

Bending Towards Justice: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Assessment of History

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On 25 March 1965, at the conclusion of a now-celebrated fifty mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a crowd of some twenty five thousand people from the steps of the Montgomery State Capitol. In one of his best-known addresses, King expressed his 'conviction that segregation [was] on its deathbed in Alabama' and, by implication, elsewhere across the South. The only uncertainty, he said, concerned 'how costly the segregationists ... will make the funeral.' Calling on all those 'who cherish their democratic traditions' to march on segregated housing and schools, on poverty and ballot boxes, he concluded his remarks by responding to the rhetorical question 'how long will it take?' 'However difficult the moment,' he said, 'however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.' 'How long?' he went on. 'Not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long? Not long. Because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.'¹

Speaking only a decade after he had first sprung to prominence as leader of the bus boycott in the same city, King may have seemed justified in his confidence. A combination of boycotts, sit-ins and freedom

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Our God is Marching On.' Address before the Alabama State Capitol, 25 March 1965, reprinted in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, ed Clayborne Carson, et. al. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 224-8.

rides, of rallies and demonstrations, and of grass-roots organization and education in towns and cities across the South had in the space of ten years yielded a string of advances: from the removal of local segregation ordinances to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Within six months of the Selma to Montgomery march, passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act would only add to the sense of optimism.² Yet today, over thirty years after the march, the children and grandchildren of King's audience in Montgomery might be forgiven for thinking that his faith in the moral universe has not been fully repaid. Looking into the recent literature on the state of black America – whether it deals with housing, health care, criminality, family structure, education, drugs or employment – it is not difficult to find evidence tending to substantiate the prognosis of the 1968 Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders: that the United States was 'moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.' Even to the most casual observer of the American scene, television coverage of the Los Angeles riots or rebellions of 1992 might easily suggest that, at least where African-Americans were concerned, the long arm of King's higher law was not so much bent as crooked. The images of Rodney King lying prostrate before baton-wielding Los Angeles police officers were scarcely what Martin Luther King, Jr. had in mind when he spoke of a bending towards justice.³

Rodney King and urban riots, documentation of chronic instability in the African-American family, statistics on segregation in public education and housing, or even more diffuse evidence of continuing discrimination and prejudice in everyday life: these are not, of course, the whole story. For every documentary on the growth of the so-called black underclass there could be a report of the rise of a prosperous African-American middle class. Statistics of income distribution and, particularly, political

² For general surveys of developments, see Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

³ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 1; Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Surveys of some of the past decade's literature on race relations in the US may be found in Andrew Hacker, 'American Apartheid,' *New York Review of Books*, 3 December 1987, 26-33; Andrew Hacker, 'Black Crime, White Racism,' *New York Review of Books*, 3 March 1988, 36-41; Andrew Hacker, 'Trans-National America,' *New York Review of Books*, 22 November 1990, 19-25; and Andrew Hacker, 'Diversity and its Dangers,' *New York Review of Books*, 7 October 1993, 21-25.

participation make for depressing reading only if one applies selective vision. The Civil Rights Act *has* helped remove many of the formal manifestations of Jim Crow; the Voting Rights Act *has* helped transform the political contours of the South. The fact that some of the most useful works on the civil rights movement in recent years have been published by university presses in Georgia and Mississippi is another, though perhaps less significant, indication of change.⁴ President Truman once joked that he would like to consult only one-armed economists. That way, he said, none of them would be able to qualify their comments by saying 'and yet, on the other hand.' Those who try to evaluate the state of black America today have a lot in common with the economists Truman did consult: there is almost always another hand.⁵

If the experience of African-Americans in general has been a mixed one, much the same might be said about Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. Since his murder in April 1968, King has become one of the United States' most revered figures, and his speeches essential scripture within the nation's civil religion. In 1977 he was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Six years later, President Reagan signed a bill which designated the third Monday in January – close to Dr. King's birthday of 15 January – a federal holiday from 1986 onwards, making him the first black American to be so honoured. In 1986 a statue of King was placed in the US Capitol's Statuary Hall. Were another face to be carved into Mount Rushmore's slopes, King would probably be a less contentious choice than virtually any American president. His name is, in the meantime, celebrated in the United States and across the world, and his work commemorated on everything from buildings to postage stamps. *And yet, on the other hand ...* in death as in life, Martin Luther

4 For brief surveys, see Harvard Sitkoff, 'The Status of African-Americans: Progress and Regression,' in David Nye and Carl Pedersen (eds), *Consumption and American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991), 204-9; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 398-405; and *Generation of Change: The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Washington, DC: USIS, 1989). Detailed analysis is provided by Steven Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Steven Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). The studies published by southern university presses include Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, cited above, and Charles Eagles (ed), *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

5 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Keynote Address, 'Beyond the First Hundred Days: What the Clinton Administration Must Do,' Institute of United States Studies, University of London, 11 March 1993.

