Portrait of America

A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project

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ian experience. In the 1980s, historians, folklorists, and students of American literature contributed to making possible the radio dramatizations of *First Person America: Voices from the Thirties and America, the Dream of My Life*. The Library of Congress's American Memory Project has made all the FPA life history materials in its possession accessible through the internet. This has made it easier for researchers to use the collection regarding a host of topics, and some of these topics are still unimagined. The American Memory Project has made it possible for anyone, not just scholars, to do research in the FPA life history collections. Computer search functions allow interested individuals to construct their own dialogues with the memories captured in this collection.

All of the major tendencies present in oral history today can be found in the various programs of the FPA. The FPA's heuristic value as an ancestor, however, lies in the way national officials attempted to reconcile romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism and build on, modify, and sometimes repudiate earlier investigations and formulations of sociological and folkloristic theories. The specific concerns and formulations of FPA officials are now somewhat foreign to the working assumptions of contemporary oral historians—and therein may lie their historical value—despite their common concern with pluralism, ethnicity, and modernity.

The liberating potential of the past can only be fully realized when we confront not the ancestors we have invented but past students of American life who had their own agendas. An openness to both similarities and differences, to continuity and discontinuity, can make for a creative dialogue with a past that can be a partner in constructing the future of oral history research in America.

National and regional FPA officials were self-conscious about the purpose of the oral history projects they conducted. Unlike many of the scholars who first assessed and used these materials, key FPA officials such as Bodkin knew they were dealing with the significance of memory and its relation to history and culture. They also knew that folklore was one of the forms memory took and, therefore, that in recording memory they would also record folklore. FPA officials believed that they were making it possible for new voices to be heard, and that voices are more than sources to be mined by historians in traditional ways, even if we have only the printed page with all its limitations in aspiring to capture that voice. The FPA interviewees are not simply informants. They are also narrators and historians, preservers and creators of memory.

Chapter 7

The People Must Be Heard

W. T. Couch and the Southern Life History Program

"With all our talk about democracy it seems not inappropriate to let the people speak for themselves," W. T. Couch wrote in the introduction to *These Are Our Lives* (1939), a collection of thirty-five life histories of ordinary southerners that he saw as the first in a series of volumes of southern life histories. *These Are Our Lives* has been widely hailed as an example of a new approach to the study of American culture and history.

As Southeast regional FPA director, Couch supervised a southern life history program that shared some of the goals of the projects B. A. Botkin, Sterling Brown, and Morton Royce developed in the national office. National FPA director Henry Altsberg encouraged the work of all of these individuals. Nevertheless, the intellectual and administrative history of Couch's project distinguishes it from the programs that Botkin, Brown, and Royce undertook.

Couch initiated the southern life history program, formulated the approach the program would take, and administered it without any significant input from the Washington office. He was not part of the dialogue that took place among Botkin, Brown, and Royce as they thought about how to study American culture. Nor did he respond to the same inherited discourse about American identity that influenced how they approached the subject. As this and the next chap-
ter will make clear, Couch’s ideas were formed in response to an inherited discourse about southern society and identity. The FWP made it possible for Couch to administer a life history program that allowed ordinary southerners, white and black, to speak to their fellow southerners, to Americans in other regions of the nation, and to future generations of Americans. However, House congressional hearings led by two of Couch’s fellow southerners, Texas Democrat Martin Dies and Virginia Republican Clifford Woodrum, contributed to changes in the Writers’ Project that prevented Couch from continuing the southern life history program.2

In the New Deal’s program for economic recovery and reform the South loomed large. The New Deal cultural projects complemented the thrust of its social and economic programs, and here, too, the South was a significant concern. Although Couch supported the New Deal, his concerns differed from those of national FWP officials. His ideas reflected his involvement with longstanding debates about southern character. These Are Our Lives and the southern life history program were not only a response to an inherited southern discourse but also a contribution to an enduring history of images of the South that influenced the way Americans both within and outside the region thought about the South.

