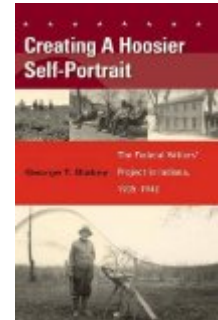


**George T. Blakey.** *Creating a Hoosier Self-Portrait: The Federal Writers' Project in Indiana, 1935-1942.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005. x + 262 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-34569-1.



**Reviewed by** Errol Stevens

**Published on** H-Indiana (February, 2006)

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was one of the four arts projects of Franklin Roosevelt's innovative work relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). (The others were the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Art Project, and the Federal Music Project.) The purpose of the Writers' Project was to put unemployed writers to work doing something similar to what they presumably did before they became unemployed. Despite the fact that its budget amounted to less than one percent of the WPA's total and that it existed for less than a decade (1935-1942), the FWP has attracted more than its share of attention from historians. Monty N. Penkower's authoritative history, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* appeared in 1977. Jerre Mangione's *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943*, a combination of memoir and history, followed in 1983. Jerrold Hirsch's interpretive study, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* came along in 2003. The book reviewed here, George T. Blakey's *Creating a Hoosier Self-Portrait: The Federal Writers' Project in Indiana,*

*1935-1942*, is the first book-length study of a state project.

Like all state projects, the personnel of the Indiana FWP consisted of a small non-relief staff of editors and a much larger group of fieldworkers drawn from the county relief rolls. The first director of the Indiana FWP was Ross Lockridge, a one-time lawyer who wrote history books for children and gave history recitals and performances to audiences around the state. Lockridge had to resign as director after two years on the job because, as Blakey politely puts it, there "appeared to be a basic incompatibility between his personal enthusiasms and the official goals established in Washington" (p. 45). Gordon F. Briggs, a former journalist and public relations officer, succeeded Lockridge as director and served in this position until the Writers' Project closed down in 1942.

Because there was so much turnover among those on relief, Blakey has no hard figures on how many unemployed the Writers' Project put to work in Indiana. He estimates that at any one time the project seldom had more than 150 men and women on the payroll. Fieldworkers made

about eighty dollars a month, working twenty to thirty hours a week. Unlike WPA projects in general, which gave male breadwinners preference in hiring, the Writers' Project employed a high percentage of women workers. In contrast, the number of African Americans who worked for the Indiana FWP was miniscule. According to Blakey, apparently "there were very few on the relief rolls who claimed literary expertise in the 1930s, so the FWP had few to choose from" (p. 42). This explanation is not convincing, especially given the fact that white fieldworkers rarely had literary qualifications beyond the ability to read and write. Indiana's African-American population was very small in the 1930s and those on relief generally worked at manual labor.

At the time of the Great Depression, Indiana was drawing to the close of what some have called its "Golden Age" of literature. The state had produced a remarkable number of talented and bestselling authors: Booth Tarkington, George Ade, Theodore Dreiser, Claude Bowers, and Meredith Nicholson, to mention a few. One might have thought that the FWP would have been able to draw on a deep reservoir of untapped Hoosier literary talent, but this was not the case. Very few, if any, of the fieldworkers were actually writers by trade. Most had worked as teachers, ministers, secretaries, and in other white-collar professions. The most notable professional writer to work for the Indiana Writers' Project was Charles Bruce Millholland who had written a script titled "Twentieth Century" that became a Broadway play in 1932 and a motion picture in 1934. (In other states talented writers such as Nelson Algren, Nathan Asch, Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright, Kenneth Rexroth, Conrad Aiken, Studs Terkel, and John Cheever did find employment with the FWP.)

The main product of all the state writers' projects was a guide to each state. *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*, published in 1941, was the forty-seventh of the forty-eight state guides to be published. The Indiana guide followed the

same basic format as all of the other state guides. Its three sections included essays on the state's history and culture, descriptions of its major cities, and automobile tours of important attractions. Despite some inevitable quibbling over minor factual errors, Blakey reports that readers greeted the Indiana guide with generous praise. The *New York Herald Tribune* judged it one of the best of all the state guides. Some indication of the book's enduring popularity can be gauged from the fact that Oxford University Press kept the volume in print until the 1960s and Somerset Publishers brought out an edition in 1973. Despite the requirements of a rigid format, the authors of the guide were allowed some latitude in presenting their material. Unlike other state guides, the Indiana volume did not include separate chapters on blacks, immigration, or sports, but, instead, integrated this material into other essays. In a state where non-whites and immigrants represented a very small percentage of the total population this approach was not unreasonable, but these demographic considerations were not the sole reasons for this approach. Blakey explains that the authors of the volume, especially the two directors, Lockridge and Briggs, saw Indiana as a white, native American state where rural values still dominated. "Indiana's guide," writes Blakey, "maintained a firm pattern of urban denial" (p. 205). Surprisingly, given the fact that they made up a large percentage of the project staff, women received short shrift in the volume. Blakey notes that the national office had to tell the state editorial staff to include more information about Indiana women in the guide. In contrast to this generally conservative tone, Blakey believes that he sees the handiwork of the Quaker and left-winger Rebecca Pitts, who worked as an editor on the project for three years, in the section on New Harmony. He detects there a "subtle argument for communal goals, women's rights, and a classless society that Marx and Lenin might have applauded" (p. 211).

