
The Scholar as Detective: Disentangling Fact from Fiction in Accounts of Pioneer History

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When Robert and Helen Lynd published *Middletown*, their sociological study of Muncie, Indiana, in 1929, they included little historical material in the volume. Seven-and-a-half pages on "The Historical Setting" and some scattered references throughout the book to historical material comprised its historical substance. Despite this lack of evidence, however, the Lynds had made a number of definite assumptions about "historical" Muncie. As far as they were concerned, Muncie before 1890 was "a placid county-seat . . . drowsing about its courthouse square," a town where local rather than national or regional influences were dominant and where class differences existed but were not as rigid as they were to become in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹ Later researchers working with the Muncie manuscript census for 1850 to 1880 were able to show that these assumptions were grossly ill-founded.²

The basis for the Lynds' misconceptions lay in the fact that the data for their historical work came from the recollections of elderly townspeople. Overlain by local mythology, such data often provide an unsatisfactory foundation for historical research, and the Lynds'

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¹ Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York, 1929), 12-13, 37, 479-80.

² See Howard M. Bahr and Alexander Bracken, "The Middletown of Yore—Population, Persistence, Migration and Stratification, 1850-1880," *Rural Sociology*, XLVIII (Spring, 1983), 120-32. It should be noted that because of confidentiality restrictions these manuscript census schedules were not available to the Lynds when they did their research.

work has been criticized because of this.³ But while the Lynds may have faced the problem of disentangling myth from fact in their historical research, they did not have to grapple with fabrication. I was not so fortunate.

I spent the summer of 1988 as a Research Fellow at the Ball State University Center for Middletown Studies in Muncie. I was to study the process of community formation in the town from the 1820s onwards, drawing on local histories, newspaper materials, county records, land records, manuscript census schedules, as well as whatever diaries, letters, and other private documents could be located.⁴ Public records are fundamental to this kind of research because they help to establish a framework of "hard" facts within which the research can develop. What is often missing, however, is the personal detail and insight that arises from private sources such as diaries or letters. Researchers prize private records, especially those that have not been previously studied. I was more than delighted, therefore, to come across two such sets of letters published in a local newspaper. Both sets of letters covered a significant period in Muncie history (1826 through 1861), both sets were fairly detailed, and, as far as I was aware, neither had been used by other researchers in the field.⁵

Between January 29 and May 14, 1933, two years prior to the Lynds' second study of Muncie,⁶ a series of sixty-one letters appeared in the Muncie *Sunday Star*. Published under the byline of Robert B. Bradbury, a regular contributor of local historical material to the *Star*, the letters were presented as having been written from Muncie by John Boyleston between March 5, 1826, through December 8, 1861. The letters were addressed to Boyleston's brother, James, who lived on Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts.

³ In the history of community studies the Lynds have not been the only ones to suffer this fate. Lloyd Warner's "Yankee City" studies were similarly criticized by Stephan Thernstrom. Likewise, Conrad M. Arensberg's and Solon T. Kimball's classic study of County Clare, Ireland, was criticized by Peter Gibbon for being informed by a faulty historical perspective. W. L. Warner and P. S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven, Conn., 1941); Stephan Thernstrom, "Yankee City Revisited: The Perils of Historical Naiveté," *American Sociological Review*, XXX (Summer, 1965), 234-42; Arensberg and Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); Peter Gibbon, "Arensberg and Kimball Revisited," *Economy and Society*, II (November, 1973), 479-98.

⁴ The theoretical framework for the research drew on Max Weber's discussion of closure and community formation. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1922; Berkeley, Calif., 1978), 339-55, 385-98.

⁵ Both sets of documents would have been available to the Lynds had they ranged more widely in their reading of Muncie newspapers. One set was published in the Muncie *Star* in 1907, sixteen-and-a-half years before the Lynds' first period of fieldwork in Muncie; the other set was published in the *Star* in 1933, two years before their second period of fieldwork.

⁶ Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937).

Two features of the Boyleston letters were striking. They covered a significant period in Muncie's past. From the early years of its settlement in the 1820s through the beginnings of the Civil War in 1861, Muncie history is not well documented. County histories provide some insight into the process of community formation during these years, but these are no substitute for primary documents.⁷ Three sets of local diaries from this period offer some insight, those of David Gharky, Thomas Neely, and Frederick Putnam.⁸ These diaries are closer to what researchers require, but their entries often provide insufficient depth of detail. Nor are local newspapers a great help in researching this period. The first newspaper was not published in Muncie until 1837; between then and the early 1860s, Muncie newspapers came and went with regularity as successive publishers faced the common problem of insufficient local subscriptions.⁹ In the midst of this dearth of primary materials, the Boyleston letters appeared to be a godsend.