Couch wanted to give ordinary southerners an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words, to let them participate in long-standing discussions about the nature of southern poverty and the southern poor. Images of poor whites have been with us from William Byrd’s colonial description of “Lubberland Land” to Erskine Caldwell’s Tobacco Road (1932) and beyond.3 So, too, have depictions of the plain folk and yeoman farmers. This ongoing discourse is as much a battle of counter-images involving the psychological and ideological needs of the participants as it is an attempt to describe reality. The debate is over the character of the subject, and the terms are only vaguely sociological. The same is true for the discussion of black southerners. Character is ascribed to these southerners either on the basis of a hasty and condescending impressionism or simply on what has been gleaned from other books. Southern mill workers, one scholar had insisted, behaved docilely because they came from an agrarian background. Another had claimed they were fiercely independent for the same reason. A northern reformer had contended that diversified farming would make for a less boring lifestyle than cotton culture and thus eliminate behaviors he found repugnant. Much of this speculation Couch hoped to push aside.4

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Couch had been appointed associate state director of the North Carolina Writers' Project in the spring of 1936; not until the spring of 1938 did he become the Southeast regional director. Although his immediate goal in appointing Couch was to obtain his editorial and administrative skills in helping the North Carolina project make greater progress on the state guidebook. But even before the North Carolina guide was completed, Couch had been contemplating other projects the rww could undertake to provide more penetrating examinations of southern life. As director of the University of North Carolina Press, he had gained a wide knowledge of conditions in the South and was full of ideas regarding the type of studies that were needed. Unlike other university presses, Couch claimed that the University of North Carolina Press conceived of itself as having a duty to the region in which it was located: "Never before has any publishing firm set out to study the whole environment and life of a particular region and then shaped its program according to the needs of that region. We have done this. We believe the intellectual atmosphere of the South has improved as a result of the work we have done during the last ten years." The press, however, always walked a financial tightrope. Its "realistic treatment of Southern situations," University of North Carolina president Dr. Frank Porter Graham explained to a northern foundation, "had not won for it an endowment by the vested interests of the region." Although Couch had successfully obtained some foundation support for the press, it was never enough for the programs he envisioned.5

Couch's vision of the work the rww should pursue in the South reflected his reaction to contemporary currents of thought in the region and the nation. The sudden end of a period of seemingly endless prosperity had brought new attitudes and programs to the forefront of national affairs. The dominant criticism of American life in the 1920s had focused on the shallowness of middle-class life, the excesses of prosperity, and what was considered the cultural backwardness of large segments of the population. The South, along with Main Street and Winesburg, Ohio, provided critics with symbols of much that was wrong in American life. In the 1930s the South continued to be a symbol of the nation's problems. But as one historian later recalled, "The Bible Belt seemed less absurd as a haven of fundamentalism, more challenging as a plagued spot of race prejudice, poor schools and hospitals, sharecropping and wasted resources." Couch responded to these new currents in southern and national affairs. He served with the liberal Southern Conference for Human Welfare, backed Graham in his liberal crusades, and worked for change in the southern tenant system.6

Much of the writing that made the South in the 1930s a symbol of the De-
pression focused on the plight of the southern tenant farmer. More than any other book, Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* inaugurated the new interest in southern tenant farmers. The world Caldwell created in *Tobacco Road* was inhabited by degenerate, stunted, and starving people. The comedy in the novel came from the behavior of individuals “so stripped of economic and social hope that they became grotesques and parodies of human beings, twisted by the simplest hungers and lacking in dignity and integrity.” Caldwell’s main character, Jeeber Lester, had lost his chance to play a useful role in society. Jeeber should have become a symbol of the clogged social and economic system that could find no use for a growing number of people. This was not, however, what he came to represent to most Americans. The adaptation of Caldwell’s novel to the New York stage resolved all the difficulties the book had created for its readers into a clear portrayal of the story as a form of low comedy.⁹

Couch found little to admire in Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* or in his volume of impassioned reporting, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). Caldwell’s plea in the latter work for collective action on the part of the tenant farmers and for governmental control of cotton farming failed to impress Couch, who remarked, “If tenant farmers are at all like the Jeeber Lesters and Ty Ty Waldens with whom Mr. Caldwell has peopled his South I cannot help wondering what good could come of their collective action. Nor can much be expected from government control if the persons controlled are of the type that Mr. Caldwell has led us to believe now populate the South.”¹⁰

