

# The Man Who Became President

by Ruth Limmer

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Ruth Limmer founded *The Hunter Magazine* and was its first editor before becoming President Shalala's assistant for research and special projects. She is the literary executor of the estate of the poet Louise Bogan and has edited three books of Bogan's writings: *A Poet's Alphabet: Reflections on the Literary Art and Vocation* (McGraw-Hill, 1970); *What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); and *Journey Around My Room: The Autobiography of Louise Bogan, A Mosaic* (The Viking Press, 1980). In the course of exploring the College's archive with Ruth Smallberg ('42) for historical exhibits they are mounting in the Wexler Library, Limmer discovered a great deal more about Thomas Hunter, the College's first president, than most people know, and she has developed an infectious admiration for the man. The conclusion of her article on Thomas Hunter will appear in the next *Hunter Magazine*.

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On the one hand, Thomas Hunter was a smooth-as-silk politician who knew where power lay. On the other hand, he was an irrepressible rebel, one who would never countenance an injustice or an attack on what he held dear.

But in looking at him that way—divisible by two—one cannot grasp the full nature of the man. The founder of Hunter College was a wonderfully complex person, one badly served by the usual pictures we get to see—fierce-eyed portraits of the aged patriarch.

Try calling him Tom. Try seeing him as a motherless boy, whipped by a teacher who "emitted brutality, vice and meanness, as the skunk emits an evil odor." The twelve-year-old didn't shed a tear; his "utter hatred of the brute," not to mention his pride, sustained him. Try thinking of him before a prize committee, spunkily questioning a biased examiner. He is saying, "If it be impertinent to ask for justice then I'm impertinent."

Try thinking of Tom as a Black Protestant ("red republican" will do as well, he tells us) writing articles in favor of disestablishing the Church of England in Ireland, knowing all the while that his treasonable

opinions will destroy his chances for advancement in his own country. See him, told by the police in Callan that he'd better leave town at once, traveling with his box of books first to Waterford, then to Liverpool, then to the Isle of Man, and finally to New York City. It is March 16, 1850. He is eighteen years old.

He is also jobless. Not yet hungry—he brought with him "a scant number of dollars"—he walks the pavements from the Battery to Fourteenth Street seeking employment. He searches the help-wanted advertisements in the newspapers. He gives to what today would be an employment agency a dollar in hopes of learning about an opening for a clerk, a foreman, a private secretary, an anything. He soon discovers that the ad is a swindle. And when he demands his dollar back and is refused, he catches the advertiser by "the lapels of his shiny black coat" and shakes him "until his head wobbled like the head of a Chinese doll."

He tries for a job in a mercantile house on Broadway. What, no references? He's turned down. Game-ly, he calls on the keeper of a saloon, he's ready to

shuck oysters, though he's never opened one in his life. No luck there or at the offices of a weekly newspaper. Tom knows American history but not as a New Yorker should, party nicknames and all.

Finally, someone notices his doodles—"heads of all sorts and curious caricatures"—and asks whether he might like to teach drawing. Tom says, "I would not like it at all. I would rather be a porter in a store; I would prefer to sweep the streets." He explains that he has a "horror" of school-masters, whom he remembers as "demons," "half idiots," and "vain-glorious pedants."

But reflecting that he's down to his last nickels, he agrees to teach, "at least until something else turns up." And so he is employed at a grammar school on Thirteenth Street. "No. 35" was in the then "silk-stocking" 15th ward, bounded by Houston Street on the south, the Bowery and Fourth Avenue on the east, Fourteenth Street on the north, and Sixth Avenue and Carmine Street on the west. The school's student body came from the wealthiest, best educated, and "most refined" families in the city, "perhaps in the whole country." He began his first class by telling the boys, "We do not draw things as they are, but as they appear."

And then he was off and running. In no time he was a regular classroom teacher; then first assistant, a position one step below that of vice-principal; then vice-principal of the day school and principal of the evening school; then principal of both the day and evening schools and president of the Principals' Association.