These letters were striking not only because of their time span but also because of their depth of detail and coverage. John Boyleston seemed to have been a man with an excellent reporter's eye. In fact, he surpassed Muncie reporters since his letters contained the type of local detail that was often missing from newspaper columns. The first and last of his letters illustrate this. The first letter was written from Munseytown¹⁰ in March of 1826:

Munseytown, Indiana.
Fifth of March, 1826.

My dear brother,

⁷ For the history of Delaware County see Thomas B. Helm, *History of Delaware County Indiana, With Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of some of its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Chicago, 1881); William H. Kemper, *A Twentieth Century History of Delaware County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1908); Frank D. Haimbaugh, *History of Delaware County, Indiana* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1924); Richard A. Greene, *Muncie and Delaware County: Its History and Early Development* (Muncie, Ind., 1965); and Wiley W. Spurgeon, *Muncie and Delaware County: An Illustrated Retrospective* (Woodland Hills, Calif., 1984).

⁸ The David Gharky diary covers the years from the early 1830s to 1850. See David Gharky, *The Life of David Gharky as Written by Himself* (Portsmouth, Ohio, 1852). The Thomas Neely diary covers the years from 1860 to 1897. While not available as a whole in published form, extracts from Neely's diary have appeared from time to time in the Muncie *Star*. See, for example, issues from July 23 to December 24, 1933. Frederick Putnam's diary begins in 1842 and continues through until 1881. It is reproduced in pages 116 to 125 of Kemper, *A Twentieth Century History of Delaware County*.

⁹ Between June, 1837, and December, 1850, there were eight separate newspapers published in Muncie. The longest running of these was the *Delaware County Democrat*, published for twenty-seven months between October, 1843, and December, 1845.

¹⁰ Muncie was originally known as Muncietown or Munseytown and was so named after the Munsee clan of the Delaware Indians who lived along the banks of the White River. The name was changed to Muncie in 1845. See Geraldine Chavis, "The Development of Muncie," in Althea L. Stoeckel and Ross S. Johnson, eds., *Delaware County, Indiana, 1827-1850: The Pioneer Period* (Muncie, Ind., 1975).

I fear you have been worried on account of my long-continued silence but the past winter has been very hard and there was no travelling out, so I had no means of sending a letter to you. But the trails will be open within a fortnight and I will forward this to you at the earliest moment I can.

I wrote you last summer from Greenville (Ohio) but I did not know then I would soon leave there. But that part of the country has been trapped for several years, so I thought it would be best for me to try further west. I stopped in Winchester for a few weeks in August, but there was only a small river there and not much sign of fur, so I came on west to Munseytown. White River at this place has some good fish, and I am glad to tell you there are mighty fine people living at this settlement, and also a number of families within ten or fifteen miles. I am staying with Daniel Simmons and his wife, Katy, now. They have the biggest cabin along the river and have been in Munseytown for a year. But I may go on to Strawtown and possibly to Indianapolis this summer. I will write you if I do.

I took a lot of prime fur this winter and sold it all to a trader by the name of Thomas Kirby, who peddles goods up and down the river, carrying a packsack on his back. There are no roads in this country like I have been used to—only here and there a winding Indian trail through the woods—so Mr Kirby does not get very far from the river or creeks, as there is where the trails mostly go. But Mr Kirby knows everybody, and I like to sit in Mr Samuel Watson's store at night and hear Mr Kirby talk.

Mr Watson keeps about everything in his store—tobacco, groceries, dry goods and potions, powder and shot and traps and quinine. There is no doctor anywhere near and people take lots of quinine in the winter for colds, and in the summer for ague and malaria. Right now, Mrs Simmons is giving me some sulphur and molasses to thin the blood. I will try and send another letter when I can.

I like this country. But I wish you would write and let me know how you are. Send your letter to me at Munseytown on White River and I will get it. Good-bye,

From your brother, John¹¹

The letter was addressed to James Boyleston Esquire, Eleven Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts. Similar detail was to be found in every one of the sixty-one published letters. By the time John wrote the last of them, on December 8, 1861, his brother had moved to number eight Beacon Street, Boston:

Muncie, Indiana.
Eighth of December 1861.

