



Ralph D. Gray. *Meredith Nicholson: A Writing Life*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007. 281 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-257-8.

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Meredith Nicholson: Indiana and Beyond

A literary historian once described Meredith Nicholson as the “most rabid” Hoosier in a set of Indiana authors who made their mark during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 3). In his latest book, Ralph D. Gray, professor emeritus of history at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, has written the first scholarly biography of this once famous, but now largely forgotten, writer and diplomat. The Nicholson who emerges from Gray’s narrative is primarily, though not exclusively, Indianian. “My attachments are all local,” Nicholson, quoting another writer, began his last book, “Purely local” (p. 11). Gray, in part, agrees, labeling his subject “an outspoken advocate of all things Hoosier” (p. 3). And, yet, as he demonstrates, Nicholson’s fame extended beyond his native state. Nicholson published, over the course of his “writing life,” twenty-eight books, nonfiction as well as fiction, and one play with such nationally renowned houses as Bobbs-Merrill, MacMillan, and Houghton Mifflin. He was a bestselling author by age forty and, incredibly, none of his book manuscripts—not even his first—ever suffered rejection at the hands of a publisher.

As Gray shows, Nicholson, the author, was a dyed-in-the-wool Hoosier. Born in Crawfordsville, Nicholson spent his youth and almost all of his adulthood in Indianapolis. Even as a young poet, he identified with the dominant political and military traditions of his state. When the Twenty-Seventh Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic convened in Indianapolis, Nicholson, a good patriotic Hoosier, greeted these veterans of the Union armies with a bit of verse that climaxed with: “Welcome, Saviors of the Land” (p. 40). A few years later, Nicholson succeeded in selling his fiancé, a Nebraskan, on the delights that awaited them in *his* Midwestern Camelot. “The spring is very sweet here in Indiana,” he beamed. “There are tranquil twilights, and calm mornings,” as well as an abundance of lilacs and long, inviting vistas down Meridian Street, the main thor-

oughfare in Indianapolis (p. 56). Appropriately enough, Nicholson’s first book, *Poets and Poetry of Indiana* (1900), was locally themed and brought together, in anthology form, “the best work of dozens of Hoosier-based writers” (p. 42). That same year, Nicholson published *The Hoosiers* (1900), a cultural, social, and political history of Indiana that, as Gray observes, became a “minor classic within the historiography of the state” (p. 63).

Nicholson’s love of all things Hoosier came through in his novels. Although Nicholson’s first stab at book-length fiction, *The Main Chance* (1903), took place in Omaha, Nebraska, his wife’s hometown, his second novel, *Zelda Dameron* (1904), was set in “Mariona,” a thinly veiled Indianapolis, where the Nicholsons then resided (p. 93). His next and best-known book was *The House of a Thousand Candles* (1905), a “fairy tale with pistols” that centered around goings-on at a spooky old mansion on Indiana’s Lake Maxinkuckee (p. 104). By locating the action so close to home, Nicholson was making a larger point, that tales of suspense and adventure do not require distant, exotic locales to capture and hold readers’ interest. *The House of a Thousand Candles* became a “blockbuster” success with the public and received rave reviews from critics (p. 105). Other “post-Candles” novels that carried a Hoosier theme included *Rosalind at Red Gate* (1907), also set at Lake Maxinkuckee; *The Hoosier Chronicle* (1913), which sharply criticized business ethics and machine politics in central Indiana; and *Otherwise Phyllis* (1914), Gray’s favorite, which took place in Crawfordsville (p. 114).

Besides these works of fiction, Nicholson continued to write about Indiana in nonfiction form. In 1912, he published a collection of his essays under the provocative, but unabashed, title *The Provincial American and Other Papers*. He also wrote a much-read World War I era newspaper editorial “Stand Up for Indiana” and, one decade later, authored the introduction to Frank McKinney “Kin” Hubbard’s compilation *A Book of Indiana*

(1929). In that last volume, Nicholson carried his Indiana patriotism to an extreme, writing, he claimed, “to make residents of other states dissatisfied with their homes and bring them in haste to the grand old Hoosier commonwealth” (p. 1).

There was, almost inevitably, a side to Nicholson that looked beyond the Hoosier commonwealth. As much as he revered Indiana’s leading literary figures—Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben Hur* (1880) and a long-time resident of Crawfordsville, and James Whitcomb Riley, the famed poet who lived in Indianapolis—he respected other writers as well. As a young chap, Nicholson “mildly scandalized” the staid Indianapolis Literary Club when he read, before their membership, a paper on that most “flamboyant” American man of letters, Walt Whitman (p. 41). He also traveled, during his mid-twenties, to Boston and New York City. Indeed, the inspiration behind *The Hoosiers* was George Edward Woodberry, a professor at Columbia University. Nicholson soon made connections with publishers in the East, won a following outside of Indiana through his novels, and wrote frequently for such nationally circulated magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*. The journalist Ernie Pyle, also a native of Indiana, later expressed it well when he called Nicholson “familiar to every inhabitant of the Hoosier state, and many millions more too” (p. 227).