Tom Hunter was appointed to head "No. 35" because he was smarter, more capable, and better connected than any of the other 43 candidates for the vacancy. The selection was to be made by the ten members of the Board of Trustees of the 15th Ward together with two school inspectors. Hunter already had four partisans on the Board; he canvassed the others, but not until he had gone over a list of pupils he had prepared to enter the Free Academy (later CCNY). As he noted, many of their fathers were influential citizens. Hunter was always to have friends, parents of students, and finally former students in high places.

It's easy to judge his campaign for the principalship as calculating and distasteful, but to do so overlooks Tom Hunter's strengths of character. Along with intelligence and ability, Tom Hunter was a man of the highest principles. He tells the story himself—he is not without vanity: One of the Trustees whose vote he needed was a bigot, claiming even a vice-principalship was "too good for a foreigner," by which Hunter understood him to mean "Roman Catholic." Not yet twenty-six, and so ambitious for advancement that he thought of emigrating to Australia should he lose the appointment, Hunter absolutely refused to deny he was a Catholic. He believed in himself—and the Constitution—too strongly to

make it known he was an Episcopalian. The Constitution prohibited religious test for office, and he, Tom Hunter, "would not crawl," however much he wanted the job.

He won the appointment by unanimous vote. Without his knowledge, the clergyman father of three of his pupils clarified his religious affiliation with the Board; and the Republican leader of the 15th Ward—uncle of a young woman whom Hunter, a staunch Democrat, had tutored for free—pulled whatever loose strings remained. Hunter later wrote that the principalship of No. 35 was the only position for which he was ever obliged to work. "All other positions came to me unsought."

His next job came atop his principalship. He took on the teaching of algebra and geometry at the Saturday Normal School. His students were certified teachers, ranging in age from seventeen to thirty-five. He accepted, he said, because it brought him \$300 a year and "close contact with the important men of my profession."

But the fact of the matter is that Thomas Hunter was also a crackerjack teacher and a born educator, and all his life he preferred involvement with instruction to the "clerical work" of administration. Once he rejected election as assistant superintendent of schools. After reflection, he decided being "a sort of Assistant Police Superintendent" was far less professionally respectable, and considerably less challenging, than being a school principal. (Later, he would also refuse to stand as a candidate for the office of city superintendent of schools. "I prefer my present place," he wrote to the president of the Board of Education, "because the work is more congenial and because an experience of ten years in the Normal College has enabled me to perform my duties with a moderate degree of satisfaction.")

As principal he could do "so much good by inspiring [his boys] to be truthful, courageous, manly and honorable." The goals are not contemporary ones, but they embarrassed no one, certainly not his pupils, who as mature men gathered for yearly reunions of what they chose to call "The Thomas Hunter Association."

"Yes, we were always a little afraid of him," said one of the eminent "boys" who had graduated from No. 35. "He had a temper and the will that could conquer, [but] we found out his heart was kind. He looked to me something like a lion, with bushy hair and beard. He always controlled himself and never allowed his personal feelings to be the cause of injustice to anyone."

Similar testimony was repeated again and again. His old students loved him; so did the "girls" of his next school—the Normal and High School for the education and training of female teachers, established by resolution of the Board of Education in December 1869.

The resolution also called for a "President who

shall be professor of the theory and practice of teaching and of political economy" and a "Vice-president who shall be professor of the English language and of the Latin language with the view to elucidate the derivation and construction of the English language."

The then thirty-eight-year-old Thomas Hunter was principal of the largest grammar school in the city as well as principal of the all-male Evening High School, which he had organized three years before. He was experienced, educationally innovative, and an intimate friend of a member of the Board. He was selected as president on the second ballot.

It was an inspired choice because only someone as energetic and knowledgeable as Tom Hunter could have succeeded in the immense task ahead of him: he was required to study the teacher training system in the United States, find a faculty to teach natural science, mathematics, modern languages (French and German), and offer classes in penmanship, stenography, bookkeeping, drawing (free-hand, architectural, and mechanical), calisthenics, musical notation, and singing. And once the doors of the new school were opened, he would also have to select the students and assign them to the proper grade.