King, Jr. has been subjected to often bitter criticism by radicals and conservatives, both black and white. An Uncle Tom to some at the time, a tool of the communists or a man of questionable morals to others, King has since his death been viewed as a poor organizer, an indecisive leader, and a man whose reputation depends to a great degree upon his martyrdom. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Change in Atlanta may continue to propagate his ideas; but those who attacked white truck driver Reginald Denny during the Los Angeles riots seem to have had as little time for those ideas as their predecessors in Watts in 1965. It is Malcolm X, and not King, who appeals most to many young urban blacks in the United States today – not to mention moviegoers in many countries.

In spite of much criticism, throughout his public career King never abandoned his belief in a nonviolent strategy for change, and never wavered in his commitment to standards of truthfulness and honesty. The means embraced by the freedom movement were, he said, just as important as the ends to which they were dedicated, for if the moral universe bent towards justice, the movement could not bend its rules. So it was both ironic and surprising to hear, in November 1990, allegations that King was himself guilty of violating basic standards of honesty. As a student, it was said, he had engaged in plagiarism. According to academics preparing the official edition of his complete writings, both his undergraduate work and his doctoral dissertation showed clear evidence of conscious but unacknowledged copying from the work of others.⁶ Not unexpectedly, many leading King scholars expressed disappointment at the news. To David Garrow, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning study *Bearing the Cross* (1986), King's behaviour was 'academically inappropriate and ethically improper.' To David Lewis, author of the first scholarly biography, *King* (1970), it was 'worse than a crime: it was a mistake' in that 'it was a repeated act of self-betrayal and subversion of the rules of scholarship that was unnecessary from the point of view of ability or

6 *Newsweek*, 19 November 1990, sec. E, p. 1; *New York Times*, 10 November 1990, sec. A, p. 10; *Time*, 3 December 1990, p. 126; Theodore Pappas, 'A Doctor in Spite of Himself: The Strange Career of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dissertation,' *Chronicles of Higher Education*, 15 (January, 1991), 25-9; Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, 'The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 31.

circumstances.' To disdistinguished intellectual liislorian John Higham, 'the greatest modern American spokesman for rights [had] failed a test of responsibility.'⁷

Though few who have reviewed the material could seriously question the findings of plagiarism, a variety of mitigating factors have been advanced to explain King's behaviour. Some have argued that the revelations reflect less badly on King than on the dominant practices of the nation's theological schools. A 'subculture of tacit rhetorical license' encouraged divinity students of King's generation to repeat authority, not least because – as King's own graduate supervisor at Boston University put it – 'all modern theology which is competent is essentially derivative.' Others have suggested that, at Boston's School of Theology in particular, 'comprehensive regurgitation' was valued much more than originality or creativity. A third suggestion has been that King's professors at Boston were guilty of racial paternalism. In a school where, at that time, not one text by an African-American writer was considered worthy of study, it is said, they turned a blind eye to the shortcomings of black students such as King. Like Dr. Johnson confronted by women preaching and dogs walking on their hind legs, they marveled at King's performance not because it had been done well but because it had been done at all. Under circumstances in which black abilities and the black church he was most familiar with were discounted, such arguments imply, King may simply have done what he felt his professors wanted and gone through the motions: in effect, 'repay[ing] their condescension ... in like coin.'⁸

Whatever validity such arguments may have, they are worth noting less for what they tell us about King's personal academic abilities or stan-

7 David S. Garrow, 'King's Plagiarism: Imitation, Insecurity, and Transformation,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 86, 88; David Levering Lewis, 'Failing to Know Martin Luther King, Jr.,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 81, 83-4; John Higham, 'Habits of the Cloth and Standards of the Academy,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 106.

