valesh sailed to Cuba on Standard Oil's yacht *Anita*, where she was the official hostess. Upon her return to New York Valesh became unemployed when she slipped on a streetcar and hurt her back. She was hospitalized and unable to work for several weeks.

Valesh returned to Washington, where she and Herbert Browne of the *New York Journal* started a syndicated political newsletter. Valesh performed public-relations work and ghostwriting for political figures. She would later say it was the most enjoyable time of her life. She attended receptions and sessions of Congress and wrote a syndicated column. In 1900 she was a member of the Democratic National Committee and advised William Jennings Bryan on labor issues.

It was in December 1900 that Valesh took a permanent position with Gompers. As the third highest paid member of the AFL national staff, at \$16 per week, her title was that of general organizer. She also edited Gompers' *The American Federationist*, yet her name did not appear anywhere in the magazine, even though she wrote everything except Gompers' editorials. The publication reflected the conservative philosophy of both Gompers and Valesh. Arguing that it would weaken the moral fiber of the American people, the AFL opposed child labor, immigration, social insurance, unemployment, old-age assistance, and welfare programs. To legitimize labor as a political force, Gompers formed the

National Civic Foundation to separate the moderate AFL from socialists and corporatists. Valesh directed the NCF women's auxiliary.

Valesh presented herself as a working class woman, but lived the upper class life, for example, in 1908 she spoke before the elite Colony Club of New York City. Her goal was to have the wives and daughters of factory owners and financiers go into the factories and see the working conditions for themselves. Valesh steered the elite women to change their focus from charity for paupers to reform for labor. The NCF had a woman's committee based out of the Colony Club, where with Valesh's help, the Belmont, Morgan, and Harriman women took up reform issues. Associating with the elite women, Valesh gained a sense of her worth and became more assertive.

When Gompers toured Europe in 1909, Valesh placed her name in the *Federationist* as assistant editor. Upon Gompers' return at the end of the year, the two had words and Valesh resigned. As she said later, she was tired of him picking her brains but not giving her any credit. On the other hand, Gompers felt personally betrayed by Valesh.

Shortly after Valesh's resignation from the AFL, in 1910, the New York Ladies Garment Workers Union went on strike against the sweatshop conditions of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which would later become infamous from the 1911 fire that killed 146 women. Meanwhile Valesh was in the midst of reporting the strike. She was critical of the socialists who, she said, made ignorant foreigners discontented. Her stance caused her to be expelled from the Women's Trade Union League, which included such high-profile members as Jane Addams, Mary Beard, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

In 1910, at forty-four years of age, Valesh married into the upper class. Captain Benjamin F. Cross was a broker and playboy, who enjoyed spending his mother's money. The couple published *The American Club Woman* from 1911 until 1919 when the Cross money ran out and Eva had a heart attack. She divorced in 1923, dropped from public view, and for twenty-seven years worked as a copyeditor for the *New York Times*. Called a chameleon, social climber, go-between, and a comet, Valesh had returned to her working class roots.

The first five chapters are in a quasi-chronological order, which causes confusion for the reader. Phrases and sentences are repeated, chronology overlaps, and the analysis too often displaces Valesh's own words. The second half of the book, on Valesh's years with Hearst and

Gompers, flows well and delightfully reveals her eccentric life among the rich and famous. Criticism aside, this biography is based on primary sources, interviews, and Valesh's writings, and certainly deserves its place alongside other works on labor and Populist leaders of the Progressive Era. It is a must for anyone interested in women, labor, or reform era politics.

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