

American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture

Michael Edmonds

Wisconsin Historical Society

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa . This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Edmonds, Michael. "American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 451-452.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12439>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

in several bands over the Indian New Deal controversy continued through the late twentieth century, contributing to the rise of the American Indian movement, the occupation of Wounded Knee, and the violence on the Pine Ridge reservation that followed. Furthermore, Lee should have let this important chapter stand on its own, rather than combining it with material about programs for youth.

Overall, this important book reminds us of the long-lasting nature of the reforms brought during the New Deal years — as well as the long-lasting nature of American resistance to them.

American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture, by Wendy Griswold. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xiv, 361 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, appendixes, notes, references, indexes. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Michael Edmonds is director of programs and outreach at the Wisconsin Historical Society. He is the author of "The Federal Writers' Project in Wisconsin, 1935–1942" (*Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 2011).

The Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s and 1940s has always been infused with a romantic glow. Poet W. H. Auden called it "one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted" because it tried to use unemployed lay people to research, write, and edit books. It also nurtured young authors, including Saul Bellow, Zora Neale Hurston, John Cheever, and Richard Wright, whose later work would shape how Americans saw themselves during the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1935 and 1943, the project's 6,500 staff produced more than 600 books about local American life and culture, the most famous of which are the American Guides discussed in this book. It was a utopian dream conceived behind rose-colored glasses, led by visionary idealists, and carried out during a political maelstrom. The sheer optimism of it has spawned a small industry of memoirs, histories, and literary criticism.

Sociologist Wendy Griswold takes a different and much more pragmatic approach. She simply asks, what did the Writers' Project try to do, was it successful, and how did it affect American culture? To find answers she not only exploited all of the relevant documentary sources but collated and analyzed reams of raw data. Her previous work includes books on Renaissance London and post-colonial Nigeria, with a focus on how material objects of culture influence the transmission of ideas and values. Applying that perspective here, she has given us by far the best book on the Federal Writers' Project and why it mattered.

In 1935, two years into Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, nearly ten million Americans were out of work, so Congress funded the Works

Progress Administration (WPA) to create jobs, many of them doing things like building roads and bridges. But WPA director Harry Hopkins also set up programs to employ artists and writers. "Hell," he told critics, "they've got to eat like other people." Federal Writers' Projects sprang up in every state. Their main assignment was to publish a travel guide "for tours, sight-seeing and investigation of local landmarks, objects of interest, fictional associations, or other data of value to citizens." Sections of automobile tours were to be accompanied by essays giving "an inclusive picture of the scenic, historical, cultural, recreational, economic, aesthetic, and commercial and industrial resources" of each state.

In her first 200 pages Griswold uses archival sources to explain how the project was conceived, established, and managed. Besides detailing New Deal politics in Washington, she scrutinizes a handful of state offices to show the day-to-day challenges of wrangling dozens of literary neophytes to produce high-quality books. This ground has been covered by previous writers, though never so thoroughly. As a sociologist, Griswold extracted massive amounts of raw data from her sources. This yields a series of tables and charts showing, for example, who ran each of the 48 projects, with their age, gender, ethnicity, education, vocation, and political inclinations. Seventy pages of statistical data fill appendixes at the end of the book. She presents conclusions based on this data clearly and boldly and relates enough colorful anecdotes to lighten the weight of analysis.

In the second half of the book Griswold examines the effect that the Writers' Project had on American culture. Here her evidence comes from the content of the guides themselves, data on the reading habits of the American public, citation analysis, and the process of canon creation before, during, and after the Writers' Project. She indulges in no vapid literary generalizations but scrupulously shows how the content of the guides compares to that of other widely accepted accounts of American literature and makes deductions based on hard data.

Her conclusions? "Before the Guides, the American literary canon was white, male, Northeastern, and traditional in terms of genre; after the Guides, it was less of all of these. The Guides marked a shift in literary definition that took place three decades before civil rights, second-wave feminism, and identity politics blew the canon wide open. . . . The Guides unobtrusively normalized conceptions of diverse literary voices and distinctive state cultures" (12).

Griswold's cross-cultural perspective, comprehensive research, use of statistical data, and engaging prose style make *American Guides* likely to be the standard work on its subject for decades to come.