8 David Thelen, 'Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.: An Introduction,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 17-18, 19; Lewis, 'Failing to Know Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 82, 84-5; Garrow, 'King's Plagiarism,' 89; Higham, 106-7. Rejecting all such accusations, one of King's doctoral examiners, Professor Paul Schilling, has defended the originality of King's work but suggested that he may have been driven by the 'demands and pressures' of his work as the new pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery to 'cut corners' unconsciously. See 'Conversation Between S. Paul Schilling and David Thelen,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 75-9.

dards than for the light they throw on the state of civil rights scholarship in general. It is not, after all, as if King owed his influence primarily to his intellectual capabilities. Philosopher Cornel West may have described King in 1986 as 'the most significant "organic intellectual" ... in American history,' able to relate complex ideas to common people; and there may have been a number of studies of King's philosophical and theological beliefs since his death. Yet his biographers have for the most part described him as less than original in his thinking.⁹ Moreover, the discovery that King had engaged in plagiarism came not entirely out of the blue. As early as 1971 one researcher had uncovered evidence of unacknowledged copying in King's 1958 history of the Montgomery bus boycott, *Stride Towards Freedom*.¹⁰ For these and other reasons, any discussion relating solely to King's academic achievement is likely to be of only marginal significance to the historiography of the civil rights movement. As Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, has put it: 'History is caught up in his footprints, and will hardly be disturbed by the absence of some footnotes.'¹¹

When it comes to the overall state of civil rights scholarship, however, at least some of the arguments put forward to mitigate King's plagiarism may be of more significance – not least because, as historian David Thelen has argued, they may offer promising ways to connect biography with social, cultural or political history.¹² Of these, perhaps the most fruitful derive from Keith Miller's study of King's language, *Voice of Deliverance* (1991).¹³ According to Miller, King's own account in *Stride To-*

9 Cornel West, 'The Religious Foundations of the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.,' in Peter Albert and Ronald Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 115-6; Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974); John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 45. Clayborne Carson remarked in 1986 that King's 'most significant leadership attributes were related to his immersion, and contribution to, the intellectual ferment that has always been an essential part of Afro-American freedom struggles.' Clayborne Carson, 'Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle,' *Journal of American History*, 74, 2 (September, 1987), 453.

10 David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: 1986; London: Cape, 1988), 112.

11 Garrow, 'King's Plagiarism,' 86; Lowery quoted in Thelen, 'Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 14.

12 Thelen, 'Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 21.

13 Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and its Sources* (New York: 1991).

ward *Freedom* (1958) of his intellectual roots, accepted for decades by his biographers, is misleading. He was *not* most profoundly influenced by the writings of Hegel, Niebuhr and Waller Rauschenbush – what Miller calls the 'Great White Thinkers' – but by the black church traditions of folk preaching in which he had been steeped from childhood. The relationship of all this to the plagiarism case lies, for Miller, in the fact that the black church was part of an African-American oral culture rather than the white print culture of the university world into which King later moved. The texts of the sermons with which King was familiar were not written down, copyrighted and treated as private property, as they might have been within the print culture of European-American scholarship. Rather they were memorized and repeated. The language of the black church was, in Miller's words, 'common treasure – not private property.' 'The rhetorical issue [was] always authority, not originally; appropriateness, not personal expression; the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not the view of an individual speaker.' 'Like generations of folk preachers before him,' Miller says, 'King often borrowed, modified, and synthesized [materials], arrangements and forms of argument used by other preachers.' Handled from this point of view, Miller concludes, when King 'ventured outside the universe of African-American orality to negotiate his way through the unfamiliar terrain of intellectualized print culture,' he did not so much violate established academic standards as remain true to the criteria of learning with which he was most familiar.¹⁴

Though developed well before the plagiarism story broke, Miller's thesis may offer too convenient a response to the charges. When he argues that King used his thorough schooling 'in folk horniletics [to] resist ... academic commandments about language,' it is worth remembering that he knew what footnotes were. As David Lewis has pointed out: 'King, of his own volition ... formally endorsed and claimed to subscribe to the elementary rules of the academy of learning.'¹⁵ Yet Miller's argu-

14 Keith D. Miller, 'Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Folk Pulpit,' *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 120-1; Keith U. Miller, 'Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.,' *PMLA*, 105 (January, 1990), 71, 78; Thelen, 'Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 16-17. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958; New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 72-88. For the earlier approach to King's influences, see Stephen Oates, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Martin Luther King,' *Massachusetts Review*, 22 (1981), 301-20; Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 16-39.

