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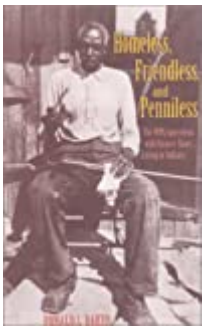

Ronald L. Baker. *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xx + 341 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33803-7.

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Former Slaves Remember

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One of the great cultural flowerings of American history occurred, paradoxically, during the Great Depression of the 1930s: an outpouring of art and film, of music and literature, of theater and popular entertainment in the midst of great suffering and anxiety. The federal government, again paradoxically some would say, seeded and nourished this flowering, by support of artists, actors, and writers, even historians. One of the most consequential of the several government-sponsored programs was the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. For Hoosiers, the Writers' Project's best-known work remains *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*, published in 1941 and still a useful source of information and insight.

One reason that much of the government supported cultural expression of the 1930s has endured is that it reflected the New Deal interest in the "common man." Running through many projects was a turn away from elitism and toward a culture from the bottom up, long before the "new" social history of the 1960s. In each of Indiana's ninety-two counties researchers gathered information about ordinary life, about the clubs and churches, about the folklore and customs, about anything that struck their fancy. Their raw notes, some 60,000 pages that were used to write the Indiana guide, sit now in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University, Terre Haute. It is an eclectic collection, filled with all kinds of this and thats, but well arranged, so that any scholar interested in a particular Indiana place in the 1930s should make a stop or purchase the microfilm copy.

These rich primary sources are not limited to the common man, not even to common white men. Reflecting the progressive orientation of the Federal Writer's Project, the Indiana workers included women, ethnic groups, and African Americans at a time when most professional historians seldom saw such "others". Among the richest sources of this kind are the interviews with the several dozen Hoosiers who had once been slaves. It is these interviews that Ronald L. Baker so wonderfully brings to print for the general reader.

Slave narratives are a central source of our understanding of the peculiar institution. They are fraught with challenges, however, as Baker notes in his introduc-

tion. Interviewed in the late 1930s these were very old men and women whose memories were mediated by all manner of factors. Most of the interviewers were white, seventeen of the eighteen in Indiana. And they worked without tape recorders, taking notes in pencil and then later typing up the interview. Despite these limitations the interviews are now a central part of scholarship on slavery.

Photographic reproductions of the interview texts are available in George P. Rawick's several published compilations, which included all but seven of the Indiana narratives from the collection at Indiana State. What Ronald Baker has done in this volume is to edit the interviews so they are more accessible for the general reader. He has corrected typographical errors, standardized style, and eliminated the interviewers' efforts to record dialect as well as their racial epithets. And he provides a very good introduction and contextual material in six appendixes. The result is a single volume that opens our eyes to the brutality of slavery, captured, for example, in the memory of the slave who recalled that his master always had a large glass of whiskey before administering a whipping.

But the interviews are about much more than whippings. They give a diverse sense of slave life, of large and small plantations, of brutal and not so brutal experiences. They provide detailed descriptions of the appearance of a slave cabin, of food and clothing, of folk medicine and religion, of slave runaways, of work in the fields and the big house, of slave auctions and the traders who separated mother from child. Several narratives tell of slaves escaping, crossing the Ohio River to freedom in Indiana, and of the usually hard life for most former slaves after 1865. As Baker notes, these interviews are not sufficient in themselves to illuminate all the corners of slavery, but their glimpses into the humanity and inhumanity of bondage are unsurpassed.

There is another value in the WPA narratives. They provide opportunity to think about the twentieth century, particularly the 1930s. A few of the former slaves became success stories, contradicting the volume's title. The Evansville physician George Washington Buckner is perhaps the most notable. But there was also Mattie Fuller, the Bloomington beauty shop operator who raised several thousand dollars to build a new A.M.E. church by singing and playing her portable organ on the courthouse square. For many others there is in these last years of their lives hardship and suffering: some of the former slaves make specific comparisons, remembering that they had more to eat in bondage than in the Great Depression.

And always the reader of these narratives needs to be mindful that these elderly black Hoosiers told their stories in a time when they could not eat in most Indiana restaurants, stay in the hotels, swim in the public pools, or know when or how white Hoosiers would remind them that they were not their equal. That fundamental fact of their long lives, so long after emancipation, colored surely the stories they told these white interviewers.

These then are primary sources of the best kind, the kind that open up and extend outward in many directions. We can all be grateful for the labor and learning that Ronald Baker brought to preparing them for publication.

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