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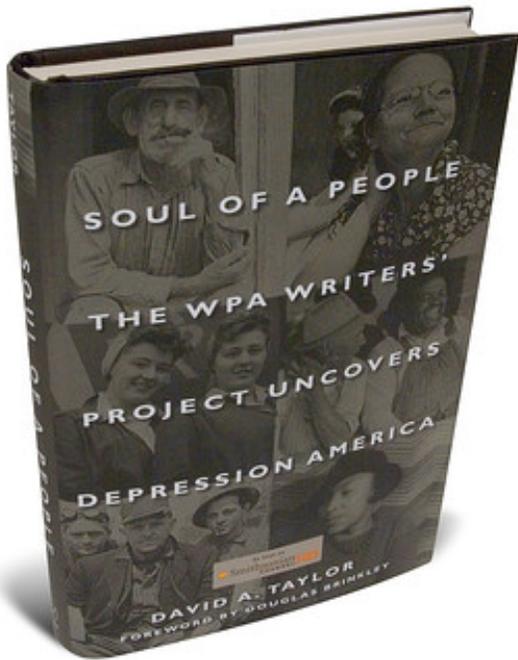
Bookshelf

A Stimulus Deal for Writers

Communism was a divisive presence in the Federal Writers' Project.

By [ROBERT K. LANDERS](#)

Writers and artists have "got to eat, just like other people," Harry Hopkins, director of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, observed during the middle of the Depression. The statement was true enough, of course, but Hopkins offered it defensively. With about 20% of the labor force unemployed in 1935, the WPA aimed to provide jobs to the millions of employable people on relief -- including writers, artists, musicians and actors. The chief purpose of the Federal Writers' Project, as with the other WPA programs for the artistic downtrodden, was to sustain the individuals and, by giving them paid work, keep up their morale and their skills. Secondary was the hope of the Writers' Project's director, Henry Alsberg, and other idealists that the ultimate result of their work -- principally, comprehensive guidebooks for each of the 48 states and Washington, D.C., as well as New York and other cities -- would be an honest and even ennobling portrait of America.



But, like other Americans on relief, Project writers often felt the associated stigma. Conservatives in Congress decried what they saw as a blatant boondoggle. And, as Project writers in many states soon discovered, there was widespread resentment at giving taxpayers' dollars to people to do something so little useful as to write. Paying supposed idlers to lean on pencils was deemed even worse than paying them to lean on shovels.

Some writers, such as John Cheever and Zora Neale Hurston, were embarrassed to be on relief. Others were just glad to have the work, which was not so demanding as to prevent the novelists and poets among them from attending to their literary muses after hours. "Everybody used [the Illinois Project] to the extent that it was a place where you could report at ten in the morning and then leave at two and then you had the rest of the day to yourself," said Nelson Algren, who began as a field interviewer and rose to become a supervisor. Richard Wright (who was "more diligent than most of us," Algren said) wrote his novel "Native Son" while a Project writer.

Soul of a People

By David A. Taylor

(Wiley, 260 pages, \$27.95)

"Recruited from the millions of jobless," David A. Taylor notes in "Soul of a People," "WPA writers drove along back roads collecting information about American history, interviewing Americans about how they lived, and gathering details about battles and landmarks, local histories and festivals, and lore."

The WPA books in the American Guide Series (which, with one exception, were printed by private publishers at their own expense) were themselves a splendid collective achievement, filled with material that might otherwise have been lost. As they delved into the past of town after town, said Robert

Cantwell in a 1939 appraisal in *The New Republic*, the guides told the stories of individuals who had failed as well as of individuals who had succeeded, providing "a terrible and yet engaging corrective to the success stories that dominate our literature." Critic Alfred Kazin, in his 1942 masterwork, "On Native Grounds," hailed the WPA guides as not merely "a super-Baedeker" but "a repository as well as a symbol of the reawakened American sense of its own history."

The guidebooks "made up America's first self-portrait," says Mr. Taylor. He takes his title from a claim by Mark Twain that "when a thousand able novels have been written" about a people, then "there you have the soul of the people." Though the guidebooks were not novels and did not number 1,000, the enthusiastic Mr. Taylor fancies that the WPA writers engaged in "the kind of experiment" that Twain had in mind.

Be that as it may, "one of the serious deficiencies" in the Federal Writers' Project (which at its peak in 1936 employed nearly 6,700 people) was "the sharply uneven distribution of literary talent throughout its forty-nine offices," noted Jerre Mangione in "The Dream and the Deal" (1972), which remains by far the best account of the Project. Not surprisingly, he said, "the ablest writers on the Project were to be found in New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco -- those traditional incubating centers of literary talent." There were, of course, exceptions, a notable one being Vardis Fisher, who wrote most of the Idaho guidebook and managed to get it published first of all the guidebooks -- and to enthusiastic reviews from around the country. Mr. Taylor's chapter on Fisher and the Idaho Project is one of his most interesting.

Mr. Taylor, who looks at the Writers' Project through the experiences of some of its more talented writers, many of whom achieved later fame, is a writer of scripts for television documentaries. And his book (which is a companion to a forthcoming Smithsonian/Showtime documentary), in its avoidance of complicating facts and analysis, rather resembles a lightweight TV documentary. He has tried to look at selected writers in the Project, not at their politics, and to put the reader in their "skins."

But politics -- communism in particular -- played a big role in many of these writers' lives. Mr. Taylor acknowledges the often divisive Communist presence in the Project but says hardly a critical word about it. He devotes much ink to Richard Wright but fails to tell, as Wright himself did in his memoir "Black Boy," how after he broke with the Communist Party and joined the Writers' Project in Chicago, the many Party members in the Project ostracized him and tried to get him fired as an incompetent.

Fortunately, the Communists in the Federal Writers' Project were in their Popular Front phase and all for the meliorist New Deal, so their presence, while provoking conservatives in Congress and making life difficult for writers such as Wright and for Project administrators, ultimately did not diminish the guidebooks' quality.

But, as Jerre Mangione observed, the reawakening of Americans' interest in their own history that Alfred Kazin perceived in the guidebooks had to be postponed, because of World War II: "The guidebooks were virtually forgotten as a symbol and largely ignored for their practical value." But, as he and Mr. Taylor make clear, readers, especially writers and editors, who have discovered the somewhat outdated volumes in recent decades have found them useful and illuminating, and even inspiring.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter).

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