My dear brother,

I cannot think of much to write you about, except the condition of the country and you probably know more about that than I do. This fall Charles W. Moore married Clara J., the daughter of Samuel P. Wilson. Last June the Baptist church was dedicated. The sermon was preached by Rev. Silas Bailey, the president of Franklin College. The church is located at the northeast corner of Jackson and Jefferson streets. It is a plain brick building with three windows on each side, a vestibule in front and a belfrey on top. They engaged Rev. M. D. Gage to preach for one month.

The Broad Axe Temperance Lodge of the Order of Good Templars has been organized here by Mrs. Amanda Way, of Winchester. Among the organizers were Dr.

¹¹ Muncie *Star*, January 29, 1933.

Samuel O. Budd the dentist, Mrs. Armstead M. Klein, David Case, William Lynn the merchant and others. I understand this order works for the maintenance of good order by keeping under subjection the promoters of intemperance and disorder.

John S. Reid is making cider vinegar at the saw mill. He does not press the apples but grinds them, then they are left standing in the tank, the cider dripping from them into a vat. This vinegar is perfectly pure and he has found a ready sale. Rev. Abijah Marine is the new Methodist preacher. Write me as I want to hear from you.

From your brother, John.¹²

The letters between these two identified individuals, described events and noted and discussed the circumstances of the township's development in considerable detail:

You will see by the heading on this letter that this is now Delaware County, it being established first of April which was last Sunday. Then on Monday the people living in the new county met and elected officers for the county (April 8th, 1827).

A man by the name of Schafer, who is a millwright, has just finished building a grist mill for Mr. Goldsmith C. Gilbert on the north side of the new race, near the river on High Street. This mill has a tub wheel and is a corn-cracker. The buhr was made from a niggerhead and hauled in from Hagerstown, Indiana. This mill is a two and a half story frame building with an attic and everyone says it will be a great inducement for people to come to Munseytown (September 14, 1829).

The school trustees of Center Township who are Minus Turner, Thomas Kirby and Joshua Truitt built a school house this summer on the Harter farm at the southeast corner of the township. They put up a frame building about twenty feet by thirty feet and it cost about \$30 (November 3, 1829).

The most interesting thing I have to write you about is that the county commissioners are building a new courthouse. They are making it of brick, forty-five feet square and twenty-eight feet high with a cupalo on top. They contracted with Mr. Morgan John to do the work and got two brick layers from New Castle, but they only got the first story of it put up before cold weather came on and stopped them working (December 10, 1836).

David Gharky started to build a sawmill on the river west of town, but did not get it completed, because the ground sank so he had all his work for nothing (December 10, 1836).

In March there was a temperance meeting in Muncietown, the first any of us had heard, I guess. It was held in the courthouse. Everybody was there. Rev. Robert Irwin of the Presbyterian Church and Rev. Wade Posey of the Methodist Church were the leaders (July 1st, 1840).¹³

By cross-checking this information with diaries, county histories, and relevant newspaper accounts, it became clear that the events described in these letters had happened much as reported and that the people referred to in the letters existed in Muncie at the times identified. The material appeared to be authentic. But what did the historical record reveal of John Boyleston? The difficulties began here.

¹² *Ibid.*, May 14, 1933.

¹³ *Ibid.*, January 29, February 12, 19, March 5, 1933.

The archival resources of Ball State University's Special Collections unit provided no information to confirm Boyleston's existence in Muncie. There was no trace of him in the Delaware County census indexes for the years 1830 to 1860. In July, 1840, Boyleston announced in a letter to his brother that he had just married a "girl" from Richmond by the name of Mary Jones, but there was no trace of the marriage in the Special Collection's index of marriages.¹⁴ In September, 1837, Boyleston wrote to his brother to say that he had just bought land on West Jackson Street in Muncie. Again the land records held in Special Collections revealed no trace of Boyleston as an owner of land in Muncie. Enquiries to the Genealogy Section of the Allen County Library in Fort Wayne failed to locate a James Boyleston either in the relevant Boston census indexes or in the Boston city directory for 1860.

Robert Bradbury, then, having found the Boyleston letters, may have changed the family name of the brothers prior to publication. Bradbury was born in 1881 and was a lifelong resident of Muncie. His father, Robert B. Bradbury, was a prominent business man in the city, and one of his uncles, A. B. Bradbury, was a prominent doctor.¹⁵ Perhaps the letters were family letters; Bradbury may have changed the name for family reasons. The task remained of discovering what Boyleston's real name was. The letters could not be legitimately used in an academic context until he had been identified. But Bradbury, the most obvious source of explanation, had died childless in 1937. A Muncie relative knew little of his long-deceased cousin.

