

“A Bolt of Lightning at the People of Indiana”

John Bartlow Martin’s *Indiana: An Interpretation*

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In March 1946, noted New York City publisher Alfred A. Knopf Sr. received a letter from a midwestern writer with whom he had worked before and who had just returned home after stateside service with the U. S. Army. Freelance author John Bartlow Martin, whose previous book for Knopf, a regional history of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, had received good reviews and sold well for a book of its type, reminded the publisher that before he had been drafted Knopf had approved his idea and outline for a second book—this one on Indiana. Martin wrote that since he had last seen Knopf the month before, he had been traveling around the Midwest on assignment for *Life* magazine—researching an article on the post-war mood—and had collected a wealth of information that he believed he could now use to produce a book about the region. “Everywhere I asked ‘What are people talking about?’ and ‘Who runs this town?’ and ‘How’d it

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John Bartlow Martin, 1946. Martin's former employer, the *Indianapolis Times*, ran this photograph to accompany an article on Martin's research for his book, *Indiana: An Interpretation*.

Gary Yohler/Frederick Vollrath, Tiffany Studio, *Indianapolis Times* Collection

change during the war—will it go back to the way it was?” said Martin, who passed along a copy of his research notes to Knopf.¹

Knopf wrote back that he and his editorial staff had discussed Martin's letter and the accompanying notes, and were unanimous in their desire for the originally agreed upon book on the Hoosier State. “We think this would be much better for you and for us,” Knopf wrote, “and that a book on a single state would have a better sale. There is a widespread feeling that books dealing with a whole *section* of the country taken at a given point in time never go over very well.” Knopf was prepared to draw up a contract if Martin could pass along details on the book's projected length, the manuscript delivery date, and “how much advance [payment] you would need and when you would need it.”²

From its publication in the fall of 1947, *Indiana: An Interpretation* confounded the expectations of Hoosiers looking for another romantic paean to the state's steady rise to greatness. Convention had it that “regional writing should be rhapsodic, not critical,” Martin wrote in the book's preface, but this was “not a book designed to advertise or praise (or, for that matter, to condemn) Indiana.” Instead, it was “one man's interpretation of Indiana—that is, the Hoosier character, the Hoosier thought, the Hoosier way of living” and not a comprehensive chronicle of Indiana's past. “This book is not history; it is journalism,” said Martin, adding that it focused on people rather than events. He had set out to examine “the idea of Indiana and the Hoosiers” held by the rest of the nation, a good deal of which was myth, according to Martin: “a conception of Indiana as a pleasant, rather rural place inhabited by people who are confident, prosperous, neighborly, easygoing, tolerant, shrewd.” Martin considered the state as the United States in miniature, “with all its faults and its virtues”:

Here is the flowering glory of native American capitalism; here are some aspects of its decay. Here is the fire of provincial political protest; here are the false leaders who gave the people false gods.

¹John Bartlow Martin to Alfred A. Knopf, March 14, 1946, John Bartlow Martin Papers, 1900-1986, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Martin Papers). *Life* magazine, according to Martin, “simply did not know what to do with these facts,” and decided to pay him for his time and effort but never published his article. Many years later, Martin learned through his friend John Steele that both *Life* and *Time* still consulted Martin's notes about the Midwest. See John Bartlow Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memoirs of Writing, Presidential Politics, and the Diplomatic Life* (New York, 1986), 48-49.

²Alfred A. Knopf to John Bartlow Martin, May 22, 1946, Martin Papers.

Here is the small-town mind at its best and worst. Here is the frost on the pumpkin; here is the cocktail lounge. Here are the great white manor houses on the bounteous soil and the shacks that cling to eroded clay hillsides. Here are the stone castles of the financiers and manufacturers and the acres of slums in the shadows of the factories. Here are good men and wicked. Here are the dwelling places of history, some splendrous, some tawdry.³

Martin's cynical assessment of the state, including his view that Indiana had suffered from a "hardening of the arteries" and lost its way after the 1900s, initially displeased an influential segment of the Hoosier population. An anonymous reviewer in the *Indiana Magazine of History* (perhaps its editor, John D. Barnhart, who later wrote significant works on the state's past) accused Martin of administering a "shock treatment" with his work and compared the author to Jove, hurling bolts of lightning at the state's citizens. "It is not a lovely book," the reviewer noted, adding that the author had failed to include "an evaluation of the good features of the state." "As a criticism of Indiana it is significant," noted the reviewer, "but as an interpretation it is inaccurate and inadequate." A buyer for the book department at L. S. Ayres and Company, Indianapolis's leading department store, ominously predicted to the book's publisher that most literate Hoosiers—at least the ones who bought books—would refuse to accept Martin's work "as a true picture of Indiana, and a good many of them, I am afraid, will object to the constant damning by innuendo of the conservative elements in the State, which are pretty large and may even be in the majority." Even Knopf, whom Martin idolized and with whom he had developed a friendship that included Thanksgiving dinners at the publisher's country estate (Martin compared it to being "summoned to Valhalla"), expressed disappointment, questioning why Martin could not describe what he intended to say "in more attractive and understandable language."⁴

³John Bartlow Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation* (New York, 1947), vii–viii, 7–8.

