

Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists: The WPA Writers' Project in Massachusetts. By Christine Bold. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. 288pp. \$80.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

As a lifeline and a training ground for writers, and a community-building project for the nation, the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was a vital element of the 1930s cultural landscape. During the past decade books by Christine Bold, Jerrold Hirsch, Michael Denning, Petra Schindler-Carter, Marguerite Shaffer, Paul Sporn, and Michael Szalay have contributed to a growing understanding of the New Deal as central to 1930s cultural production. Representing a crucial shift away from the earlier focus on the radical left, these studies give us a glimpse into the cultural politics of the modern welfare state as it emerged. Building on her essential 1999 study, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America*, Bold's *Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists: The WPA Writers' Project in Massachusetts* offers an astute, detailed account of FWP activities at the state and local levels while synthesizing recent insights about the national project.

Massachusetts offers a particularly important locus of study because it was one of the first cultural battlegrounds for the FWP. When the state guidebook, *Massachusetts: A Guide to its Places and People*, was first published, it disturbed state administrators with passages about the Sacco and Vanzetti case and statements favoring organized labor. The resulting controversy fueled Congressional opposition to the FWP. To her credit, Bold considers the quarrel, but does not let it dominate her account. Instead, she offers a broad description of Massachusetts FWP activities, while focusing on how federal, state, and local cultural concerns played out in specific texts. Bold's first section provides an overview of the state project's activities, noting their variety. In her second section, she focuses on three political issues: the row over the state guidebook, the representation of race in FWP texts, and the status of FWP "worker-writers." The final section complements these accounts with explorations of several FWP publications.

The introductory essay of the Massachusetts guide is a historical anemometer, tracing the "salty breeze" of progressive thought that "blows through this most conservative of commonwealths" (3). Bold sets up her own cultural meteorology, a series of keen close readings that elucidate the politics encoded in the documentary texts. However, Bold's argument ultimately rests on her commitment to the archive. By examining draft manuscripts and letters, Bold illuminates the agendas that shaped FWP documents, usefully redeploying the contrastive framework that guided her first study through conflicts among the national FWP administration and state and local units.

Cultural memory and amnesia are Bold's central concerns. Regarding the fight over the state guidebook, Bold contends that the national office first defended the guide's portrayal, then silently excised many of the offending passages in a revised edition. She notes that former FWP administrators "continued to collude in this act of censorship" by silencing the retreat in their memoirs (67). Indeed, FWP documents themselves often abetted this historical whitewashing. While the national editors encouraged state and local units to be attentive to the presence and history of African Americans, Bold shows that in the Massachusetts guidebook, African Americans and Native Americans virtually disappear as active historical agents. Similarly, groups like the Cape Verdeans on Nantucket appear minimally, despite their historical importance to commercial fishing (and to literature via Melville).

While the state guides were its most important contribution, the FWP planned and published a variety of smaller projects through state and local offices. Bold's focus on these documents opens new directions in FWP scholarship and complicates her account of FWP memory-making. Local FWP documents often escaped editorial oversight, occasionally veering toward boosterism as they linked town histories to a national heritage. Like the state guidebook, town guides regularly marginalized African Americans and Native Americans, though other ethnic groups found ways to utilize the guidebooks to make a case

for inclusion. Bold compares the representation of Albanians and Armenians in local studies as the national office shifted, according to Hirsch, from a model of ethnic contribution to a received national heritage toward one of ongoing and active engagement. Bold's epilogue extends the focus on cultural memory into the present. She draws on her travel experiences to weigh the cultural legacy of the FWP against cultural memory exhibits in Massachusetts mill towns that she visits, offering commentary on lost opportunities.

Bold's contribution extends, however, beyond memory/amnesia to revisiting key problems of FWP cultural production identified by Jerre Mangione and Szalay. She suggests that the Writers' Projects not only challenged the framework of literary value by paying writers for work done rather than for production of marketable products; they also disrupted the very definition of authorship while providing both literary apprenticeship and an outlet for "worker-writer" experimentation. This challenge manifested differently in the lives of professional writers and conscripted ones, as is demonstrated in the book's most compelling chapter, a discussion of New Bedford and Provincetown in which Bold explores the tensions that mark her title. Here, she shows how professional writers Carl Malmberg, George Willison, and Josef Berger in the artists' colony/fishing village of Provincetown sought to fulfill Joseph Freeman's call for a proletarian literary aesthetic through FWP projects. In contrast, writers culled from local labor pools for the New Bedford unit hesitated to identify with the Project or to embrace writers' union militancy, resisting being seen as radicals.

Despite Bold's sharp eye for textual and historical nuance, her book would profit from a more direct consideration of a few important aesthetic and political questions. Bold clearly favors polyvocality and local perspective in the FWP texts and the museums she visits, yet she suggests that "the pace, cross-cutting between text and image, and the symbiosis in that process" in the inclusive *New England Hurricane* "could only have been achieved by a strongly central editorial hand which managed multiple voices according to a New Deal agenda" (196). A single author, Josef Berger, wrote the lauded *Cape Cod Pilot*, disregarding Washington's guidelines by incorporating his personal voice. Both examples suggest that the aesthetic success of FWP projects depended on centralized direction, a paradox Bold acknowledges but never fully addresses. A more thorough analysis of this problem would yield useful connections with other 1930s literature and film, which often utilized parallax and personalization to advance, and to question, political agendas. Another issue Bold might have enlarged upon is the meaning of her insights for our understanding of the New Deal, particularly since several historians contend that the New Deal emerged precisely as a move away from reform agendas of the kind that FWP projects both advocated and embodied.

On balance, however, Bold's book offers many insights for scholars of American cultural history and adds considerable depth to our understanding of the FWP. Her acute investigations into national-local conflicts, politics of

historical representation, and questions of FWP authorship provide touchstones for future studies. They open the way not only for local FWP studies that complement Bold's arguments, but also for further examination of the crucial issues of aesthetics, community, labor, and memory that marked the New Deal.

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