By this stage it seemed possible that the letters—whoever their author—were not authentic, but the comments that Bradbury made in introducing the first of the letters on January 29, 1933, gave no hint of fabrication:

A little package of letters discovered in the bottom of an old trunk where they had lain for almost a century; dusty, the paper brittle to the touch, yellowed in the folds and crumbling at the edges, the ink faded by the years—would not these be interesting to read whatever the unknown scribe wrote so long ago? But they would be doubly interesting if they should give, out of the past, intimate facts about the early formative years of one's own home town. Not an historical parade of important events and leading citizens, but the everyday happenings in the little settlement of Munseytown from 1826 through 1842 as seen and set out in letters to his brother in Boston, by a young man who had come west to grow up with the country and had chosen to make his home here. . . . The first installment of twenty-five of the letters follows.¹⁶

¹⁴ It is not surprising that the marriage did not appear in the Delaware County records since the ceremony would have taken place in the bride's hometown in Richmond, Wayne County, and would have been recorded there.

¹⁵ Details of the Bradbury family's history in Muncie can be obtained from Haimbaugh, *History of Delaware County*, II, 474-75.

¹⁶ Muncie *Sunday Star*, January 29, 1933.

There were also uncertainties resulting from the style of the letters—would anyone write in such detailed fashion to a brother in Boston?—but the discovery of yet another set of letters in the *Muncie Star* dispelled this doubt. These letters supposedly had been penned by another early Muncie settler and displayed a style very similar to the Boyleston letters.

In the September, 1907, issue of the *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History*, the editor, George S. Cottman, drew attention to a local history contribution under the heading “Early Muncie Letters.” He commented:

The *Muncie Sunday Star* for June 23, 1907, publishes more than three columns of old letters that have considerable local interest. These were written by Margaret Blount, of Muncie, and extend in time from 1826 to 1864. These letters, well-written, sprightly and gossipy, make excellent reading and give graphic and intimate pictures of old “Muncietown” and its surroundings.¹⁷

Margaret Blount was a daughter of William Blount, one of the first white settlers in Delaware County, and the addressee of the letters was her cousin Rachel. Only seven in number, the Blount letters were not as extensive in their coverage as the Boyleston letters, but there were similarities in style and in detail:

on the first of April they are going to organise a county and call it after the Delaware Indians. The three men who own land right in the middle of this county are going to give donations to the county for a county seat and call that place Munseytown after the Munsees of the Delawares. . . . (October 6, 1826)

Nearly all of us have been sick this spring with what our first neighbour here Goldsmith Gilbert calls the “shakes”. And that is a good name for it for it just describes the sickness exactly. This Mr and Mrs Gilbert were the first people to settle in this part of the country. Mrs Gilbert came over last Thursday to ask mother if I couldn’t come and help her on the day the county is organized for the commissioners are all to meet at their house and she will have to feed them for several days (October 6, 1826).

I forgot to tell you we are having grand jury meetings here now in a little log building up near the brick yard. Nearly every one in town has joined. I expect we will have a meeting house before long as nearly every one around here are Methodists (December, 1830).

The greatest piece of news in Munseytown today and that which everyone is talking about is that we have a newspaper here now. It is called the Munsietonian and its first issue was on the fifteenth of this month. It is a fine paper. I wish I could send you a copy but there are not very many of them (June, 1837).

It has been ten years since I last wrote one of these letters to you, yet it seems but yesterday. And in that time our country has been at war with Mexico. Twelve men went from this county but none from this town. David Kilgore, of this place, organized a company and they drilled up and down the commons here getting ready to go, but when they went to Indianapolis the regiment was full and they had to return home (Muncietown, 1848).

¹⁷ *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History*, III (September, 1907), 148.

Speaking of good times, our young people certainly have them at our county fairs now. A few years ago our fairs were so small they were held in the courthouse but now we have a fine fair ground and lots of attractions, one of our special features is our society girls riding in the races (1864).¹⁸

The similarity of style between the Boyleston and Blount letters provided the necessary encouragement to continue the task of authenticating the Boyleston material. The introductory comments to the Blount letters in the *Muncie Star* of June 23, 1907, however, might have offered a warning.