15 Miller, 'King and the Black Folk Pulpit,' 121; Lewis, 'Failing to Know Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 82.

ments do serve to highlight broader issues in the historiography of the civil rights movement that transcend the narrowly circumscribed question of King's scholarly practices. The emphasis on the crucial role of the African-American church in the inaltering of King, shared by philosopher Cornel West and biographer David Garrow, is, for example, but one part of a broader emphasis on the role of the church in the making of the movement shared by sociologist Aldon Morris and historian Adam Fairclough. As a study of works by these writers makes clear, the black church provided not only leadership within the civil rights movement but also an organizational basis, a political platform, a source of funds and labour, a mutual aid system, a communications network, a forum for debate, a belief structure, an emotional reservoir and – not least – a common discourse.¹⁶

This more recent emphasis on the African-American church is, in turn, part of a still-larger historiographical debate about those aggregate developments that together engendered and propelled the civil rights movement. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (1984), for example, Aldon Morris identifies not only the African-American church but also the black college system and the black family as vital institutional bases for an increasingly effective black protest movement. The nationwide urbanization of the African-American population he also sees as highly significant: not only did it make organization and communication within black communities easier; it also increased their influence on the nation's political parties. Such an influence could not have been exercised, however, without the existence of an established tradition of black protest against segregation, disenfranchisement and other expressions of racial prejudice, which Morris identifies as a third key to the movement's post-war growth. In addition, he emphasizes the beneficial impact of developments in international relations on the struggle for racial justice: the process of decolonization and the shift in the Cold War's focus to the Third World during the late 1950s made racial discrimination an ever-greater burden for successive US governments to bear before the eyes of the

¹⁶ West, 120-23; Garrow, 'King's Plagiarism,' 86; Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Aldon Morris, 'A Man Prepared for the Times: A Sociological Analysis of the Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 39-40, 49-51; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*.

world. Finally, Morris refers to a range of technical developments in the field of mass media, notably the spread of television, the introduction of lightweight cameras and the growth of satellite broadcasting. These, he argues, made it possible for the civil rights movement to draw public attention to injustice in ways previously unthinkable.¹⁷

Such sociological approaches to the civil rights movement have a built-in tendency to highlight collective, often gradual and less dramatic processes at the expense of individual and personalized events, such as the Montgomery bus boycott or the 1963 March on Washington. In recent years, however, those engaged in producing new historical interpretations of the movement have also challenged earlier emphases on the prominent role of figures such as Dr. King. In his path-breaking *In Struggle* (1981), as well as in subsequent scholarly papers, Clayborne Carson has argued 'that the black struggle was a locally-based mass movement rather than simply a reform movement led by national civil rights leaders.'¹⁸ At a 1986 conference in Washington, DC, Robert Moses made a distinction between organizers and leaders. The world of organizers 'didn't make good copy,' he said, and it did not bring people like Amzie Moore or Ella Baker national attention; 'but it made the movement.' Without 'the tissues and the bones ... of the movement' which they built up, prominent leaders like King could have achieved nothing. At a conference on King at the University of Newcastle in 1993, Julian Bond referred to the recent opening of the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama, the scene of one of King's best-known triumphs in 1963. The Institute featured a visitors' book in which those attending were invited to record their comments and memories of events there. Bond recited many entries from the book – 'boycotted a store,' 'helped organize children's demonstration,' 'marched to City Hall' – and then added pointedly that

17 Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*; Aldon Morris, 'A Man Prepared for the Times,' 37-48. See also Louis Harlan, 'Thoughts on the Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 60-62; and Harvard Sitkoff, 'The Preconditions for Racial Change,' in William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff (eds), *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 157-66. Morris's emphasis on the importance of the black church is challenged by Adolph Reed, Jr., *The Jessie Jackson Phenomenon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 2-4, 31-33, 41-60.