The theme of “Indiana and beyond” also defined Nicholson’s political and diplomatic career. Heartened by the example of President Grover Cleveland, a ruggedly honest Gilded Age politician, Nicholson became a lifelong Democrat. He was a vocal supporter of fellow Hoosier Thomas Riley Marshall, governor of Indiana (1909-1913) and vice president of the United States (1913-1921). And, during the 1920s, Nicholson opposed the power of the Ku Klux Klan, which, through the vehicle of the Republican Party, controlled, for a time, the governments of both Indiana and Indianapolis. Along the way, he befriended Dr. Carleton B. McCulloch, the Democratic nominee for governor in 1920 and 1924, and supported the political aspirations of Paul V. McNutt, a Democrat who won the governorship of Indiana in 1932. With the Democratic Party back in power, in both state and nation, jobs opened up for Nicholson. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt, he served successively as minister to three Latin American nations, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, before returning to the United States in 1941. Nicholson, Gray explains, “did a commendable job as a neophyte diplomat” (p. 204). Certainly, he was a competent representative of his nation and made no enemies in his overseas assignments. Summing up his diplomatic duties, Nicholson alluded to his career in letters:

“Ambassadors and ministers are essentially reporters” who write dispatches to their governments (p. 238). Although Gray clearly likes his subject, he allows the reader to see Nicholson’s disappointments and to “feel his pain,” to borrow a phrase uttered by a later Democrat.

With respect to his writing career, Nicholson was embarrassed about being a bestselling author. “He wanted to become a more serious writer of realism,” Gray maintains, but his attempts at this type of fiction fell flat (p. 116). Part of the problem lay in Nicholson’s saccharine-sweet outlook and subscribed talents. Nicholson disdained the morbid real life novels of fellow Hoosier Theodore Dreiser, whose works would prove more enduring than those produced by Dreiser’s more sentimental Indiana contemporaries. Even among that group, Nicholson’s novels did not measure up. His *Broken Barriers* (1922), a novel about the “new woman” of the 1920s, “displeased” critics and compared unfavorably with *Alice Adams* (1921), a Pulitzer Prize-winning story about a “single working girl” by fellow Hoosier Booth Tarkington (pp. 159-160). Gray does not analyze fully the reasons why Nicholson’s work declined in quality and the author in popularity. Instead, he notes the failure of Nicholson’s more realistic novels and suggests that his breezier tales became out of place during the grittier intellectual times that followed World War I.

Nicholson’s professional setbacks were matched by personal troubles. While Gray does not overemphasize this point, Nicholson was somewhat lonely. As a self-educated man, he never enjoyed the lifelong friendships that often begin in high school or college. To be sure, Nicholson liked Tarkington, who also never graduated college, and he grew close to McCulloch, a (thankfully for historians) diligent letter-writer and inveterate gossip. At the same time, the Hoosier literati, such as Riley, remained more mentors than confidants to Nicholson. And there was tension at home as well. Nicholson’s generally happy first marriage to Eugenie Kountze was marred by his apparent philandering. His second marriage to a much younger Dorothy Wolfe Lannon involved a case of turnabout being fair play. According to family lore, Dorothy’s habit of becoming “flagrantly indiscrete” with “American navy officers” seemingly prompted Nicholson’s sudden, unexpected, and unexplained diplomatic transfer from Caracas to Managua in 1938 (p. 218). The couple eventually divorced five years later.

As those anecdotes reveal, Gray is a masterful storyteller. He has a marvelously dry wit, which, when coupled with the foibles of his characters, make for truly amusing reading. Gray describes how an “overindulging”

Dorothy once became so inebriated that she placed a match between her lips and then attempted to light it, in the fashion of a cigarette, with a candle—to near disastrous results (p. 210). Gray’s gift for portraiture extends across cultural boundaries, such as when he describes the family life of President Juan Vicente Gomez of Venezuela, an aging bachelor who had managed to sire one hundred children “most of whom carried the Gomez name” (p. 207). In one story, which could have fallen under the headline “Somoza at the Speedway,” Gray discusses the visit of Nicholson’s confederate, President Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua, to Indianapolis and of how, at the speedway, Somoza “jumped into the driver’s seat of the pace car and sped around the track” (p. 225). In another saga involving the Nicaraguan caudillo—“Somoza Showers Governor”—he discusses Somoza’s trip to Purdue University where, at a cow-milking contest, the president pointed the “business end of the udder” in the direction of Indiana Governor M. Clifford Townsend—and then gave it a tug (p. 235).

Even in this fine book, there are some points that Gray might have explored in greater depth. There is little on Nicholson’s despair over the lowly state of Indiana politics during the 1920s and of his expectation, back then, that McNutt would emerge as a latter-day Cleve-

land and rescue the state from rampant corruption. More could have been done with the Nicholson-McNutt relationship and with the tricorned correspondence among three eloquent, politically minded Hoosiers—Nicholson, Tarkington, and McCulloch. More important, Nicholson’s service in Latin America cries out for added analysis and comparison, especially with the accomplishments of other “amateur” diplomats, such as fellow Hoosiers Wallace and McNutt, and non-Hoosier Dwight Morrow, who was President Calvin Coolidge’s trouble-shooting ambassador to Mexico.

These quibbles aside, *Meredith Nicholson* is an enlightening read, one worthy of both subject and author. A reviewer once attributed Nicholson’s skill as a writer to his “grace of style,” “lightness of touch,” and “deft-weaving of anecdote and illustration” (p. 70). Such compliments also describe Gray’s narration of Nicholson’s life. This book is light enough to be read at twenty-eight thousand feet in the air—where I devoured a large chunk of it—but grounded, nevertheless, in a number of secondary sources, Nicholson’s own extant writings, and a plethora of manuscript collections in Indiana and beyond. Thus, the “last leaf on a famous literary tree that grew in Indiana,” as the *New York Times* eulogized Nicholson in 1947, has at long last found his biographer (p. 243).

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