

*A Little More Freedom*  
*African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930*

By Jack S. Blocker

(Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. Pp. xvii, 330. Illustrations, notes, appendices, index. Clothbound, \$49.95; CD, \$9.95.)

Jack S. Blocker argues that most African Americans arriving in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio during and after the Civil War settled in “nonmetropolitan” areas but gradually left them for cities. Northern migration, Blocker writes, reflected the “mental maps” that black migrants carried with them—personal images that reflected their interests. Their quality of life in the Midwest depended on local economies, the attitudes and actions of whites, and the conditions within each black community. While violence between 1885 and 1910 shaped migration patterns, population decline in the region’s towns was slow and steady.

This book focuses on four of the region’s 364 towns containing at least 2,500 residents: Washington Court House and Springfield, Ohio; Springfield, Illinois; and Muncie, Indiana. It is organized into three parts. The first deals with waves of migration before 1890. Part two (1860-1910) examines conditions that migrants found and how they coped with them. The last section explores (mostly after 1910) “the choices made by migrants before leaving the South as well as those that brought them to some destinations rather than others in the Lower Midwest” (p. 12).

While providing a wealth of material and analysis—including

twenty graphs and thirty-five tables—and demonstrating wide reading in primary and secondary sources, the author disappoints the reader. Information is difficult to digest, partly because of the author’s writing style. Unexplained statistical jargon (for example, in the two tables on pp. 79-80) reinforces the impression that the author is addressing a specialized audience. Language issues persist throughout the volume. The writer never defines “metropolitan”—the reader must assume that this is the federal census term introduced in 1910—and uses such terms as rural, village, town, small city, and nonmetropolitan interchangeably. He calls these decades “the age of the village” (p. 214), yet all of the places he describes had at least 2,500 residents, and hence by census terminology were urban.

Factual and interpretive errors appear too frequently—for example, the locations and dates of Ohio River bridges (p. 23), the account of the election of blacks to state legislatures (p. 90), and the analysis of black settlement patterns in Kentucky and her three Northern neighbors (pp. 140, 150), which asserts that blacks in the lower Midwest forsook rural neighborhoods for urban ones after 1890. In fact, from the early 1800s onward, the largest number of black new-

comers settled directly in the biggest cities—Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Louisville.

The author also incorrectly attributes the post-1900 declension in Evansville's black population to the race riot of 1903. Violence influenced settlement patterns in the Ohio Valley generally, but more telling was the growth of Jim Crow policies—for example, the creation of restrictive covenants in real estate transactions. Most settlements along both sides of the Ohio, moreover, experienced population decline or stagnation—white as well as black—after 1890, reflecting limited local job opportunities and the appeal of industrial employment to the north. Evansville, Cincinnati, and Louisville were notable exceptions. Blocker incorrectly attributes blacks' departure from the former city to its lack of prosperity, when in fact Evansville tripled in size

between 1880 and 1920, and its economy thrived. He also overlooks the relatively small size of Evansville's black community, as compared with upriver Cincinnati and Louisville, where a critical mass supported black businesses and professions, despite a history of violence against blacks.

*A Little More Freedom*, in short, offers much information about African American settlement in the lower Midwest prior to 1910. Whether the book offers a new interpretation of this period remains to be seen.

DARREL E. BIGHAM is emeritus professor of history and director of Historic Southern Indiana at the University of Southern Indiana. His most recent book is *On Jordan's Banks: The Aftermath of Emancipation in the Ohio River Valley* (2006).



### *Meredith Nicholson*

#### *A Writing Life*

By Ralph D. Gray

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007. Pp. 281. Illustrations. \$19.95.)

In the early 1900s, Meredith Nicholson was a household name, not just in Indiana, but in most homes of literate Americans. Acclaimed for his best-selling romantic adventure novels, he was one of four central figures in Indiana's golden age of literature, alongside James Whitcomb Riley, Booth Tarkington, and George Ade. Now, a century later, Nicholson's

name is barely recognized—a fact that Ralph D. Gray has sought to remedy with his biography, *Meredith Nicholson: A Writing Life*.

Gray, professor emeritus of history at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, is best known for his scholarship on the history of transportation and the history of Indiana, which has included