

Workers of America (UMW) in the 1890s. They also transplanted and nurtured a culture that valued family commitments, hard work, temperance, and a certain degree of stubbornness.

Like most of his male relatives and neighbors, Lewis went into the mines at age 14 as a "trapper boy," working as a shot firer, mule driver, and miner before he was old enough to vote. By that time, he had already joined the Masons, acted in community theater, helped build a gazebo in the town square, and managed a local baseball team. By early adulthood, he was known as a man who could quote Shakespeare *and* lead a strike. At 27, he was elected president of UMW Local 799 in Lucas.

Lewis would never go back to work in the mines. He soon left Iowa for Illinois, where he continued to develop as a working-class intellectual and a union leader. Over the next few years, he lobbied for safety legislation, organized for the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and became statistician for the national UMW. On the eve of World War I, John White, the president of the UMW and a Lucas native as well, appointed Lewis executive vice-president of the union. In 1920 Lewis was elected president, a post he would hold until 1959.

Lewis's years of greatest visibility and controversy were the 1930s and 1940s, when he launched the CIO over the objections of his old allies in the AFL, and when he broke with the mainstream of even the CIO to challenge Roosevelt and the labor movement's no-strike pledge during World War II. Throughout his career, Lewis was respected and reviled, praised and caricatured. Neither his friends nor his enemies ever made light of him.

Ron Roberts's book provides us with a chance to gain new insight into this prominent labor leader. It also gives students of Iowa history an additional perspective on the significance of coal mining to the state's economic and labor development, a topic recently raised in Shelton Stromquist's *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor* (1994). *John L. Lewis: Hard Labor and Wild Justice* is a valuable contribution to our deepening understanding of this subject.

*Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990*, by Douglas Wixson. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. xvi, 678 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RONALD WEBER, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

In the late 1960s Jack Conroy began reaping awards after a long fallow period. Gwendolyn Brooks, presenting the Literary Times Prize, cited "his aid and encouragement to young writers and his overall contribu-

tion to American literature, particularly his novel, *The Disinherited*" (482). Other awards included an honorary degree from the University of Missouri at Kansas City and the Mark Twain Award from the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

Ahead was more success. *The Jack Conroy Reader* (1979) gathered together his critical writing, poetry, and sketches. *The Disinherited*, first published in 1933, appeared in new editions in 1983 and 1991. In 1985 came *The Weed King and Other Stories*, a collection of folktales and sketches. That year, his home town of Moberly, Missouri, proclaimed a Jack Conroy Day.

His achievements may seem minor if measured against that of such midwestern giants as Ernest Hemingway and Hart Crane. But any achievement at all was remarkable, given the vastly different way Conroy entered into and sustained himself within the literary life.

Born into a working-class family in 1898, Conroy apprenticed in the railroad shops of Moberly from the age of thirteen onward. He worked ten-hour days for fourteen cents an hour. Thereafter he labored as an itinerant worker in mines and plants throughout the Midwest before settling in Chicago in the 1940s as an encyclopedia editor. He held this position for some twenty years before retiring to Moberly, where he died in 1990.

Conroy had a brush with higher education during a semester at the University of Missouri but chose to spend much of his life among self-educated worker-writers who by day performed manual labor and at night produced prose and poetry. He aimed always to promote the tantalizing dream of worker solidarity in the face of capitalist exploitation. "The cause of the laborers is my religion," Conroy maintained, "and it is holy to me" (171).

During the depression years, Conroy made a name for himself as a magazine editor. He first edited the *Rebel Poet*, then the *Anvil*, a left-wing bimonthly which merged with the *Partisan Review* in 1936. Conroy's editing was influenced by the regionalist example of John T. Frederick's *Midland*, even though that magazine, which was based in Iowa City and later Chicago, had no interest in proletarian writing. In the pages of the *Anvil*, Conroy first introduced to national readership work by Richard Wright and Nelson Algren.

As a writer himself, Conroy found an audience with sketches and stories in the *New Masses* and H. L. Menken's *American Mercury*. His autobiographical novel *The Disinherited* was pieced together from earlier work and had to be fundamentally reworked by an editor before it was published. The work still seemed disjointed to reviewers, but they remarked upon its fresh and exuberant account of working-class life.

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.

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