The letters were headlined "History of Muncie from Old Letters. Written by Margaret Blount, Daughter of Third Settler in County." This title certainly gave the impression that the editorial staff wanted readers to believe the letters were authentic; the editor of the *Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History* was taken in by this, judging by his comments quoted earlier. The introductory comments in the *Star* told another story, however:

Pioneer history of Munseytown and Delaware county, written in the form of letters by a descendant of William Blount who entered land in Liberty township in 1822 and in 1826 entered 113 acres in Center township on what is now the greater part of Muncie. All dates, incidents etc. are exact—being taken from wills, county records, county histories and personal conversation with Mary Jane Edmunds, the first white child born in Delaware county just prior to her death; Uncle Joe Randall, a pioneer one month before his death; Aunt Betsy Wilson, Aunt Emily Streeter and most of Muncie's first settlers, also Muncie's first newspapers up to the time of the civil war. Paper read before the Culture club by Mrs Ralph W. Ross, great, great granddaughter of William Blount.¹⁹

Technically speaking, the *Star* was correct when it said that the letters had been written by "a descendant of William Blount," but a sleight of hand led one to believe that the descendant in question was the daughter, Margaret Blount, rather than the great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. Ralph W. Ross. This was obviously not the case, but the clue was missed.

While willing to concede that the Boyleston letters might be fake, there were still problems attributing motive to Bradbury's action. He was a noted local historian, as part of his obituary in 1937 acknowledged:

Mr Bradbury's articles on Indian and pioneer life and customs and on state parks, based on exhaustive research, won him state-wide recognition as an authority in the three fields. One article brought him nation-wide recognition.²⁰

It still seemed reasonable that the letters were Bradbury family letters and that the name had been changed to protect the family.

¹⁸ *Muncie Sunday Star*; June 23, 1907.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Muncie Star*, January 2, 1937. Bradbury died on the evening of January 1, 1937. Further articles commemorating his death appeared in the *Muncie Star*, January 3 and February 2, 1937.

The accuracy of the material and the plausibility of the story both seemed to substantiate the letters' authenticity.

First, most of the material matched that from other sources. There were one or two inaccuracies, but by and large one might explain them away. Boyleston's reference to Gharky Street in his listing of Muncie streets in 1827 was peculiar, since David Gharky did not arrive in Munseytown until 1830. Boyleston's list, however, omitted mention of Cherry Street. Gharky Street was eventually laid out two blocks west of Cherry. Bradbury, having difficulty with "ink faded by the years" may have misread Gharky for Cherry. The "inaccuracy" was resolved.

Next, there was the issue of the plausibility of the story. If Bradbury faked the whole thing, surely he would have created a character with the necessary education to sustain such a volume of detailed correspondence. In a perverse way the letters rang truer because John Boyleston did not fit this mold. The letters revealed that he had a variety of occupations during his time in Muncie—trapper, laborer, farmworker, store clerk, and brickyard worker—none of which suggested that he was a man of education. Indeed, his lack of education was substantiated by reference to a writing school that was being held in the courthouse: "I have been there some time but it did not seem to help my writing any. But anyway I hope you can read it" (November 4, 1834).²¹ Again, it seemed that if Bradbury was inventing a fictitious character he would not have allowed such an implausible blemish.

When more serious work began of tracing John Boyleston's identity, problems emerged. In a letter dated September 20, 1837, Boyleston wrote to his brother that he had bought "two lots and a house on West Jackson Street as an investment."²² This seemed an important lead; the deed books and property maps were scanned for likely candidates. A few possibilities were identified from men who owned two town sections on West Jackson around this time, but none of them could have been Boyleston. Out of curiosity I scanned East Jackson and thought for a moment that I had found something. There were two town sections on East Jackson that were held in the name of James L. Russey and Frederick E. Putnam. In a letter dated December 3, 1838, Boyleston had written that he was working as a clerk in Charles Willard's store and sharing his house with Willard's other clerk, Frederick Putnam.²³ This seemed to be the needed breakthrough. Again, however, further research revealed that Russey could not have been Boyleston since he had purchased his land after September, 1837. Excitement again gave way to frustration.

²¹ *Ibid.*, February 19, 1933.

²² *Ibid.*, February 26, 1933.