On St. Valentine's Day 1870, approximately ten weeks after the resolution was taken, the Female Normal and High School opened. Seven hundred girls applied for admission. Three hundred—students from Miss Lydia Wadleigh's school on Twelfth Street—were fully prepared for high school; the others, with few exceptions, were, as he wrote, "raw, immature, and unfit for the advanced work."

But all of them—prepared and unprepared—wanted to enter the top grade. Just one year later, if they passed their courses, they would gain the exclusive right to teach in the public schools of the city and county of New York. Indeed, no one uncertified by the Committee on the Normal and High School would be licensed. At one blow, this regulation meant considerable loss of patronage for the school commissioners and inspectors. While they continued to be responsible for appointing teachers, their pool of candidates was now sharply limited. Without further explanation, we understand why Hunter wrote that opposition to the Normal School was "appalling."

We also understand why he thought the opposition "stimulating." He loved a good fight.

But before he could begin to fight, and win, a series of battles that lasted some thirty-five years, we should watch him operate on those opening days, when "clamor, complaint, weeping, confusion, and rebellion prevailed." Direct quotation will be best:

I was almost at my wit's end. I had been accustomed to rule boys, but the tears of the girls almost overcame me. I thought of classification by day and dreamed of it by night; for I well knew that without perfect or nearly perfect grading there could be little success in teach-

ing. . . . Dreams of long lines of girls twisting and turning in all directions, forcing themselves into upper classes, oppressed me night after night until I was afraid to sleep. . . . I was thirty-eight years old and had never known a sick day. Hitherto I had been able to bear any amount of fatigue; but this classification of girls from all parts of the city and belonging to the heterogeneous masses constituting the population of New York nearly drove me insane. . . . Perceiving that my mind must be diverted in some way, I began to write a plane geometry knowing that the consecutive, mathematical reasoning would drive out everything else from my thoughts. It worked like a charm.

The next crisis was securing a site on which to erect a building to house the school, whose name had been almost instantly changed to "Normal College of the City of New York." It appears that good old-fashioned graft motivated the selection of Park Avenue at 69th Street. The then mayor objected to the first recommendation: Reservoir Square (now the home of the New York Public Library at Fifth and 42nd); he wanted no school-house in front of his residence. Boss Tweed, on the other hand, was part of a syndicate that owned land west of Park Avenue between 68th and 69th Streets, and the city owned the adjacent lots east of Park. An elegant college building on the city site should, and did, increase the value of the syndicate's property.

"Then followed delays." Constitutionally impatient, and requiring a building suited to instruct twelve hundred students, Hunter sat down and "in sheer desperation" drew up the plans in the shape of a cross or a lower case T, the front facing Park Avenue, the training school facing Lexington. And lest the new building not be ready in time for the opening of school, he walked up each day, from the Normal's rooms at Broadway and Fourth Street, to oversee its construction.

The building was completed on time. It was not, as was threatened, turned over to City College. It survived until St. Valentine's Day 1936, when fire destroyed it.

Once settled into the Park Avenue building, Tom Hunter becomes institutionalized. His later history is the history of the Normal College. We hear his strong voice in the annual reports he prepares for the Trustees about the problems and advances of the Normal College, but he himself largely vanishes from the published record.

His autobiography, from which all but two of the preceding quotes come, is of little help either, and in any case it is a suspect item. Published sixteen years after his death in 1915, it was edited by "his daughters." Did he write it as consecutive autobiography? No. No such completed manuscript exists. When he retired, he told the *Tribune* that he was preparing "The Reminiscences of an Old Schoolmaster." He said, "I may spend some of my time writing down my



Thomas Hunter at the age of 43, four years after becoming president of the Normal College (from *Harper's Weekly*, July 1874).

enemies and writing up my friends. Richelieu once said he had no enemies except enemies of the state. I have no enemies except enemies of the Normal College." And indeed, the autobiography does include

anecdotes portraying opponents of the College in a poor light and supporters of the College in a bright one. But is the compilation entitled *The Autobiography of Dr. Thomas Hunter* that book? No.