18 Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Clayborne Carson, 'Reconstructing the King Legacy: Scholars and National Myth,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 244-5.

the first mention of Martin Luther King, Jr. did not occur until twenty-five pages into the book.¹⁹

Like many other areas of historical enquiry, research into the civil rights movement carries with it traces of the political and ideological struggles that informed its development. During the 1960s, Carson, Moses and Bond were all active within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the more radical, grass-roots oriented organizations, which maintained a sometimes uneasy relationship with King, his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and other more conservative groups within the civil rights coalition. In 1986 Carson could write that 'if King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did,' from bus boycotts via sit-ins, mass marches and voter registrations to legislative reforms. By contrast, the late Professor Nathan Huggins has insisted upon the significance of King's own individual contribution, a function particularly of the sense of mission he embodied, to which millions responded: 'you cannot remove Martin Luther King from [the] picture and have the story happen more or less the same way.' Hugh Graham has described Carson's redefinition of the civil rights movement as the 'black freedom struggle' as an attempt 'to push black power ideology ... into the history of the movement where it does not apply.' Perhaps not coincidentally, both Graham and Huggins played relatively minor roles in the civil rights movement, neither within SNCC.²⁰

Historical enquiry without this sort of disagreement would imply an uncontentious and perhaps stagnant discipline. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the differences in interpretation and emphasis between scholars like Carson and Huggins are no more than that: both

19 Robert Parris Moses, 'Commentary,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 73-4; Julian Bond, 'Civil Rights: Then and Now,' Public Lecture, Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Conference: Civil Rights and Race Relations, University of Newcastle, 22 October 1993. A version of Bond's address is available as 'History, Hopes and Heroes,' *Southern Changes*, [Atlanta], 15, 4 (Winter, 1993), 1-7.

20 Carson, 'Reconstructing the King Legacy,' 245-6; Nathan Huggins, 'Commentary,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 87; Hugh Graham, 'The Civil Rights Movement,' *over Here: Reviews in American Studies*, 8, 2 (Autumn, 1988), 17. Graham's critique was of Clayborne Carson, 'Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle,' in Eagles (ed), *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, 19-37. Hugh Murray has added that those 'who were involved in the movement in the 1950s and 1960s called it the civil rights movement. Historians in pipe-smoke filled rooms ought not to try and rename it.' Hugh Murray, 'Change in the South' *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 1h (Suinmei; 1988), 119-35.

agree on the need to place biographical investigation within historical, social, political and institutional contexts. This broad consensus has been reflected within the scholarly literature. Where earlier biographers such as Lawrence Reddick, Lerone Bennett and William Miller published books whose titles reflected a narrow (and largely uncritical) preoccupation with their subject, recent biographers have broadened their focus (and deepened their critique). David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* (1986) is thus subtitled *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*; Adam Fairclough's *To Redeem the Soul of America* (1987) is subtitled *The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* While King's life lies at its heart, Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters* (1989) rejects the concept of biography which, he says, 'makes for unstable history and collapsible myth.' In this sense, as David Garrow remarked in 1991, knowledge of King's plagiarism may 'unavoidably alter our understanding of the young Martin Luther King.' In the long term and more generally, however, it should do nothing to challenge the growing consensus that 'the emergence and development of' the black freedom movement was in no way the simple product of individual leaders and national organizations.²¹

Garrow's challenge to the primacy of 'national organizations,' in common with Carson's reference to 'a locally-based mass movement' for racial justice, is itself based on a growing literature dealing with the civil rights movement in individual states and localities. The 1980s saw the publication of book-length investigations of the movement in places such as Greensboro, North Carolina; St. Augustine, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi; Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee; Chicago, Illinois; and Tuskegee, Alabama.²² More recently, scholars have been engaged in producing

21 Lawrence Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man? A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson, 1964); William Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life, Martyrdom and Meaning for the World* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1963* (New York: 1988; London: Macmillan, 1990), xi-xii; Garrow, 'King's Plagiarism,' 68.

22 William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); David Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); John Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and Schism* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1979); J. David Woodward, *The Burden of Busing: The Politics of Desegregation in Nashville* (Knoxville: Univer →

books and theses on the movement in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and elsewhere. These studies are supplemented by research into individual institutions such as the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and more especially the Citizen Education Project originated there by Septima Clark. Pctes Ling's research into Clark's work with black women at Highlander is, in turn, part of a broader investigation of the activities of women – black and white – within the movement in general. The names of Ella Balter of SCLC and Jo Ann Robinson of the Women's Political Committee in Montgomery, for example, have been added to that of Rosa Parks of the NAACP in the movement's role of honour, and there will be others. As these more specialized works fill in some of the missing detail – so it will become easier to evaluate the accuracy of Hugh Graham's overall characterization of the civil rights movement as 'a cloth of many colours and patterns [made up of] red threads, white threads, lavender, elephant-hair, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, Quaker-Unitarian, female, poor, northern, foundation, and undoubtedly other threads.'²³