Federal Writers, Couch maintained, could be used to obtain a more accurate picture of southern life than novelists such as Caldwell or defenders of the southern agrarian way of life had provided. His original plans, submitted in 1937, for studies of cotton mill villages, slum sections in southern towns and cities, and rural slum tenant problems had the endorsement of numerous students of the South and the sympathetic interest of Alsberg. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic structure of the FWP initially made it impossible to implement Couch’s program.¹¹ May E. Campbell, North Carolina WPA director of women’s and professional projects, explained to Alsberg that although she was “intensely interested” in the proposals Couch had made, she did not see how they could be approved by the North Carolina office when they involved work in all the southern states. Nor, in her opinion, was work far enough advanced on the state guide to allow competent writers to be spared for other projects. She suggested, however, that the work could be undertaken if an office for this project was established in Washington and the work administered from there, or it could be administered from North Carolina if the national office authorized
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The methodology he suggested for obtaining material on various aspects of southern life differed sharply from conventional approaches. The case histories Rupert Vance used in his study *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* (1935), "to go behind the statistics and show the cotton system as it works," provided Couch with an initial model. He argued that writers could collect life histories of tenant families, farm families, mill village families, and other important occupational groups. In addition, he proposed to collect material on black artists and their work, landlord-tenant relations, laws, customs, and habits governing relations between the races, eating and drinking habits, southern health and disease, poor whites in the South, blacks who had achieved distinction, river bottom culture, the early history of state universities; criminals condemned to death; rural and urban slums; consumers' and producers' cooperatives; and the
quantity and quality of recreational facilities in the South. In each of these areas he described work that had been previously done in the field and what remained to be done.\textsuperscript{15}

Couch also defined the advantages of using life histories as opposed to more conventional methods. He thought that if southerners were given a chance to speak for themselves, they would demonstrate that southern life was more complex than easy generalizations had led numerous people to believe. He argued against "the possible objection that only sociologists can get case histories that are worth getting. The fact is that when sociologists get such material, they generally treat their subjects as abstractions." Couch was providing a rationale for using writers unfamiliar with the study of sociology. The life histories would reflect the social situation without becoming statistical abstractions; they would have that elusive quality of human interest, unlike the material gathered by sociologists. Fiction, he thought, was equally inadequate in capturing people's lives, "because of its composite or imaginary character." Since sociologists generally treat people as abstractions, and novelists create composite characters, it would be better to use individuals who lacked background in both fields, such as the majority of project workers. Though sociology and fiction offered the models from which Couch drew in formulating his ideas, the life history program was nevertheless a pioneering effort in social history.\textsuperscript{16}

The emphasis was on the present, but the format of the life history led to a discussion of change over time—a discussion of history. Unlike the FWP ex-slave narratives, the life history program was not conceived of in relation to an existing historiography on the topic. The ex-slave narratives, FWP officials thought, would allow an alternative to the standard written histories of slavery; slavery would be examined from the slave's point of view.\textsuperscript{17} Until recently, however, the history of ordinary southerners, both black and white, had been written by sociologists and novelists. Couch set out to disprove the traditional notion that the southern poor, white and black, were innately inferior. His work fitted with the underlying themes of reformist social documentary so popular in the 1930s; social problems were a product of a system that could be reformed.

The life history outline given to project workers instructed them to ask questions about topics such as family, income, politics, occupation, medical needs, diet, and education. The outline was oriented to the present, and the approach was that of the social worker. However, the outline also reflected concerns about the past and the future. For example, interviewees were asked not only how many years they had attended school but about the causes for limited education and their educational expectations for their children. The life histo-
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Frank Porter Graham promised Couch his total support in obtaining approval for the project. Graham had recently been appointed chairman of the committee, created by President Roosevelt, to examine economic conditions in the South and had friendly access to the offices of high government officials. He was willing to talk with Harry Hopkins or any other high official Alsberg suggested in order to secure approval for Couch’s program, and Graham assured Alsberg that with Couch directing the program, he “need not worry about the quality of the final product.” Paul Green, the prominent North Carolina dramatist, also urged Alsberg, whom he knew well from the days when Alsberg was associated with the Provincetown Players, “to do all you can to get Mr. Couch’s appointment approved.” In his opinion, Couch was “the best man in the south for the job, there’s no question about it. The results will prove it.” To gain additional support, Couch sent samples of the life histories that had already been collected to such prominent New Deal officials as Clark Foreman, a liberal southerner who had served Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes as an adviser on Negro affairs and then as a high official of the Public Works Administration, and Arthur Goldschmidt, a WPA official who had been instrumental in establishing the arts projects. The samples were “quite effective propaganda” and provided the “final push” in obtaining official approval for Couch’s appointment as regional director.23