²³ *Ibid.*

Attention then returned to the Muncie manuscript census indexes. There were no Boylestons or Bradburys listed for 1830 through 1860. If the letters were genuine, however, then someone had to span those years. A list of all Muncie adult males recorded in the 1830 census was drawn up and compared with the names for the 1840 census. Of the twenty-one males listed in the 1830 census only four were still in Muncie in 1840. Goldsmith Gilbert and William Gilbert were discounted since they were known settlers. The other two were William Fitzpatrick and John Smith. Neither of their family profiles matched John Boyleston and, more significantly, neither of them were recorded as living in Muncie at the 1850 census. Another blank had been drawn.

As a last resort, the family listings for the 1850 Muncie census were scanned for a man in his mid-forties with a wife and a son aged between nine and ten (Boyleston had announced the birth of his son, James, in a letter dated October 10, 1841).²⁴ There were no Muncie families that matched this profile. By this stage I was becoming extremely annoyed with the late Robert B. Bradbury.

Newspaper articles by Bradbury had been mentioned in the 1930s in the *Indiana History Bulletin*. Knowing from his obituary that he had been a member of the Indiana Historical Society, I decided to call their office in Indianapolis to enquire whether any papers of Bradbury's had been deposited with them either before or after his death. Again I drew a blank but was referred to the Manuscript Division of the Indiana State Library. There the trail ended; Bradbury's deception was finally revealed.

After the Boyleston letters had been published in the *Muncie Star* in 1933, Bradbury sent copies of the clippings to the Indiana State Library in Indianapolis. On October 28, 1933, Hazel White-leather, the manuscript librarian, wrote in reply and expressed interest in getting access to the original letters. When Bradbury responded on November 1, however, it was to say that he could only let her have the newspaper clippings. His letter ignored the issue of whether the letters were genuine or not. After Bradbury's death in January, 1937, the manuscript librarian wrote to his sister, Jessie, asking if the the State Library could at least have access to the manuscript material from which Bradbury had worked.²⁵ No reply was received to this letter. In the opinion of the manuscript librarian, the Boyleston letters were fake, and a handwritten note was accordingly attached to the front of the library's file containing the Bradbury letters. It read: "The letters printed in these newspaper articles were probably fabricated by Mr. Bradbury."²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid.*, March 5, 1933.

²⁵ Correspondence between the manuscript librarian of the State Library and the Bradbury family is held in the library.

²⁶ See Robert B. Bradbury correspondence file (Manuscripts Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

To compound the problems further, discussions with the current manuscript librarian, Marybelle Burch, revealed that the Blount letters were also fake. She directed my attention to the introductory comments to those letters—the comments I had overlooked in my concern with authenticating the Boyleston material—and these contained the damning evidence referred to earlier. To have come across two instances of the same phenomenon in the history of one small midwestern town seemed noteworthy, however, and the suggestion was made that that at least merited attention in an article.

Discovering the fabrication of the Boyleston and Blount letters was unsettling enough, but further research in the Indiana State Library revealed that both of these popular historians had simply been following what seemed at the time to be an accepted Indiana tradition of fabricating historical documents. In fact, the work of Bradbury and Mrs. Ross paled into insignificance beside that of Kate Milner Rabb.

When she died in July, 1937, Kate Milner Rabb was a respected figure in Indiana historical circles. Born into a physician's family in Rockport, Indiana, in 1866, she was educated at Indiana University and in 1891 married a lawyer, who subsequently became a prominent attorney in Indianapolis. After her marriage Rabb began to write seriously and by the time of her death had published extensively on Indiana local history. Her publications included books and newspaper articles.

Among her newspaper articles was a series that appeared in the Indianapolis *Star* in 1920. It was presented as an edited version of the diary of John Parsons, a young lawyer from Petersburg, Virginia, who had traveled through Indiana in 1840. In the course of his travels, Parsons met many prominent Indiana leaders of the time, attended social gatherings and political rallies, and recorded it all in meticulous detail. Prior to the publication of the Rabb series, the people of Indiana had celebrated their state centennial and in this situation of heightened historic consciousness, many wrote to the newspaper expressing their appreciation of the series. A New York publishing house subsequently published the diary in 1920 under the title *A Tour Through Indiana in 1840*.²⁷

In its book form, the diary was 378 pages long and was supplemented by editorial comment as well as by a short biography and daguerreotype of Parsons. In a concluding note, indicating that Parsons had died in Oxford, Ohio, on his way home from the Indiana trip, Rabb commented: "Had he lived, his education, his native brilliancy, his charming personality, would certainly have insured