Where, in conclusion, will all this leave Martin Luther King, Jr? Scholarly investigations of the civil rights movement at the state and local levels will, in at least some cases, tend to marginalize him by their very nature. The fund-raising demands which led him to travel everywhere meant that – as some SNCC members occasionally complained – he was never anywhere for very long (unless he was in jail). Likewise, and given what we are told about his attitudes to and relations with women, further research into the role of women in the movement is unlikely to

22 Continued

sity of Tennessee Press, 1985); Joan Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1985; Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989); Alan Anderson and George Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

23 Adam Fairclough, 'The Civil Rights Movement in Louisiana, 1939-1954,' and John Kirk, 'He Founded a Movement: W.H. Flowers, The Committee on Negro Organizations and Black Activism in Arkansas,' papers given at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Conference, University of Newcastle, 22 October 1993; John Dittmer, 'The Politics of the Mississippi Movement,' in Eagles (ed), *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, 65-93; Cynthia Stokes Brown (ed), *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Nashville, TN: Wild Trees Press, 1986); Jo Ann Grant, dir., *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker* (New York: First Run Films, 1981); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 129-72; David Garrow (ed), *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Graham, 24.

add to his stature. Such research may, however, bring little-known individuals and forgotten initiatives – such as W.F. Flowers and his Committee on Negro Organization – into greater prominence. At the 1993 Newcastle conference on King, John White gave a paper on the Montgomery Bus Boycott while sporting a lapel badge portraying ‘the father of the civil rights movement.’ It was not Martin Luther King, Jr., however, but E.D. Nixon of the Montgomery Improvement Association.²⁴ Through such diffusing of the spotlight, therefore, we can expect to witness the continuing development of a fuller – not necessarily less respectful – portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as of the movement he came to embody – regardless of our knowledge of the plagiarism. If, as David Garrow believes, the recent revelations prompt a reassessment of his college and university activities, they may also lead us to see King's later involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott as the crucial formative experience that provided him with the dedication, courage and sense of purpose he would show for the rest of his life. This would certainly lend weight to Ella Balter's contention that ‘the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement.’ Rephrased into scholarly terms, Clayborne Carson concludes that King was ‘a major example of the emergent local black leadership that developed as African-American communities mobilized for sustained struggle.’ In more poetic terms, Robert Moses offers a metaphor: the civil rights movement as an ocean, and King as one particularly visible wave. ‘Through [a] history of the movement,’ he says, ‘we can understand the relationship of Dr. King to the movement. But without that history, trying to understand King is as meaningless as trying to understand the wave without the ocean.’²⁵

It is doubtful whether Martin Luther King, Jr. himself would have objected to that metaphor. As Clayborne Carson remarked in 1986, ‘he recognized the extent to which he was a product of the movement that called him to leadership.’ King would almost certainly have agreed with Bernice Johnson Reagon's more recent claim that ‘the Civil Rights Movement was peopled by ordinary people who did extraordinary things.’

²⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 373-6; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 49-50; John White, ‘Nixon was the One: Edgar Daniel Nixon, the MIA and the Montgomery Bus Boycott,’ Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Conference, University of Newcastle, 22 October 1993.

²⁵ Garrow, ‘King's Plagiarism,’ 90-92; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 625; Carson, ‘Reconstructing the King Legacy,’ 246; Moses, 73.

Whether, to return to his own metaphor, he would feel today that the long arm of the moral universe still bends towards justice for the children and grandchildren of his supporters on the Selma march is another matter. King believed that traces of God's presence were detectable in both history and human nature. There was, he felt, 'some creative force that works for universal wholeness' which made both possible and necessary the creation of the 'beloved community.' For all a mere historian knows, he could have been right. But whatever conclusions might be reached about the movement of the moral universe for African-Americans today, the assessment of history represented by recent work on the civil rights movement suggests that Martin Luther King, Jr. himself is having his faith repaid. As Steven Lawson put it in 1991: 'If the studies of the next thirty years are as rich as those of the previous three decades ... we all have something to look forward to.'²⁶

26 Carson, 'Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 454; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "'Nobody Knows the Trouble I See'"; or, "'By and By I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load,'" *Journal of American History*, 78, 1 (June, 1991), 112; Richard H. King, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Meaning of Freedom: A Political Interpretation,' in Albert and Hoffman (eds), *We Shall Overcome*, 138; Steven E. Lawson, 'Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,' *American Historical Review*, 96, 2 (April, 1991), 471.