⁴Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 41, 122; review of *Indiana: An Interpretation*, *Indiana Magazine of History* 44 (September 1948), 308–309; Ben H. Riker to Alfred A. Knopf, April 22, 1947, and Alfred A. Knopf to John Bartlow Martin, April 14, 1947, Martin Papers. For the possibility that Barnhart wrote the unsigned review in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, see James H. Madison, "Introduction," John Bartlow Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation* (1947; reprint, Bloomington, Ind., 1992), xiv. A student of Frederick Jackson Turner's at Harvard University, Barnhart taught at the University of Nebraska, Louisiana State University, and Indiana University, where he edited the *IMH* from 1941 to 1955. With Donald F. Carmony, he wrote *Indiana: From Frontier to Industrial Commonwealth* (1954) and, with Carmony, Opal M. Nichols, and Jack E. Weicker, *Indiana: The Hoosier State* (1959), a book used in Indiana junior high schools. See "Memorial Tribute to John D. Barnhart," *Indiana Magazine of History* 64 (June 1968), 109–112.

Martin had appeared to be well suited for such a project. Although born in Hamilton, Ohio, just north of Cincinnati, on August 4, 1915, Martin had lived most of his young life in Indianapolis, Indiana, with his father, John Williamson (known as J. W.), a successful general contractor and head of the Indiana Gunitite and Construction Company, and his mother, Laura. A lifelong Democrat—a political affiliation he passed along to his son—the elder Martin refused to join the Ku Klux Klan, a significant force in Indiana during the 1920s. One of the young Martin's earliest boyhood memories involved "watching a seemingly endless parade of robed and hooded Klansmen marching around Monument Circle in Indianapolis in dead silence." The Great Depression devastated J. W.'s business, and Martin's two younger brothers died young at their home on Brookside Avenue. "Most people who write their memoirs," Martin reflected in his autobiography, "seem to have had happy childhoods. I hated mine. Many seem to regard the years of their youth as the easiest years of their lives. Mine were the hardest." At an early age, however, Martin knew what he wanted to do—write. Although his father derisively dubbed him "the bookworm" and wanted him to pursue a career as an engineer, J. W. played a role in shaping his son's subsequent career as an author, buying him the books he asked for as Christmas presents. Martin's teachers at Indianapolis's Arsenal Technical High School encouraged him to read such progressive authors of the day as John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, H. L. Mencken, and Ernest Hemingway.⁵

Martin went on to attend DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. Thrown out of school because of a drunken incident, he returned home and found work with the Associated Press's Indianapolis office; for a time his meager earnings were the only money supporting his family. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs saved the family from disaster, as the Home Owners' Loan Corporation prevented the bank from foreclosing on the mortgage and the Works Progress Administration gave J. W. a job. "Roosevelt saved us all," said Martin. Encouraged by his boss at the AP, Sam Ochiltree, Martin returned to DePauw, where he became editor of the school's newspaper and honed his writing skills as a freelancer for the *Indianapolis Times*; accepting a full-time job with the newspaper while still at the university, he completed his courses at DePauw in absentia. The collapse of his first marriage helped push Martin to abandon the life of a reporter for that of a freelance writer, and he established himself in Chicago, producing numerous articles for editor Harry Keller's true-crime

⁵Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 17–18, 21.



John Bartlow Martin, c. 1933. Martin's teachers at Arsenal Technical High School, Indianapolis, encouraged him to read contemporary authors such as Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, and Ernest Hemingway.

John Bartlow Martin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

magazines *Official Detective Stories* and *Actual Detective Stories of Women in Crime*. At the peak of his true-crime writing career, Martin pounded out a million words a year on his typewriter, at first selling a third of his stories, and later half, at two cents a word. "I worked as hard at this writ-

ing as at any I ever did and, given the constrictions of the genre, made it as good as I could," Martin said. "And I thought of what I was writing not as articles but as stories. Thus I learned the uses of description, dialogue, characterization, and perhaps above all narrative pull—that mysterious invisible force that pulls the reader onward."⁶

With this solid writing background and a more settled home life (he had married Frances Smethurst in August 1940, a union that lasted until his death in 1987), Martin grew tired of writing for the true-crime genre. While living in the Hubbard Woods neighborhood of Winnetka, Illinois, Martin reconnected with high school friend Francis S. Nipp, an English teacher studying for his doctorate at the University of Chicago and someone Martin called "a natural editor." Nipp encouraged Martin to become a regular reader of *The New Yorker* and convinced him to submit "serious nonfiction" to one of the country's most prestigious magazines, *Harper's*, then edited by best-selling author Frederick Lewis Allen. Although it had a small circulation and offered its contributors lower fees in comparison to other periodicals, *Harper's* reached a vital audience—what one of its editors described as "the intelligent minority" of opinion makers in the United States, "the thinking, cultured reader who seeks both entertainment and an enlarged and broadened point of view"—and catered to them with the work of such well-known writers as Elmer Davis and John Gunther, as well as monthly columns such as "The Easy Chair" from historian Bernard DeVoto and "One Man's Meat" by essayist E. B. White. With the assistance of Allen and his associate editors—Russell Lynes, George Leighton, John Kouwenhoven, Jack Fisher, and Eric Larrabee—Martin became a frequent contributor, eventually specializing in articles on crime and its effect on American society. He also learned that these East Coast editors felt out of touch with the rest of the country, and often questioned him about what people cared and thought about in the Midwest. "Just as farm boys yearn to go to New York, so do New York editors yearn to know what's on the farm boy's mind," said Martin. To satisfy their curiosity, he produced for the magazine articles on midwestern themes and such Indiana-related subjects as the wartime mood of Muncie, Indiana; the rise and fall of Ku Klux Klan leader D. C. Stephenson; and the often-bizarre ramblings of isolationist and bigot Court Asher, who in his *X-Ray* newspaper called