In August 1938 Couch became regional director for the southeastern states: Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, and Alabama. The appointment gave him the opportunity to draw on personnel from outside the ranks of the North Carolina project and thus secure life histories from other southern states. He took advantage of the exemption state WPA units were given to employ a small number of nonrelief workers. He hired several talented writers who were in financial need but who did not qualify for relief.24

Relying on the contacts he had made as director of the University of North Carolina Press, Couch was able to recruit additional writers and secure a small regional staff. Walter Cutter, who had much experience in social work and had served with such New Deal agencies in North Carolina as the Emergency Relief Administration and the National Youth Administration, became assistant regional director. Muriel Wolff, Leonard Rapport, and Bernice Kelly Harris went to work for the project in nonrelief positions. Wolff had been a member of the Carolina Playmakers and had worked for the press from 1931 to 1937; Rapport had also come to Couch’s attention as an employee of the press. Harris had, like Wolff, been a member of the Carolina Playmakers. Couch was considering publishing her first novel. He was convinced she had the talent and
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At the end of January 1939, Couch sought the response of friends in Chapel Hill to a sample of life histories that the project had collected. Sociologist Rupert Vance expressed concern that "the sketches are unique... among all the things that have been done in the social field." Perhaps most encouraging was his opinion that "without further editing it seems to me that they can be integrated into a volume which will give us something of real biography of the common man of the South." Playwright Paul Green was equally impressed and thought the life histories would "be a storehouse for the creative writer as well as those of a scientific bent."26

In some areas project workers did not conduct as many life history interviews as Couch desired. Despite repeated encouragement, project workers found it difficult to obtain life histories of middle-class individuals; a life history of a doctor appears in These Are Our Lives but not one of either a milliner or a lawyer. In trying to secure life histories of blacks, Couch discovered that project workers not only found the assignment difficult but were reluctant to accept it. They had to be reminded that "we must have life histories that reveal the way people in the South live, and Negroes and members of other racial groups are people just as well as whites." That there was only a small number of African Americans on the state projects in the Southeast handicapped the work. Only one of the black life histories, "Didn't Keep a Penny," in These Are Our Lives was written by an African American.27

Couch also looked for stories that were well written. The rejection of fiction did not mean the rejection of literary devices. There was room in the life histories for descriptions of surroundings and individuals. Though an outlined guide to the project workers, the life histories were not written in a dry questionnaire format, but more like short stories. This meant that material gathered by the field-workers often had to be revised by the few nonrelief workers on the project. Project editors thought that "field workers were able to get the material, but they had no sense of literary form." All changes in the arrangement of the material were approved by the original interviewers. Still, many of the project workers used the life histories to try to demonstrate their literary skills. This added an element of distortion. On one hand, Couch and his assistants talked about authenticity, but on the other hand, they wanted to reach a large audience. Thus they often edited and changed material to make it better organized and easier to read.28

Unless the first volume of life histories was successful, Couch assumed
there was no hope that the work would be allowed to continue. This may have been why he excluded “a number of extremely sordid stories,” arguing that though they were important, other material merited first attention. William McDaniel, the Tennessee state director, argued for the inclusion of “Burn All I Can,” a life history of a prostitute, Bessie Mai Boatwright. “Bessie Mai,” he pointed out, “represents a general class of people in the South and that they have a definite influence on social and economic conditions cannot be denied.” Nevertheless, Couch rejected the story, which had “caused some consternation” in Bjorkman’s office, where “all our typists are young married women.” Couch eventually accumulated enough material for a volume “that would make Caldwell’s degenerates look like fine upstanding citizens.” But he had “scruples about publishing such stuff,” and though he was convinced it ought to be published, he was unsure “how it can be handled and not make a bad situation worse.” He had long combated the idea that most poor white and black southerners were hopeless degenerates, and he had no desire to contribute to “the merriment over psychopaths,” to which he attributed Erskine Caldwell’s success.29

Couch selected the life histories to be included in These Are Our Lives with the aim of capturing the life of a community composed of individuals “who are of different status, perform different functions, and in general have widely different experiences and attitudes—so different indeed as to be almost unimaginable.” Sociologists, he thought, had previously used case histories only to illuminate “narrow segments of experience” and to buttress a particular point they wished to make. In contrast Couch claimed that his selection revealed that “I did not start on this job to get anything on anybody or any class of people, to condemn anyone or to excuse anyone; I started on it to get the real stuff, the real feelings of people of all kinds and classes.”30

