

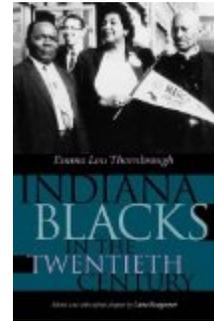
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emma Lou Thornbrough. *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*. Edited and with a final chapter by Lana Ruegamer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xii + 287 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33799-3.

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## A Black History Pioneer Completes Her Journey

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*Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* brings to fruition the second half of Emma Lou Thornbrough's two volume history of African Americans in the Hoosier state. Almost but not quite completed at the author's death in 1994, it is the final effort of a talented scholar who devoted her career to uncovering Indiana's black history and promoting racial justice in our time. Fittingly, *Twentieth Century* is a work of high quality. With its publication, Indiana now has not only a comprehensive account of its African American past, but arguably the best state-level black history published to date.

Thornbrough's first volume, *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900* (1957), is rightfully considered a classic in the fields of Indiana and black historical scholarship. It is, above all else, a finely crafted study—thoroughly researched, well organized, carefully written, and judicious in its assessments. Thornbrough's principal argument—that Indiana black Hoosiers' early progress proved the fallacy of their white contemporaries' assertions about black inferiority—is more than convincingly demonstrated, partly through the author's impressive array of evidence, and partly through her even-handed, dispassionate style of analysis. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Before 1900* continues to be an invaluable resource for anyone interested in its subject matter. (Indeed, Indiana University Press reissued the book in 1994, testimony in its own way to its enduring value.)

*Twentieth Century* shares many of its predecessor's finer qualities and implicitly develops the same theme. Thornbrough relies once again on a wide array of primary sources—including newspapers, census data, local NAACP and Urban League records, and private correspondence—together with a smattering of secondary materials to provide a comprehensive, well-rounded survey of key twentieth century developments. The book is also organized effectively, with specific chapters devoted to the turn of the twentieth century, World War One and the beginnings of the Great Migration, the 1920s, the Great Depression and the New Deal, the fight for greater civil rights after World War Two, and so on. And Thornbrough's characteristic "voice" is fully evident, carefully guiding the reader through controversial matters in a judicious, seemingly objective fashion. She does not completely shy away from making strong judgments, but generally allows the evidence to speak for itself. Her restraint, in turn, gives the narrative greater authority, and draws the reader's attention when she does, in fact, make strong assertions.

The strongest sections of *Twentieth Century* are those dealing with the major public struggles faced by African Americans in Indiana in the last century. These include the fights over greater access to decent jobs, public accommodations, high quality housing, and integrated public schools. In recounting these events, Thornbrough often casts her story in a vivid, engaging narrative form. And, despite (or because of) the author's even-handed ap-

proach, it is easy for the reader to make her/his own judgment about the “heroes” and “villains” involved. (I, for one, was appalled by the obstructionist tactics of groups like the Indiana Chamber of Commerce and the Indianapolis Board of Realtors; and conversely, heartened by the courageous actions of the NAACP, the CIO, and a long list of local African American political leaders, from Willard Ransom and Henry Richardson to Andrew Ramsay and Jessie Jacobs.)

*Twentieth Century*, like any book, is open to a degree of criticism. The overall narrative seems at times uneven, in large measure because of its given geographic and chronological scope. While *Twentieth Century* takes the entire state of Indiana as its focus, the narrative narrows increasingly to Indianapolis and Gary as it proceeds, with only an occasional brief reference to a few other cities. This narrowing is understandable—the state’s black population is increasingly concentrated in a few urban settings over time—but it does draw attention to the limits of using the state as a unit of analysis, especially in the twentieth century. On a somewhat similar note, the final two chapters of the book, dealing with African American Hoosiers since 1970, seem much more impressionistic and less cohesive than those that comprise the bulk of *Twentieth Century*. This, too, is understandable—it stems from the successes of the civil rights movement and subsequent fragmentation of the black community as American society opened up. The story of Indiana’s black population no longer has the same degree of focus and unity it had before the 1960s. (Lana Ruegamer’s final chapter, much

to her credit, is wisely tailored to this new dynamic.)

A final, more substantive criticism concerns context. Thornbrough begins most chapters with introductory paragraphs placing her immediate subject matter in a broader regional or national discussion. In the body of each chapter, however, the focus narrows almost exclusively to the Indiana setting, with little attempt to compare or contrast Indiana patterns with those found elsewhere. This will not bother some readers, especially if their interest is largely confined to the local or state level. It will be less satisfying, however, to those wanting to understand Indiana blacks’ typicality or exceptional character—i.e., to place Indiana blacks’ experiences in the “big picture” concerning matters like industrialization, housing segregation, African American political activism, or the influence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Notwithstanding these minor quibbles, *Twentieth Century* is a fine book. It provides a well researched, detailed, and at times authoritative account of the Indiana black experience since 1900. Like its predecessor, it will undoubtedly become *the* standard reference on its subject for decades to come.

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