⁶Ibid., 17, 24, and 29. For more on Martin's life and career, see Ray E. Boomhower, "A Voice for Those from Below: John Bartlow Martin, Reporter," *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 9 (Spring 1997), 4–13; and Boomhower, *John Bartlow Martin: A Voice for the Underdog* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2015).

for the extermination of “red rat Communists” and “Red Kikes.” Martin grew used to the fluctuating fortunes of the freelance writing career, a life that he described as “champagne today, crackers and milk tomorrow.”⁷

Through the influence of Nipp and his editors at *Harper's*, Martin began to take his writing seriously and thought about writing a book. His entry into the world of book publishing came through a friendship he had developed with Ben Abramson, the owner of the Argus Book Shop in Chicago. Abramson—described by Martin as a “red-haired gnome-like little man with a mottled complexion who not only sold books but also read them—and loved them”—had written to Knopf in February 1943 introducing his friend as a successful magazine writer who for “many years traveled in, and studied, and read about the Lake Superior country. That is, the Michigan Peninsula and Minnesota.” Abramson believed that a book about either the Upper Peninsula alone or the state of Michigan might fit in with the publisher's series of books on Americana. “Never had I dreamed I might write for him, might even meet him,” Martin said of Knopf, publisher of such notable writers as Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, Willa Cather, W. Somerset Maugham, and Langston Hughes.⁸ Martin and Frances had discovered the rough beauty of the region on their honeymoon when the newlyweds had taken out a roadmap and had come upon the name of a town they liked—Michigamme, Michigan—that appeared remote because only one road, U. S. 41, ran nearby. Martin recalled that they were drawn to the Upper Peninsula by “its magnificent waterfalls, great forests, high rough hills, long stretches of uninhabited country, abundant fish and game.”⁹

Knopf advanced Martin \$1,000 for the project and during the summer of 1943, assisted by his wife, the writer traveled to the Upper Peninsula to conduct research, collecting enough material, he later estimated, to produce three books. In addition to his research at the Marquette County Historical Library, Martin gathered a wealth of detail “in bars in the mining and logging towns, talking to miners and lumberjacks and trappers and union men.” He concentrated on the Marquette iron range, the copper

⁷Darwin Payne, *The Man of Only Yesterday: Frederick Lewis Allen* (New York, 1975), 83; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 37, 43; and Sherley Uhl, “John Martin, Former Reporter, Neck-Deep in New Book About Hoosier Land,” *Indianapolis Times*, July 31, 1946.

⁸John Bartlow Martin, *Rough Draft of Memoirs*, and Ben Abramson to Alfred A. Knopf, February 22, 1943, Martin Papers; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 39.

⁹John Bartlow Martin, *Call it North Country: The Story of Upper Michigan* (1944; reprint, Detroit, Mich., 1986), 257.



John and Frances Martin on vacation in Colorado, c. 1946-1947. The couple's earlier trips to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan inspired Martin's first book, *Call It North Country*.

Courtesy, Cindy Martin Coleman

range, and "the forestland in between." Martin realized that his work on the Upper Peninsula portrayed "how the American people talked, worked, and behaved"—what today is considered social history. The stories he garnered from the people he interviewed were important because nearly everybody whose recollections of the old days were "entombed" in the book were themselves entombed not long afterwards. "It wasn't a bad

idea to get them down on paper for our children,” Martin said.¹⁰ Released in early 1944, when the author was twenty-eight years old, *Call it North Country: The Story of Upper Michigan* sold well for a regional publication (approximately 10,000 copies, Martin estimated), and received respectful reviews from major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, whose reviewer described it as offering a “detailed, vigorous, and understanding interpretation” of the people who lived in the region, and praised the author as a “young and hearty observer.”¹¹ Later, on his many summer vacation trips to the Upper Peninsula, Martin was pleased to find in other people’s houses and cabins copies of his book “almost read literally to pieces, their spines cracked, pages loose, pages pencil-marked and with coffee spilled on them, books that have really been read. That is the readership an author appreciates.”¹²

Call it North Country—a title selected by Knopf that Martin halfheartedly described as not being “too good nor is it terrible”—opened the way for Martin to learn about the book publishing business and to make a solid connection with Knopf, a man once called by one of his authors “the perfect publisher.” Martin recalled that after he had finished his manuscript and sent it off to the publisher, Knopf had responded promptly and succinctly, indicating that the work was satisfactory and that he was placing it into production. Martin expressed some disappointment at the matter-of-fact response, but Nipp reminded him: “He’s published books before.”¹³

In March 1944, Martin met with his publisher for a three-hour luncheon at the Palmer House in Chicago, and the two of them spent the rest of the day together, including a visit to the manager of the local Brentano’s bookstore and a shopping expedition in the Loop. “He’s a very human sort of guy, much more so than I had thought at my previous pleasant but brief meeting with him,” Martin said of Knopf in a letter to Keller. “I feel as

¹⁰Martin, *Call it North Country*, vii; John Bartlow Martin to Harry Keller, August 24, 1943, Martin Papers.