One project worker felt it necessary to apologize for the life histories she had submitted, because “the people I have covered do not seem to be in such dire straits as those Mrs. Moore described.” Couch explained to her that she was wrong to feel that she had not “picked good ones.” He insisted, “I definitely do not want you to pick people who are in dire straits and write only about them. I want you to write about all the most important kinds of people that live in the villages, giving most attention to those that seem to you most important by virtue of their numbers, interest, or some other good reason. I believe I told you we are not trying to prove anything, but on the contrary are trying to get as honest and accurate a picture of mill life as possible” (emphasis added).31

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Nevertheless, Couch rejected the story, which had "caused some consternation" in Bjorkman's office, where "all our typists are young, married women." Couch eventually accumulated enough material for a volume "that would make Caldwell's degenerates look like fine upstanding citizens." But he had "scrupled so much in publishing such stuff," and though he was convinced it ought to be published, he was unsure "how it can be handled and not make a bad situation worse." He had long combated the idea that most poor white and black southerners were hopeless degenerates, and he had no desire to contribute to "the moratorium over psychopaths," to which he attributed Einkine Caldwell's success.90

Couch selected the life histories to be included in These Are Our Lives with the aim of capturing the life of a community composed of individuals "who are of different status, perform different functions, and in general have widely different experiences and attitudes—so different indeed as to be almost unimaginable." Sociologists, he thought, had previously used case histories only to illuminate "narrow segments of experience" and to buttress a particular point they wished to make. In contrast, Couch claimed that his selection revealed that "I did not start on this job to get anything on anybody or any class of people, to condemn anyone or to excuse anyone; I started on it to get the real stuff, the real feelings of people of all kinds and classes."91

One project worker felt it necessary to apologize for the life histories she had submitted, because "the people I have covered do not seem to be in such dire straits as those Mrs. Moore described." Couch explained to her that she was wrong to feel that she had not "picket good ones." He insisted, "I definitely do not want you to pick people who are in dire straits and write only about them. I want you to write about all the most important kinds of people that live in the villages, giving some attention to those that seem to you most important by virtue of their numbers, interest, or some other good reason. I believe I told you we are not trying to prove anything, but on the contrary are trying to get as broad and accurate a picture of rural life as possible" (emphasis added).92

Only by permitting individuals to tell their own stories from their own point of view, Couch thought, could the statistical and sociological evidence that it

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manner. Ida Moore remembered choosing "the people to be interviewed more or less by instinct... saying that I'd like very much to stop by for a few minutes and talk with them." This friendliness, this sharing "of a few minutes," often between neighbors, perhaps explains why, unlike much similar material, these life histories do not seem to have been cajoled from beleaguered and defenseless individuals unsure of how to cope with people who wished to study them. James Arscott thought that project workers succeeded in collecting life histories because "Southern people are born talkers. Interest in themselves and in others takes the place of interest in books and causes."56

The life histories submitted by the field-workers often had to be edited by more competent writers on the project. The field-workers, however, possessed qualities that compensated for their lack of writing skill. William McDaniel, the director of the Tennessee Writers' Project, remarked of one relief worker, "Her greatest attribute is that she is one of the people. She shares their views, religion, and mode of living, and through that gets into her stories the essence of their community life."57

Perhaps this closeness, this sense of community, between interviewer and interviewed accounts for the sympathetic tone that permeated the book. The point of view is always clear; these are people like people everywhere: they hope, they struggle, and they persevere. A poor farm laborer still hoped, someday, to satisfy his wife's desire for lace curtains. Gracie Turner, a black sharecropper watching a neighbor moving, exclaimed, "Dat's de way we'll be soon—tore up and a-movin'. I wish I could have me one acre o' land dat I could call mine. I'd be willin' to eat dry bread de rest o' my life if I had a place I could settle down on and nobody could tell me I had to move no more. I hates movin'"58. A woman living with her aged mother in a shantytown along a river bottom showed perceptiveness and pride in her analysis of "city folks who come trotting up there getting under our feet... Half of them wouldn't no more set foot in your house low water time than nothing at all." But she thought she ought not to say a word against them... I 'preciate what they does. But it's mighty hard for them that's had it easy all they lives to know what 'tis to be poor. They's always one saying to another, "Do you suppose them people got little enough sense to go back to them shacks when the river goes down?" And that's jest the little sense we've got—to come back to where we've got a little spot for a garden and a house we've built to live in without putting out rent money when you ain't got money for eats, much less rent. Yes Lord, we'll always go back to Shanty Town till the river rise someday and forgets to go down."59
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A woman living with her aged mother in a shantytown along a river board showed perceptiveness and pride in her analysis of “city folks who come visitin up here gettin under our feet... Half of them wouldn’t no more sit in your house low water time than nothing at all.” But she thought she ought not to say a word against them... I ‘preciate what they does. But it mighty hard for them that’s had it easy all they lives to know what it is to be poor. They’s always one saying to another, “Do you suppose them people got little enough sense to go back to them shacks when the river got down?” And that’s jest the little sense we’ve got—to come back when we’ve got a little spot for a garden and a house we’ve built to live in without putting out rent money when you ain’t got money for eat, much less rent. Yet Lord, we’ll always go back to Shanny Town till the river rise somewhere and forgets to go down.”