Why is his mother, his father, and his disliked step-mother recalled in the autobiography but never his wife, Annie McBride, whom he married in 1854? In that puzzling book, at the end of a long anecdote about an actress who asked him to tutor her clandestinely (her husband was not to know), he writes, "Differences of taste and difference of intellect have caused more trouble between husbands and wives than all else combined." Should we read this as having reference to his own marriage?

And what of his children? He had one son, who died several years before him, and three daughters, at least two of whom — Jenny and Anna Marie — attended the College. Did his editor-daughters remove all references to themselves, their mother, and their brother from his papers or did he never write of them?

There is all too much that the autobiography doesn't tell us, all too much that will never be known. There are, however, two additional sources in which we can glimpse Tom Hunter off duty. One is a scrapbook kept by his daughter Jenny. She habitually trimmed the name and date of the newspaper from the clipping itself, and most of what she collected and pasted down tells of official events, but here and there a flash of the man comes through vividly. For example, his recreation was walking. A firm believer in physical activity — he saw to it that the College had a "calistheneum" — he swung Indian clubs and "handled dumb-bells" on occasion, but mostly he loved to walk. In his late seventies he and a friend were still taking their traditional Good Friday stroll — a sixteen-mile hike to Yonkers. (They returned by train.)

What else did he do after hours, this man who championed equal pay for equal work; who was said to be to the College what Dr. Arnold was to Rugby; who, if it had been feasible, would have "abolish[ed] all marks and all standing as immoral means to accomplish moral ends"; who *did* abolish corporal punishment in the schools and said he was "prouder of that than of any other act of my life"? What else? He wrote College-referenced doggerel and satire. He wrote a play. He wrote novels.

By the look of the handwriting, the play — "Laura Lindsay, The School Teacher" — was written in his later years. It is pretty bad: stock characters, hopelessly unconvincing dialogue, and a plot that serves only to allow the playwright to express his social, educational, and psychological theories.

But his heroine — "Poor little Laura! How strong! How wise beyond her years!" soliloquizes her carpenter father. "I'm glad to think that I spent my savings to put her through the Normal College, and make her what she is, the equal of any lady in the land" — his heroine is a liberated woman of astonishing gutsiness. Teaching at a mission school because she had no "political or religious influence" that would get

her appointed to a public school, Laura boldly demands that her classroom be supplied with the "working tools" of her profession: a terrestrial globe, blackboards, a few geometrical forms, and maps — one of New York City, one of the United States. She also requires that the walls be whitewashed and the windows cleaned.

Equally astounding, when grilled by a powerful busybody, Laura retorts, "I am willing to answer all questions relating to my duties. My home life is sacred and you've no right to invade it." More amazing yet, when reproved for not teaching the catechism, she announces that teaching catechism and religion through the memorization of words is absurd. "I might as well ask them to commit to memory the Calculus."

Laura Lindsay makes demands. She knows her worth. She has been educated at the Normal College.

And what an extraordinary place it was! Twenty-five years after its founding, Thomas Hunter could claim graduates in almost every walk of professional life: teachers, scientists, ministers, ten medical doctors, and the only woman who'd ever been admitted to the practice of law in New York State. President Hunter believed women could do *anything*. And excepting, perhaps, for captaining an ocean-going ship, his "girls" proved him right.

An article deserves to be written about Tom Hunter as a feminist, so far in advance of his time and sex, and a book needs to be written about his educational theories, some of which can be encapsulated in three principles articulated by his alter-ego in the play: *There are no two children exactly alike. There is no true education unless it is based on morality. Justice is the child's inherent right.*

In the considered judgment of Professor Barbara Welter of the Hunter College history department, Thomas Hunter is more than a match for John Dewey as an educational innovator. The difference in renown stems from the fact that Dewey wrote his ideas down while Hunter put his into practice. Theory always wins in the academic arena.

But it is the man whom we seek. What went on in his mind and heart when he wasn't working for the advancement of the Normal College and its students? The answers may lie between the lines of his novels. □

(Part one of two parts.)

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**On the second floor of the Wexler Library, there is now a permanent exhibit devoted to Thomas Hunter. It displays pictures, manuscripts, newspaper clippings, and quotations winnowed from his writings. Other historical exhibits are in preparation.**