¹¹James Gray, “Michigan Peninsula,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1944.

¹²Martin, *Call it North Country*, viii; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 40. Martin never forgot the thrill of seeing his first book published. He wrote Harry Keller: “You sign a contract then go out and do a lot of legwork then type page after page of copy then send it in—and then nothing happens, and you begin to wonder if maybe you weren’t just sort of making it all up. Then along come the proofs and bang—it’s really going to be a book after all.” John Bartlow Martin to Harry Keller, January 25, 1944, Martin Papers.

¹³John Bartlow Martin to Harry Keller, January 4, 1944, Martin Papers; Herbert Mitgang, “Alfred A. Knopf, 91, is Dead; Founder of Publishing House,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1984; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 40–41.



Alfred Knopf Sr. and his wife Blanche, 1932. Martin greatly admired the publisher and was proud that his first two books were published by Knopf, although Blanche rejected his subsequent manuscript.

Carl Van Vechten Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

though he got to know something about me too and what I want to do.” Martin listened as Knopf talked about the famous writers he had known over the years, including H. L. Mencken, a favorite of Martin’s. They also discussed the possibility of Martin writing a book examining the history of modern advertising in the United States. “We had a hell of a good talk, and he said that the Midwest amazes New York publishers for one reason: There isn’t anybody out here who writes,” Martin wrote Keller. “This of course isn’t literally true, he said, but there are surprisingly few; and I don’t think it’s all ego which made me read into his subsequent remarks the fact that he regards me more or less as, if not his one man out here, at least one of his. Which is very fine, of course.”¹⁴

As Martin waited to hear from his draft board late in the summer of 1944, he wrote Knopf that he did not want to “delay longer writing another fact book, with a view to publication next Fall.” He outlined two

¹⁴John Martin to Harry Keller, March 24, 1944, Martin Papers.

possibilities, one being the book on advertising they had previously discussed. Martin planned on highlighting the careers of the few men who had shaped the development of modern advertising, including Albert Lasker, Raymond Rubicam, George Gallup, E. Frank Hummert, and Claude Hopkins. "I think the book should be a bright readable account, avoiding diligently the textbook, or definitive treatise, slant," Martin wrote. "I recall your asking whether my book would be the one that advertising men would like or dislike. The ones I know are pretty well aware that theirs is a business full of hot air and hocus-pocus, and I imagine they might enjoy a candid appraisal. At this point I'm more inclined to view advertising as a critic than as an advocate." Martin also suggested that—given his work on midwestern subjects for *Harper's* and his book on the Upper Peninsula—he might continue to "mine the same vein" by writing either a book on the Midwest or one on just Indiana. As he would later write, he viewed the state as "an excellent cross-section of the whole Midwest, with its northern industrial area, its middle farm belt, its southern rural slums bordering on the South, its few large cities and numerous Main Street towns, and, of course, its shrewd bigoted hard-headed friendly people." The timetable for a completed manuscript would be the same on any of the subjects, he noted, with an outline by the end of October, writing to begin by the first of the year, and a finished manuscript probably in April. "Of the three," Martin added, "the book on the Midwest strikes me as the most 'important.' But I leave to you the decision as to what would sell the best and what you think I could do the best." Just two days after Martin sent his letter to Knopf, the publisher responded: "We all seem to feel that the best bet by far would be the book on Indiana, so why don't you start preparing an outline of this?" A book on the Midwest would be "a fine thing," Knopf acknowledged, adding that such a project represented "a pretty ambitious undertaking and it is hard for us to know just what point of view, in general, you would adopt in writing it and how well you can carry off the job. I'd begin with Indiana."¹⁵

Martin received news of Knopf's decision while vacationing in Michigamme, but wasted no time in making preparations for his research. In early September, he wrote Nipp, who was planning to join Martin to do some fishing in the Upper Peninsula, and asked him to bring along a number of books on Indiana and the Midwest, as "the library here on the back forty by the swamp isn't very complete so I need some books brought up from down

¹⁵John Bartlow Martin to Alfred A. Knopf, August 26, 1944, and Alfred A. Knopf to John Bartlow Martin, August 28, 1944, Martin Papers.

below." Among the volumes he requested were the 1941 WPA-produced *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State*; Claude G. Bowers's *Beveridge and the Progressive Era* (1932); Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* (1921); and any books cited in the WPA guide's bibliography "that seem important for this project." Martin wrote that he would be able to work out a general outline for his project based on these secondary sources, and then could, "by independent digging," obtain the primary material he needed. "I want to read all I can at the outset, especially in secondary sources," Martin added, "so I won't flounder too badly in disorganized original sources." He also confided to his friend that Knopf, in selecting the Indiana book, had done "exactly what I hoped he would do; he feels, as I do, that I need more time and study to undertake the rather ambitious book on the whole Midwest (which would be a reputation maker)." Martin believed that if he could research and write the Indiana book during the winter and spring of 1945, he would be "digging in the Midwest field and can follow up the next year with one on the Midwest." His schedule called for a complete outline by mid-October 1944, a trip to New York in November to sign a contract, much of November and December in Indiana for research ("legwork," as Martin called it), starting to write the first of the year, and finishing in April 1945. "I want to do preliminary reading here until Oct. 1," Martin wrote Nipp, "go to Indianapolis then and do detailed reading at the State Library there, and complete the outline by mid-October. If things go well, it's a good schedule, just about right."¹⁶