Not all of the stories in These Are Our Lives emphasize hardship. The life history of a country doctor, a small-town merchant, and a justice of the peace portray not only individual lives but also social change in a rural society. But the census reports, it is hardship that predominates. What the census reports could not show, and what Couch wanted to point out in These Are Our Lives, was that along with hardship there was also a struggle to endure, to achieve dignity and self-respect, and not to lose hope.

Critics’ response to These Are Our Lives was overwhelmingly favorable. It was a distinctly minority opinion that argued that the “book points out what every one knows, and does it without skill or beauty,” and that “its characters are approached as ‘human types’ rather than as human beings, as members of a class, rather than as individuals.” Instead, the work was widely viewed as having literary merit and was praised for its emphasis on the individual. Time claimed “is given the South its most pungent picture of common life and the Writers’ Project its strongest claim to literary distinction.” The reviewer in the New York Times thought it was “as important as any book that has been written since the cultural renaissance dawned below the Potomac.” And the life histories were told with “the simplicity of a Child’s book.” Historian Charles Beard maintained that “some of these pages are as literate more powerful than anything I have ever read in fiction, nor excluding Zola’s most vehement passages.”

Praise came from local southern papers as well. They recognized in the pages of These Are Our Lives “our neighbors and the folk who crowd the streets... Some we recognize as old acquaintances, and some we see for the first time.” Equally they lauded the book as an illustration of the complexity of southern life that defied stereotypes: “We in the South have been called an economic problem. That is not true. We are millions of problems! We are millions of individuals.”

In a review titled “Realities on Tobacco Road,” Virginia Dalnby wrote, “One thing which appeals to me in the volume before us is the absence of... degeneracy. After all, degenerates are the exception, rather than the rule both North and South.” No doubt much of the favorable response to the book in the southern press stemmed from a feeling that it provided an answer to Tobacco Road. Yet as Dalnby also noted, These Are Our Lives “presents a vivid picture of the poverty and ignorance, the destitution and degradation of many Southern settlers. Yet a number of the poorest and most unsuccessful of those interviewed are seen to be persons of innate dignity, frustrated in their strivings for better things by the system under which they have been forced to live and work.”

Part of the strength of the book was that it offered no easy answers. The
question of how to regard the lives and conditions recorded in *These Are Our Lives* remained open to debate. Donald Davidson could argue that “this book suggests to me that the possibilities of the self-reliant spirit among our people have been quite overlooked by our plan-makers. . . . It shows there’s probably as much of the older American spirit in the so-called backward ‘feudal’ South as anywhere else, and probably even more of it.” In contrast Erskine Caldwell called it a “revolutionary book . . . a biographical dictionary of the hamstrung and thwarted people of America.”

After the manuscript for *These Are Our Lives* had gone to the printer, the collection of life histories continued because Couch was “more convinced than ever that the work we are doing is important and that ways will be found to use the life histories that are written.” A week later the University of North Carolina agreed to sponsor four more volumes of life histories. Couch was convinced the project could “have ready in three or four months an important book on tenant farming in the South.” Instead of just another book on the deplorable conditions in this area, Couch thought it would be helpful to have a volume that focused on “the habits and mode of living of those tenants and landlords . . . who have been successful” and thus “reveal the reasons for their more healthy condition.” He described to Henry Alsberg a future volume of life histories that would deal with workers in such occupations as “coal and iron works in the Birmingham area, transient laborers in early fruits and vegetables in Florida and on the Gulf coast, workers in rice and sugar in fields and processing plants in Louisiana and workers in oil in the Southwest and other vital, but little acknowledged areas of Southern life and labor.” In addition, Ida Moore and Leonard Rapport were gathering life histories for books on people in mill villages and in the tobacco industry. With Alsberg’s aid, Couch tried to build the foundation for future work.