²⁷ Kate Milner Rabb, ed., *A Tour Through Indiana in 1840* (New York, 1920).

him success and position. The diary, recently brought to light, is all that remains of his papers."²⁸

In 1921, the book was reviewed by the noted Indiana historian Logan Esarey, who commented: "The editor has done her work with great care. . . . Altogether it is a very pleasant picture. One might wish for a little spice here and there, but I believe pepper is not usually served with peaches and cream."²⁹ Others were not so favorably disposed. An anonymous reviewer in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* of 1921 commented: "This book is a clever bit of historical fiction masquerading as a genuine diary. . . . There is no diary of John Parsons, other than that which exists in the fertile imagination of the supposed editor; . . . so clever is the deceit that very few have discovered the spuriousness of the 'diary'."³⁰ The reviewer acknowledged that the book was based on extensive Indiana research and as such was "extremely interesting" and "of historical value." Nevertheless, since Rabb had refused to acknowledge the truth about the diary, it was being sold "under false pretenses."³¹

Rabb never acknowledged that the book was a work of fiction, but after her death the truth became a matter of public record. In her obituary in July, 1937, the Indianapolis *Star* described Rabb's book as "written as fiction but based on fact."³² In 1943, on the occasion of the dedication of the Kate Milner Rabb bookshelf in the Rauth Memorial Library in Indianapolis, the *Star* commented further on her book that "while it was believed to be an actual diary, it was in reality compiled by Mrs. Rabb from data she gathered in the files of the State library."³³

These cases of fabrication of historical documents suggest that some Indiana writers thought that history could be made more interesting and appealing if presented in the form of original documents—particularly diaries or letters—rather than as dry academic narrative. Neither Bradbury, Ross, nor Rabb were scholars, so they might not have felt themselves bound by the strictures of professional historical research and presentation. At the time of his death, Bradbury worked as production manager for the Muncie Malleable Foundry company. His historical research and writing were done as an amateur. He wrote with some flair, as is obvious from other

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 379.

²⁹ Logan Esarey, review of *Tour Through Indiana in 1840*, by Kate Milner Rabb, *Indiana University Alumni Quarterly*, X (May, 1921), 486-87.

³⁰ Review of *Tour Through Indiana in 1840*, by Kate Milner Rabb, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VIII (December, 1921), 283-84. The fact that the reviewer was anonymous is intriguing; perhaps there was a reluctance to get involved in controversy.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

³² *Indianapolis Star*, July 4, 1937.

³³ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1943.

historical material that he contributed to the *Muncie Star* ("The Romance of Muncie," "Haunted Hills," "The Old Timer," and "Indian Saga"), but it is obvious that, like Rabb, he, too, wrote with a fair degree of historical license.³⁴

It could indeed be argued that both Robert Bradbury and Kate Milner Rabb succeeded in making local history accessible to a lay audience that otherwise might have ignored it. Their respective contributions were based on extensive research and wide-ranging familiarity with Indiana history. There are very few inaccuracies in their historical detail. To this extent, their commitment to popularizing local history cannot be faulted. What can be faulted, however, is their approach to how this popularization should be achieved.

To the scholarly researcher and many popular writers, too, the way in which both Bradbury and Rabb took historical license with their materials has to be judged unforgiveable, especially since they deliberately concealed it. In an interview in 1930, Rabb made the following comment: "The dullest hamlet in Indiana will yield an interesting story. The beginnings of every village are full of romantic interest if only one knows how to go about finding the story of those beginnings."³⁵ While agreeing with this, the scholar would have to insist that accuracy and interest can only be achieved to the extent that the sources are authentic. Misconceptions based on recollections of a mythical past, as appeared in *Middletown*, are problematic enough. Unacknowledged fabrication, however, is another matter.

³⁴ Just as Bradbury had his regular "Oldtimer" column in the *Muncie Star*, so did Rabb have a "Hoosier Listening Post" column in the *Indianapolis Star*. Rabb's column ran daily from July 18, 1920, to July 6, 1937. Given their common interest in Indiana history, the two must have met at some stage, but it is unclear to what extent Bradbury's approach was directly influenced by Rabb's diary format.

³⁵ The interview appeared in the December, 1930, edition of *Matrix*, the publication of Theta Sigma Phi, the national honorary and professional fraternity for women in journalism. The quotation is from a report on the interview, published in the *Indianapolis Star*, January 18, 1931.