Martin's plans were derailed when, on October 26, 1944, he received the "Greetings" letter from his local draft board, ordering him to report at 7:00 a.m. on November 16 for induction into the armed forces. After spending time in Arkansas, Texas, and California, where he served with the Army's 246th Military Police Criminal Investigation Platoon in the newly established Criminal Investigation Division, Martin returned to his wife and young daughter, Cindy, on February 16, 1946. Trying to readjust to life in peacetime, Martin set out to finish his interrupted book on Indiana. He asked Knopf for, and obtained, a larger advance than he had received for *Call it North Country*—from \$1,000 to \$1,200; Knopf also, on his own, raised the royalty rate for the Indiana book, which had as its tentative title "Moonlight's Fair Tonight," part of the lyrics from Paul Dresser's Indiana state song, "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away."¹⁷

¹⁶John Bartlow Martin to Francis Nipp, September 1, 1944, Martin Papers.

¹⁷Alfred A. Knopf to John Bartlow Martin, May 22, 1946, Martin Papers; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 48.

By the middle of July 1946, Martin had traveled to Indiana to do research, staying with his parents and interviewing a host of people—newspapermen, labor organizers, businessmen, workingmen, policemen, politicians, local historians, secretaries, retired madames, realtors, taxicab drivers, veterans, farmers, hotel doormen, waitresses, editors, and publishers. He consulted the Indiana Farm Bureau, Indiana Historical Bureau, Indiana Chamber of Commerce, Indiana Society of Chicago, Purdue University, and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He also talked with many members of his own profession. “Much of the best material came from newspapermen,” Martin noted. Many of those who provided “information of the highest value,” however, perhaps sensing the controversy to come, requested that Martin not disclose their names. Those who did agree to have their contributions acknowledged included Ned Gorrell of the *Pulaski County Democrat* (whom Martin profiled in a chapter in his book), Ernest Showalter of the *Brookville American* and the *Brookville Democrat*, Harry J. Riddick of the *Columbia City Post*, Richard Forbes and James Benham of the *Terre Haute Star*, and several staff members from Martin’s former employer, the *Indianapolis Times*. In reviewing his material, Martin discovered that his Indiana book would be quite different from the one he had written about the Upper Peninsula. “Instead of the earlier book’s picturesque explorers and lumberjacks and miners,” Martin noted, the characters for his new book were “politicians, union leaders, industrialists, writers.” Instead of the vast wilderness of the Upper Peninsula, the atmosphere was now one of “farm revolt, strikes, violence, industrialization, and bored farm-town life.”¹⁸

As he contemplated the mounds of research material he had collected, Martin realized that one man, beloved Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley, had played a major role in shaping how Hoosiers saw themselves and their state. As he talked to his sources regarding what he *should* be writing about Indiana, they instead invariably told him what did *not* belong in the book—the Calumet Region in the northwest part of the state, Evansville and Madison (described as Southern towns, not Hoosier ones), Socialist and labor leader Eugene V. Debs, novelist and journalist Theodore Dreiser, and sophisticated songwriter Cole Porter—because these places and people did not really represent the state. “And finally you realize,” Martin wrote a friend, “that they are chopping off chunks of Indiana to try to get Indiana to conform to what Riley said it was: a hayseed from Brown County.”

¹⁸Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 285–86; Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 49.

After Riley's death in 1916, people in Indiana had demanded more of his sentimental style of work—"poems in praise of the homely, the simple, the rustic, the Hoosier." A host of other Indiana writers came along to "supply the demand," said Martin, including William Herschel, *Indianapolis News* reporter and author of the poem "Ain't God Good to Indiana?"; George Ade, newspaperman and columnist known for his "Fables in Slang"; and Frank McKinney "Kin" Hubbard, creator of Brown County crackerbarrel philosopher Abe Martin. The fact remained, however, that individuals such as Dreiser and Porter did come from Indiana and, as Martin argued, someone like Debs could not have come from anywhere else. A different type of nostalgia from the one Martin had initially anticipated permeated the state—a yearning for the days when Marmon and National automobiles were made in Indianapolis and when "nobody accused George A. Ball [of the Ball Brothers of Muncie, Indiana] the old bastard of ducking income tax but just thought he was a smart man who gave his money away to help those less fortunate." Martin came to believe that Indiana was hard to write about because it stood as the United States in microcosm. The country was changing, but

nobody seems to know just how or why. I do think this: if this keeps up the book is going to surprise people who look for another book about Hoosiers. And if you hammer hard enough at the idea of infinite variety you can confound those who carp at it because it 'is just the faults one man finds with Indiana.' I guess it is going to be a better book than one that recaps the old swimmin' hole but it will be a long ways from THE book on Indiana in the sense that FIVE CITIES was THE book on the cities.¹⁹