Couch had begun a program in August 1938 that had proved so successful that he was ready in the spring of 1939 to expand it to include the entire South. But from the beginning, the possibility that Couch would be allowed to continue this work had been becoming less and less likely with each passing month. In retrospect it is possible to see that Couch’s work on life histories was in jeopardy from its start. From the almost simultaneous commencement of his work with the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in August 1938 emerged a pattern of events that ended Couch’s association with the FWP.

When the new relief act was first proposed in April 1939, Couch saw that it threatened the work he was trying to do. To North Carolina senator Josiah Bailey he expressed his fear that if the new relief bill required that local and state
question of how to regard the lives and conditions recorded in *These Are Our Laws* remained open to debate. Donald Davidson could argue that "this book suggests to me that the possibilities of the self-sustaining spirit among our people have been quite overlooked by our plan-makers. . . . It shows there probably as much of the older American spirit in the so-called backward 'South' as anywhere else, and probably even more of it." In contrast, Berkeba Geere well called it a "revolutionary book . . . a biographical dictionary of the bastion and threatened people of America." After the manuscript for *These Are Our Laws* had gone to the printer, the collection of life histories continued because Coach was "more convinced than ever that the work we are doing is important and that ways will be found to use the life histories that are written." A week later, the University of North Carolina agreed to sponsor four more volumes of life histories. Couch was convinced the project could "have ready in three or four months an important book on tenant farming in the South." Instead of just another book on the deplorable conditions in this area, Couch thought it would be helpful to have a volume that focused on "the habits and mode of living of those means and landlords . . . who have been unsuccessful" and thus "reveal the reasons for their more healthy condition." He described to Henry Alberd a future volume of life histories that would deal with workers in such occupations as "coal and iron works in the Birmingham area, transient laborers in early fruits and vegetables in Florida and on the gulf coast, workers in rice and sugar in fields and processing plants in Louisiana and workers in oil in the Southwest and other vital, but little acknowledged areas of Southern life and labor." In addition, Adia Moore and Leonard Rapport were gathering life histories for books on people in mill villages and the tobacco industry. With Alberd's aid, Couch tried to build the foundation for future work.

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could not proceed. But before he reached that conclusion, he continued to make plans for future work on the life history program that are interesting as reflections of the cultural and intellectual history of the 1930s and as programmatic statements about the study of southern cultural and social history. That the work did not continue is part of the story of what happened to the FWP after June 1939.48

The dismissal of Alsb erg in August further demoralized project officials. Couch found it distressing that this, “the most confused moment we have had,” Alsb erg was fired. He expressed his gratitude to Alsb erg for giving him the “chance to do TAOL” and explained that he would continue with the FWP “if I see any chance to get any more work done of any value,” but he admitted that “the outlook is anything but hopeful.”50

Despite the dismal outlook, Couch continued to advocate work on life histories. Eager to obtain the aid of sociologists in carrying out this work, he corresponded with a number of the nation’s outstanding scholars in that field. Notwithstanding the general acclaim for These Are Our Lives, Couch was disappointed that sociologists did not give it careful attention. Paul Underwood Kellogg, editor of Survey magazine, a journal whose history and interests were intimately tied to its origins as a forum for the social work and social welfare issues that emerged during the Progressive Era, was enthusiastic about Couch’s work. Kellogg, more interested in social work than social theory and in reform than in research, thought that sociologists who lacked interest in These Are Our Lives “were all wet. We’ve put in a lot of licks for this very type of case history.” On the other hand, Ellsworth Faris, a professional sociologist at the University of Chicago, thought that while the success of the book “must be a source of satisfaction and encouragement” to Couch, it was “natural and proper” that sociologists did not concern themselves with it. In his opinion the work did not “come under the most liberal definition of sociological concern.” These Are Our Lives, he argued, was a “type of propaganda” comparable to Tobacco Road, Gone with the Wind, and The Grapes of Wrath. He maintained that a distinction had to be made “between objective, scientific research and the warm hearted efforts to promote a cause.” He failed to specify what cause he thought These Are Our Lives advocated.51