The Indiana Writers' Project produced a handful of other publications. *Hoosier Tall Stories*, appearing in mimeographed form in 1937, was a collection of allegedly authentic Indiana folktales and whoppers. The *Calumet Region Historical Guide* appeared two years later. The Region, as it is known to locals, makes up the largely urbanized northwestern corner of the state. With large immigrant and minority populations, it has always had more in common with Chicago than with the rest of the state of the state. The Calumet guide emphasized everything that had been minimized in the state guide--urbanization, industrialization, race, ethnicity. This regional guide was popular in the Calumet, but found few readers down state.

The published works of the Indiana FWP were just the tip of the iceberg of the project's output. The Writers' Project editors and fieldworkers left behind a huge archive of unpublished materials that have been preserved in the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and at Indiana State University, Terre Haute. Blakey describes these materials in detail in chapters titled "Almost Finished Projects," "Incomplete Projects," and "Research Inventories." In another chapter, "Oral History," Blakey describes the three oral history projects that involved FWP workers--interviews of former slaves living in the state, interviews of surviving witnesses of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's five-day raid into Indiana in July 1863, and materials that fieldworker James Clarence Godfroy collected from surviving members of the Miami and other Native American tribes. The slave narratives were part of a national project that involved seventeen other states. Indiana fieldworkers found and interviewed 134 former slaves who were still living in the 1930s. Blakey reports that the Indiana slave narratives were the least satisfactory of all the states largely because the interviewers had substituted their own words for those of the interviewees. The fact that all of the interviewers, except Anna Pritchett

of Indianapolis, were white also probably affected the quality of the final product.

Blakey is particularly good at describing the breadth of the work that the Writers' Project staff and fieldworkers produced--particularly the large archive of materials that never saw the light of day as publications. His book would have been more satisfying had he taken the opportunity to probe a little more deeply into the material when the occasion warranted. For example, in some states, particularly New York, the FWP had become a target of the anti-Communist witch hunts, but this never happened in Indiana. Why not? Red hunters certainly had material to work with. As Blakey points out, although the project was hardly dominated by radicals, some employees, like Rebecca Pitts, were Communists or fellow travelers. (Pitts once told this writer that she got her job with the FWP because of her left-wing connections and if local politicians wanted to find Communists that they would not have had to look any further than her office, located across the street from the state house.) It would have been interesting to read Blakey's speculations on why the Indiana Writers' Project did not become a target of conservative anti-Communists, but he does not probe beneath the surface.

Blakey clearly admires the Indiana Writer's Project and its legacy, but, at times, his praise seems a little too effusive. This is most apparent in the section dealing with the unpublished materials that the Writers' Project produced. Blakey probably correctly points out that the archival material that the Writers' Project left behind presents "more local, personal, and idiosyncratic versions of the Hoosier past and character than do the officially approved ones" (p. 211), but this reader remains skeptical about Blakey's repeated use of terms like "hidden treasures," "invaluable," or "a gold mine" to describe these materials. Much of the material seems mundane and only marginally interesting--perhaps explaining why it never appeared in print. The inventory of grave

stone epitaphs is a case in point. Blakey concludes that this inventory documented "the primacy of military service ..., the second-class status of both women and blacks in early Indiana, a strong religious belief in a rewarding afterlife, high infant mortality rates" and so on, but are these findings really news to the students of Indiana history?

Another question that Blakey does not answer adequately is why the Indiana guide was the forty-seventh of the forty-eight guides to appear in print. Indiana is the smallest state west of the Appalachians. One wonders why the state project was so slow in producing a guide for such a small state. Were the Hoosier project managers more inefficient than in other states? Were they given fewer resources? Did the Indiana editors have more editorial disagreements with the national office than other states? Some comparisons with other state projects would have helped answer these questions.

Blakey ends his book on a somewhat odd note. He probably correctly believes that many Hoosiers felt a deep shame at finding themselves on relief during the Depression. He presents no evidence that these sentiments applied to former Writers' Project staff members or fieldworkers—in fact, he cites examples of the opposite. Nevertheless, Blakey asserts that "ambivalence about unemployment and relief work is understandable for the FWP employees, but there need be neither silence nor shame about their legacy" (p. 212). This reviewer enthusiastically agrees.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-indiana>

**Citation:** Errol Stevens. Review of Blakey, George T. *Creating a Hoosier Self-Portrait: The Federal Writers' Project in Indiana, 1935-1942*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11389>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.