In his manuscript, Martin could never quite put his finger on "the villain," the person or persons responsible for ruining the state's golden age of the 1880s and 1890s, a time when Hoosiers were "confident of the future." He suspected that the villain in Indiana was "not spectacular, just as Indiana is never spectacular, but mediocre, first rate second rate stuff." Between World War I and World War II, in Martin's estimation, the magic and wonder of the state's past—Riley's poetry and Elwood Haynes's inven-

¹⁹John Bartlow Martin to George [?], August 20, 1946, Martin Papers; Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 108. Martin refers to George R. Leighton, *Five Cities: The Story of Their Youth and Old Age* (New York, 1939).

tiveness, for example—had disappeared from the scene to be replaced by robed figures from the Ku Klux Klan. “A suspicion had arisen that bigotry, ignorance, and hysteria were as much a part of the Hoosier character as were conservatism and steadfastness and common sense,” wrote Martin. “One of Indiana’s chief exports had long been ideas, but so many of these had turned out to be wrong-headed, wicked, or useless.” This vein of bigotry and intolerance could be seen in the careers of Klan leader Stephenson and homegrown bigot and isolationist Asher, but other possible sources included small-town capitalists who, fearful of labor unions, discouraged outside manufacturers from moving to their communities; labor union leaders more worried about jurisdictional disputes than the interests of their members; and politicians obsessed with the day-to-day business of garnering votes (“the little trickeries that make Presidents and ward heelers alike”) rather than the social and economic ends of politics.²⁰

Building upon his skeptical view of the Indiana idea, Martin’s book featured vignettes of figures outside of the Hoosier mainstream. Some of the book’s best writing is featured in the “Voices of Protest” section, which covers the careers of Debs, workplace democracy pioneer William Powers Hapgood, and his son, labor organizer Powers. Martin gives Debs the book’s longest chapter. He later wrote that the man from Terre Haute, Indiana, “almost ran away with the book,” one reason he believed that “conservative booksellers from Indianapolis did little to sell the book.” Martin also presented an honest view of Terre Haute’s bawdy early twentieth-century history, when gambling and prostitution ran rampant in the District, the area north of Second and Third Streets, with establishments such as Madame Brown’s whorehouse. Born near the District, Debs stayed away from its wickedness (but not drink, calling temperance “this mean and narrow fanaticism”) and, through his work organizing railroad workers and representing workingmen as five-time Socialist Party candidate for president, he stood in the vanguard of Indiana protest, what Martin called “the ceaseless quest for the better life begun by Robert Owen, the uprising against authority begun in William Henry Harrison’s time. . . . They left an impress and a heritage—Debs most of all. He was the greatest of Indiana protestants, the most effective.”²¹

As he wrote his book, Martin believed that because he had hated his Indianapolis childhood, he would also hate Indiana. He was surprised, however, to find “a certain affection suffusing parts of the book.” When

²⁰John Bartlow Martin to George [?], August 20, 1946, Martin Papers; Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 269–73.

²¹Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 49; Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 140, 156.

he quoted the old saying that many good men come from Indiana, and the better they were the quicker they came, he said he used it “more in jest than in bitterness.”²² Even before the book's publication, however, there were indications that many Hoosiers would fail to find the affection Martin thought he had included. Martin's ambivalence is exemplified in the book's chapter on Indiana's then governor, Ralph F. Gates of Columbia City. Although Martin disparaged Gates's impact—“God has made few more unimportant Governors than Gates”—he devoted fourteen pages to him because “he is, really, extremely important. There are so many Hoosiers like him.” The chapter's opening offers a sampling of Martin's ability to grasp the essence of his subject in just a few sentences; it also helps to explain Gates's unfavorable reaction:

Ralph F. Gates, a Republican who was elected Governor of Indiana in 1944, is a medium-sized, vigorous man of fifty-four who gives the impression of being a little younger and a good deal larger than he really is. On such important occasions as the annual Beefsteak Dinner at the Columbia Club, his chunky body looks constricted in a dinner jacket; standing behind a speaker's table, peering down through the lower part of his glasses to read a speech, he seems to have no neck, only a fold of fat below his chin which spills down onto the white front of his shirt. At such times, though he looks not unlike a sea lion, he is a figure that inspires confident satisfaction in any banker or manufacturer. At work in the Governor's office in his shirt sleeves, however, he is all plain, intelligent Hoosier, a friendly sympathetic man to whom anybody can take his troubles. While drinking with some politicians in a hotel room, he is downright jolly, handsome in a rough, unadorned way, with iron-gray hair that keeps falling down over his forehead, a lumpy, rugged face, a quick, easy laugh, a boyish way of glancing up at you from under shaggy eyebrows, a deep, rasping voice that trails off at the ends of sentences, and clothes that nearly always look rumpled.²³

Martin had sent the chapter to the governor for review, asking him to go over it and to write back if he found any factual errors. Initially delayed by his work with the legislature, then in session, Gates finally replied to

²²Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 49.

²³Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation*, 235.