Couch denied that there was any propagandistic purpose behind the life histories. What he had hoped to do, he insisted, “was to find and use a method which would reveal the real experiences of persons in different levels and in different occupational groups.” Sociologists, Couch thought, could help him gather statistical information “to test the typicalness of much of the experience in the life histories.” Only by presenting the life histories of individuals,
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be believed, could the statistical facts be given a meaningful context." Surely
sociologists are aware of the danger of using isolated facts without context—
in more real the context, the more nearly it comes to representing the whole
man complex in which fact functions, the more "truthful", or if you prefer, the
more "scientific."49

Other social scientists expressed a more positive interest in Couch's work.
Harley Garfied, a distinguished student of public opinion, wrote Couch of his
interest in the work on life histories. Plans were made for Hope Tidwell, a mem-
ber of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University
of North Carolina, to supervise the collection of life histories for the proposed
volume "Victims of Depression." For the first time, Couch would have the
aid of trained sociologists. The possibility of Paul Green bringing his literary
interests and knowledge of the southern folk to aid in the work on life histories
was discussed. Couch was so impressed by poet Allen Tate's review of These
Are Our Lives that he wished Tate could help him edit future volumes. These
fears were so far removed from a concern with mere propaganda that Couch
sought the aid of sociologists committed to a "regionalist" approach to southern
problems, a liberal playwright, and an Agrarian poet.50

Although Couch now had the support of interested scholars and the promis-
ence of their help in the collection of life histories, he was not optimistic about
the possibilities of continuing the work under the pwa. He explored the pos-
ibility of obtaining foundation support either as a supplement to pwa funds
or as necessary, as an alternative. Only after several months of fruitless negoti-
ations with government officials did he abandon the hope of continuing the
work with the Writers' Program.51

In November 1939 Couch finally concluded that there was no longer any
practical in continuing with the Writers' Program. In his letter of resignation
Couch offered a detailed critique of the program's weaknesses. Foremost among
these reasons for resigning was that he "had not been able to get any work done
since May 1939." What made matters worse was that "much that was previ-
ously done had been undone." From the project in Oklahoma Couch had se-
ned barely enough material to publish a volume of life histories on people in
the oil industry, but "for some reasons never yet made clear, the Oklahoma
material was dropped." More than a month earlier, Washington officials had prom-
ised to inform Couch when he "could go ahead." On other volumes. That ap-
proach never arrived "in spite of repeated inquiries." He pointed out that three
of four additional volumes of life histories could have been published by this
time had work begun on others if only Washington officials had extended their
cooperation.52
Although only a part of Couch's plans for the southern life history program were completed, the more than one thousand life histories collected offer ample materials to scholars that they have only recently begun to exploit. *These Are Our Lives* provides only a limited introduction to the life histories collected by the FWP. Couch's editing of this volume reflected his reformist and instrumental view of the life history project. His sample is biased. All of the life histories in *These Are Our Lives* deal with hard-working, virtuous people coping with their problems. A more recently published selection from the life histories, *Such as Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*, edited by Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, focuses on many of the same areas as *These Are Our Lives*; however, there are people in *Such as Us* who had become their own worst enemies. They are wasteful, they drink to excess, or they beat their wives. Even when read together, the two volumes give a limited view of the richness of the collection. Many life histories of such diverse occupational and ethnic groups as miners, turpentiners, fishermen, Chinese laundrymen, and Cuban and Italian cigar makers remain unpublished and virtually unknown.

While the idea behind the life history program was Couch's, his authority in implementing it was limited. He determined what was published, but he could not control what was recorded. The life history collection represents not a single vision but a collective one—a vision that reflects the efforts of ordinary project workers and the people they talked with. Relying on their personal and, occasionally, eccentric understanding of what was required, southern FWP field-workers had gone about their task, each one picking his or her own subjects for his or her own reasons and often taking great liberties in following the suggested interview outline. The nature of that collective vision and the historical uses of the southern life history collection are explored in the context of larger issues dealt with in the next two chapters.

The unpublished southern life histories are one of the enduring legacies of the FWP. They are a product of Couch's ideas and energy, the intellectual currents of the 1930s, and the contribution of southern Federal Writers. They are evidence that despite the makeshift air surrounding the Writers' Project and its conflicting roles as a relief agency and an art project, significant work was completed. In retrospect it can be seen that the publication of *These Are Our Lives* in 1939 represented what writer Harvey Swados has called "not only the high-water mark but the last wave of an unprecedented tide of government-sponsored creative work by writers, artists, and theatre people during the depression years."