

Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project, by Jerrold Hirsch. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xii, 293 pp. Notes, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Julia Mickenberg is assistant professor of American studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her article, "Left at Home in Iowa: 'Progressive Regionalists' and the WPA Guide to 1930s Iowa," appeared in the *Annals of Iowa* in 1997.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP), whose most extensive and enduring undertaking was the compilation of guides to all fifty states, was a New Deal program started in the mid-1930s to provide relief work for unemployed writers. In addition to the American Guides—which include essays on state history, institutions, and culture as well as driving tours—the FWP also sponsored oral history and folklore projects.

Until now, no book has attempted to come to grips with that massive program: the sheer volume and scope of material, published and unpublished, in archives and repositories around the country seem to have made the task too daunting. Previous studies, such as Jerre Mangione's *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935–1943* (1972) and Monty Penkower's *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (1977), are valuable works of scholarship, but they fall short, as Hirsch points out, of situating the program in a broader cultural context that sheds light on the true significance of the work. Although there have been several good regional studies (Paul Sporn's *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers' Projects in the Midwest* [1995], for example, as well as some dissertations), and even a general study of the American Guides (Christine Bold's *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* [1999]), there was still an obvious need for the kind of book that Hirsch ambitiously claims to offer. As he puts it in the book's introduction, "while other studies . . . focused on the birth, growth, and demise of the [FWP]—the administrative details—this study treats it as an episode in American cultural and intellectual history and as part of the cultural component of the New Deal's program of political and economic reform. By focusing on key individuals, developments, and programs, this study provides an analysis of the dreams and accomplishments of the FWP" (1).

That is a tall order, so it is not surprising that Hirsch has devoted a major portion of his academic career to arriving at a deep understanding of the program and its significance. He devotes a lot of space to discussing how FWP officials "aimed to redefine American national identity and culture by embracing the nation's diversity" (1). He offers detailed portraits of key FWP officials, almost all of whom (except Alan Lomax, who articulated a more conservative nationalism) shared the

cosmopolitan, pluralist, romantic nationalism that characterized the New Deal philosophy more generally. Hirsch successfully demonstrates how they translated those New Deal values into their general program and, to some extent, into particular texts. Most of them also had been influenced by the new anthropology, which looked to the lives of ordinary people (especially the poor, industrial workers and racial and ethnic minorities) to understand *culture* as a way of life. Hirsch emphasizes the truly innovative nature of the FWP as a program, noting, for instance, that the social-ethnic studies undertaken by the FWP were "the first government sponsored program that rejected either a racial or an assimilationist definition of American nationality"; and he stresses that the sources for this new "portrait of America"—ex-slave narratives, folklore, and the life histories of ordinary people—were largely unmined in the 1930s.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, "Romantic Nationalism, Cultural Pluralism, and the Federal Writers' Project," focuses on the broader goals of the project and on the American Guides in particular. In the most compelling chapter in this section, "Picturesque Pluralism," Hirsch is critical of the brand of history offered in the guidebooks, which he characterizes as "a cataloging of America without any transforming point of view" (98). Yet he also suggests that the accrual of detail did operate to create a sense of place, which is at the heart of what federal officials wanted the guides to do. His musings on *tourism*, *travel*, and *guidebooks* as metaphors provide provocative insights into the project's philosophical underpinnings and the degree to which the guidebooks served them: "Ironically," Hirsch notes, "during the Great Depression the FWP invited Americans . . . either literally or imaginatively, to step outside their daily routine, to leave their places in the spatial, social, and class structure of their nation—to travel" (102). Hirsch notes federal officials' hopes that the guidebooks would be perceived as "literature." Hirsch himself might have taken this cue more seriously, offering more close readings, particularly since those he does offer are insightful and engaging. Still, he provides a revealing glimpse into the material as well as ideological dynamics of textual *production*, albeit from the perspective of the federal editors rather than local writers. To truly grasp all the material and account for all the actors involved would be impossible, and Hirsch's work of synthesis is commendable.

The second part of the book focuses on cultural pluralism in the project, discussing the treatment of ethnicity and race in the FWP, specifically in folklore projects, oral history research, and the Southern Life History Program. Most scholars, focusing on the slave narratives,

have tended primarily to debate how accurate those sources are as evidence of life under slavery; Hirsch asks us to subject the materials to a new, probably more useful set of questions. Whether the life histories collected from ex-slaves yield accurate information about life under slavery is difficult to know, but they certainly reveal something about how ex-slaves interpreted their experience, and, importantly, about how researchers perceived ex-slaves as subjects. The material that Hirsch unearthed on Sterling Brown's effort to check and correct often distorted and racist views of African Americans in locally produced materials is fascinating and very telling. It certainly bolsters his claims that federal officials and local writers were often at odds in their outlook. Still, I wanted to know more about some of those local writers, researchers, and interviewers, particularly given Hirsch's assertion that such information is not too difficult to ascertain.

The final section of the book, "Denouement," contains chapters dealing with investigation of the FWP by the Dies Committee (the predecessor of the House Un-American Activities Committee) and the transformation of the Writers' Project into the Writers' Program. Hirsch makes it clear that accusations leveled against the program reflected the discomfort conservative Americans felt with challenges to the traditional position of working-class people, ethnic groups, and African Americans in the American social hierarchy. Hirsch's final chapter suggests how the FWP's pluralist agenda was co-opted to serve the project of building consensus, patriotism, and unity during wartime.

Many of the American Guides have been reprinted in recent years, and several previously unpublished FWP studies have found a new audience, suggesting the FWP's contemporary relevance. This is particularly true as Americans in a period of crisis attempt to define themselves and uncover a basis for unity while respecting diversity. Moreover, Hirsch's book provides a useful historical perspective on ongoing debates about government funding of the arts.

Across the Wide River, by William Hewitt. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. 96 pp. Bibliography. \$11.95 cloth.

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In August 1951 officials at Memorial Park Cemetery in Sioux City denied burial to John R. Rice—a decorated veteran of Winnebago descent who had been killed in Korea—because the cemetery was for "whites

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