Martin, indicating his preference that the author not “use the manuscript at all due to the fact that I find a great deal of it is in error and I certainly would not want to be in any way responsible for an article which does not entirely cover the facts as they are.” He closed his letter saying it would be “a terrible mistake to use the article as it was prepared.” Martin wrote back expressing his regret that the governor did not like the chapter and absolving Gates of any responsibility for how Martin used the material that the governor had helped to furnish. “I wish you’d been able to point out the factual errors,” Martin told Gates, “so I could correct them but since you didn’t there wasn’t anything I could do. I’m sure you know there’s nothing intentionally erroneous in it; I’ve gone to great lengths to avoid errors, throughout the book.”²⁴

Even Knopf, Martin’s publisher and friend, had concerns about the Indiana manuscript, writing to his author that the work lacked “genuine integration,” and that the book “in its total effect is somewhat disappointing.” Knopf acknowledged that Martin had done everything he could with the manuscript “short of putting it aside for a matter of years,” and admitted that he might be “super-persnickety” in his criticisms, as the public “may cheerfully overlook most of what we have found fault with. We will push the book to the best of our ability and expect it to have a good sale.” However, Knopf also sent the manuscript for comment to Ben H. Riker, the buyer for the book department at L. S. Ayres and Company in Indianapolis. Because Ayres’s book department was considered to be “the best in the city, even better than the independent bookstores,” as Kenneth L. Turchi noted in his history of the firm, Riker’s opinion carried great weight when it came to potential sales of a book about Indiana. In a letter that the publisher shared with Martin, Riker told Knopf that the manuscript failed to meet his expectations. “I think Martin has allowed his own political, social, and economic prejudices to color what ought to be an objective piece of reporting with unbiased interpretation,” wrote Riker. “It is interesting enough, but it does not do what it purports to do—or at least what I was expecting it to do.”²⁵

Not everyone on Knopf’s staff shared their boss’s pessimistic opinion of Martin’s Indiana book. The publisher’s son, Alfred Jr., told the writer that he had done “a perfectly swell job. The book is full of atmosphere and moods, and in a great many places it is completely ‘un-put-downable.’”

²⁴Ralph F. Gates to John Bartlow Martin, March 19, 1947, and John Bartlow Martin to Ralph F. Gates, April 29, 1947, Martin Papers.

²⁵Alfred A. Knopf to John Bartlow Martin, April 14, 1947, Martin Papers; Kenneth L. Turchi, *L. S. Ayres & Company: The Store at the Crossroads of America* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2012), 145; and Ben H. Riker to Alfred A. Knopf, April 22, 1947, Martin Papers.

Although the manuscript did read more like a series of “first-rate magazine articles than like a continuous drama,” the junior Knopf said he had told his father that Martin had written what he had expected “and more.” Another Knopf employee, Irving P. Hotchkiss, a member of the sales department, called the work “one of the finest regional interpretations that I’ve read for a long time and I happen to have read quite a number. With its emphasis on interpretation of social forces, rather than on the usual recital of picturesque local detail, I believe it will have a general interest and sale beyond the usual expectations for such a book.” Hotchkiss also advised Martin not to be too “greatly disturbed” at Riker’s letter—he planned on talking Riker out of “his compromised attitude” when he visited Indianapolis in September, and Riker still expected to promote the book. Hotchkiss also passed on news from Lawrence Hill of Indianapolis’s Meridian Book Shop, who had developed a number of possibilities for publicity that he intended to follow up on. Knopf also intended to promote the book through letters to members of the Indiana Society of Chicago and the Indiana Historical Society. “In any case,” Hotchkiss assured the author, “I don’t feel that the local sale is crucial and I am emphasizing the national possibilities here.”²⁶

Critical response in Indiana to Martin’s book upon its release proved to be tepid, at best. The anonymous *IMH* reviewer faulted him for devoting little space to such important issues as the period before the Civil War, while lavishing entirely too much attention (an entire chapter) on a fringe figure such as Asher. “Is a community to be interpreted by its most eccentric citizen?” the reviewer asked. Writing in the *Indianapolis Star*, Eugene Pulliam Jr., the son of the newspaper’s publisher, expressed grudging respect for Martin’s effort, calling *Indiana: An Interpretation* “interesting and different as books about Indiana go. The brief biographies around which the main theme of the book is built are competently done.” Henry Butler, writing in the *Indianapolis Times*, offered an accurate assessment of the view that many people in the state had of the book when he noted that true believers seldom like to have their “articles of faith described as myth. And though Indiana myth is no more fantastic than many phases of the greater American myth, of which it is a part, such a description of Hoosierism may strike some as offensive.”²⁷

²⁶Alfred A. Knopf Jr. to John Bartlow Martin, April 28, 1947, and Irving P. Hotchkiss to John Bartlow Martin, August 15, 1947, Martin Papers.

²⁷*IMH* review of *Indiana: An Interpretation*; Eugene Pulliam Jr., review of *Indiana: An Interpretation*, *Indianapolis Star*, November 9, 1947; and Henry Butler, “History, Biography and Traveling Mingled in Interesting New Book on Hoosierland,” *Indianapolis Times*, November 15, 1947.

