

Hostile responses from James T. Farrell and others did not diminish Conroy's sense of himself as a rough-hewn writer of the people. In 1935 he told an audience at a literary conference that "to me a strike bulletin or an impassioned leaflet is of more moment than three hundred prettily and faultlessly written pages about the private woes of a gigolo or the biological ferment of a society dame" (389).

At the end of the 1930s, Conroy joined the Illinois Writers' Project under the direction of John T. Frederick and set to work gathering industrial folklore, some of which was amassed in Chicago bars. Thereafter he became a familiar figure in the city's bohemian literary circles in its post-renaissance years, working by day in the encyclopedia mills and carousing at night. Although he continued with writing and editing projects, after 1941 Conroy's creative period was essentially over. He slipped into obscurity just as the literary stars of such Chicago friends as Nelson Algren and Willard Motley rose.

Whether Conroy's career merits a long scholarly biography is arguable. Yet Douglas Wixson, Conroy's literary executor, earns high marks for placing the editor-writers's life within a context of radical literary activity in the 1920s and 1930s—and especially for emphasizing midwestern aspects of such activity. Wixson's pages are crowded with the names of unknown writers, fugitive publications, and vanished radical groups. They remain outside our usual understanding of the main currents of midwestern writing in the period, and wholly remote from the great tide of international modernism that carried writers like Crane and Hemingway out of the Midwest. Wixson asks the reader to pay attention, and thereby see the region in a more complex light.

*Poor Relations: The Children of the State of Illinois, 1818–1990*, by Joan Gittens. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xi, 295 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY BEVERLY STADUM, ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

State legislators, like those in Washington D.C., have long debated the relationship between public expenditures and the dependency of poor families, between measures for public safety and for containing crimes by youth. In *Poor Relations: The Children of the State of Illinois, 1818–1990*, Joan Gittens provides a context for contemporary discussion by examining past public actions that affected youngsters who lacked the capacity to advocate for themselves. While her use of public and private records makes Illinois politics and institutions the backdrop, her assessment of children's needs and program shortcomings holds truths that repeat across state lines.

In the late nineteenth century, East Coast reformers found a "simple answer" to the perceived threats of children's poverty and children's crimes by shipping urban youngsters to live with midwestern families via the "orphan trains." Progressive reformers in the twentieth century urged state governments to save youngsters by expanding public authority to intervene in family life, confidently expecting that officials and trained experts would serve as wise and caring parents—*parens patriae*. Reform led to establishment of the country's first juvenile court with probation officers to rehabilitate Chicago youngsters outside of the adult corrections system and with legislation for the country's first mothers' pensions, precursor of Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Gittens criticizes naive expectations about government's benevolence in the absence of adequate funding and simplistic judgments about children's malleability, parents' inadequacies, and institutions' capacity to be constructive. Her evidence shows that many reforms failed to live up to the rhetoric of their creators. According to Gittens, the challenge has always been to balance supportive public intervention with respect for the individual rights of children and their families.

One of the book's strengths is sensitivity to children's diverse needs. The book's three sections explore and critique changing attitudes, policies, and practice toward (1) children who were dependent owing to poverty or abuse; (2) children who were "in trouble with the law" (vii); and (3) those whose needs derived from physical or mental disability. This latter category was most likely to cross class lines, and thus the story of youngsters with disabilities has been different in ways from that of children whose poverty merited public indifference or hostility.

In each section, Gittens faults Illinois for being an affluent but stingy state, inefficient in program administration. Her criticism of conditions in institutions (whether poorhouse, reform school, or asylum) is sharp and detailed, enriched by the study of administrative records and reports from reform commissions.

Some of the discussion related to poverty and delinquency will be familiar to readers with a background in social welfare history, as similar reforms moved across the nation. But the subject of youth with disabilities has received much less attention. Gittens provides insight into the fears and expectations that led to education for blind and deaf children in contrast to confinement for those with mental disabilities. She expands on how parents became effective advocates and on federal legislation in 1975 that opened public education for youngsters with disabilities.

A hundred and fifty years of activity in the state, private, voluntary, and federal sector are all part of the synthesis Gittens works to build. While she consistently draws attention to contradictory values

about children and family that underlay policy, the quality and quantity of evidence presented varies considerably. For example, early state institutions are described with detail that draws the reader into the plight of residents. However, policy decided in Washington, D.C. in the 1970s and 1980s is summarized as in a textbook with the experience of children and reformers almost absent from the telling.

Gittens identifies certain issues as important but then neglects to develop them with the social history for which a reader might wish. She criticizes reformers' willingness to discount parents' perspective, yet *Poor Relations* itself pays inconsistent attention to parents. While she notes the historic impact of race in differentiating children's experiences, more might have been said about child welfare work organized by communities of color and about ongoing racial stereotypes that have influenced discussion about intervention in family life. What is obvious throughout, however, is Gittens's concern for youngsters and her hope that Illinois and other states will not repeat past errors as they design child welfare solutions for the future.

*When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps during World War II*, by Martha S. Putney. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992. x, 241 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KARLA EKQUIST, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

From the birth of the United States to the present, women have contributed their time, labor, and skill to the nation's wars. Such contributions, including the essential labors of camp followers, nurses, and women who went into combat, have been ignored by scholars until relatively recently. In *When the Nation Was in Need*, Martha Putney looks at the experiences of the African-American women who volunteered to serve in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and the Women's Army Corps. She also examines the impact of these women on the military and the nation. Finally, she discusses the legislation that helped shape the character and role of the WAC and details the conditions, attitudes, and expectations associated with the African-American volunteers.

After the creation of the WAAC in May 1942, the first women volunteers were sent to the first WAAC training center, located at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. The forty African-American women who arrived in this first wave represented the army's quota, 10.6 percent. Although training centers were also established in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Louisiana, and Arkansas, most African-American WAACS/WACs were either stationed at Fort Des Moines or received their training there.

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