The further away from Indiana, the better the reviews were for the book. The *New York Times* credited Martin for his “rare adventure into the field of self-criticism” in regional writing, and praised him for presenting a “challenging indictment of what one might call ‘grass-rootism.’” Martin’s “interesting and well-written story” captured not only the salt-of-the-earth Hoosiers lionized by Riley, said the *Times* review, but also covered in depth the tale of “grassroots mediocrity, of intolerance, of political myopia, of crass materialism, of political corruption.” Writing in the *New York Herald-Tribune*’s weekly book review, Elrick B. Davis said that Martin had finally presented a regional book “that makes sense,” one that stripped Indiana from its costume and integrated the state into the social history of the United States. Calling the book a “regional psychograph,” Davis lauded Martin for a book “amiably critical, interested but objective, warm with neighborly concern, sufficiently historical, pleasantly colorful—never gaudy—and without a single statistic to snag its biographic flow.”²⁸

According to Martin, *Indiana: An Interpretation* did not sell well for him. In a December 1947 letter to his friend John Voelker, a Michigan attorney and author of the novel *Anatomy of a Murder*, Martin asked if Voelker had yet obtained a copy of the book, as he wanted his friend to read it and let him know what he thought. “People I know *talk* about it, they don’t read it,” Martin lamented. Reflecting later in life, Martin, who worked as a speechwriter on every Democratic presidential campaign from Adlai Stevenson’s in 1952 to George McGovern’s in 1972, did not believe that writing the book had been a waste of his time. “Just as the *Harper’s* pieces on Muncie and the Klan . . . and the *Life* legwork had helped prepare me to do *Indiana*,” he said, “so did *Indiana* prepare me for my future work and politics.” As a key aide in Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 Indiana Democratic presidential primary campaign, Martin drew upon the interviewing he had done for *Indiana: An Interpretation* to help prepare detailed “briefing sheets” that informed the candidate about the history of a town or city. Kennedy could take the briefing sheets Martin produced and use them to speak extemporaneously and expertly about the issues facing a community.²⁹

²⁸Gilbert Bailey, “Hoosier History,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1947; Elrick B. Davis, “Here are Real Hoosiers,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 7, 1947.

²⁹Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 49; John Bartlow Martin to John Voelker, December 11, 1947, John D. Voelker Papers, Central Upper Michigan Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives, Marquette, Michigan; and John Bartlow Martin, RFK Notes, June 28, 1968, Martin Papers. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the Harvard historian who worked with Martin as a speechwriter for Stevenson and Kennedy, considered *Indiana: An Interpretation* as “the best book on Indiana.” See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, 1978), 880.

Although *Indiana: An Interpretation* was the last book Martin published with Knopf, other factors than its poor sales probably contributed to the split between writer and publisher. In 1950, Martin put together a collection of his articles about crime that had appeared in *Harper's* and other magazines and sent it first to Knopf for possible publication. The publisher, however, laid up in the hospital with a broken ankle, referred Martin to his wife, Blanche, who, as someone used to dealing with writers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, "could not make head or tail of my project," said Martin. Rebuffed at Knopf, he took the book to Harper and Brothers, which published it as *Butcher's Dozen, and Other Murders*. Although Martin went on to publish other books with Harper and enjoyed a good relationship with the company, he often thought that, if he had it to do over again, he would have never left Knopf, who preferred to develop long-term relationships with authors. "I have had several publishers, and our relationship was always good at first, but inevitably trouble came, and I about concluded that although an author and his publisher are bound together," said Martin, "they are, in a sense, natural enemies."³⁰

Martin enjoyed a long and successful career as a freelance author. He developed an especially close working relationship with the *Saturday Evening Post*, producing stories for the weekly magazine on such critical issues of the 1950s and 1960s as criminals and prisons, civil rights, abortion, and television's impact on American society, and winning praise as "the best living reporter" and "the ablest crime reporter in America." His speechwriting duties for Stevenson led him eventually to publish an acclaimed two-volume biography of the two-time Democratic presidential candidate; his duties with John F. Kennedy's winning presidential campaign in 1960 led to his appointment as the American ambassador to the Dominican Republic.³¹

Since Martin's death on January 3, 1987, his work on Indiana has seen new life. In December 1992, Indiana University Press issued a new edition of *Indiana: An Interpretation* that included an introduction by Hoosier historian and Indiana University professor of history James H. Madison. Although Madison noted that the book had its faults—including, among other things, its virtual exclusion of any discussion of the roles of women and African Americans—it remained "a modern and compelling piece of writing." The new edition also won attention several years after

³⁰Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 115.

³¹John Bartlow Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois: The Life of Adlai Stevenson* (New York, 1976); and Martin, *Adlai Stevenson and the World: The Life of Adlai Stevenson* (New York, 1977).

its release, when Robert McColley, professor of history at the University of Illinois and an admirer of Martin's Stevenson biography, discovered the reprint. The book, said McColley in a review for the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, reflected Martin's "great gifts as an observer, an interpreter, and a stylist." He particularly admired the writer's ability to describe even despicable characters such as Asher in human terms. "Like the villains in Shakespeare's plays and Wagner's operas, a certain sympathy is engaged, as well as justifiable loathing," McColley said. Although Martin might have spent too much time on alcohol and prostitution, and too little on such subjects as education, science, religion, and fine arts, McColley commended the overall "force and eloquence" that Martin had brought to his interpretation of the state—a fitting epitaph for a modern Indiana classic.³²



³²Robert O. Boorstin, "John Bartlow Martin, 71, Author and Envoy, Dies," *New York Times*, January 5, 1987; Madison, "Introduction," *Indiana: An Interpretation*, vii, xv; and Robert McColley, review of *Indiana: An Interpretation*, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 92 (Spring 1999), 73–75.