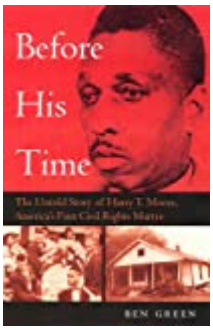
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ben Green. *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xii + 310 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-2837-8.

Reviewed by Steven G. Noll (Department of History, University of Florida)

Published on H-Florida (December, 2005)

Florida, Civil Rights, and Historical Memory

The late spring and early summer of 2005 witnessed a flurry of public interest and governmental action regarding the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In early May, the body of Emmitt Till, the 14-year-old African-American youth slain in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman, was exhumed from a suburban Chicago cemetery and an autopsy performed to determine his cause of death and the possibility of discovering the individuals involved in his murder. A month later, the United States Senate passed a resolution apologizing to the victims of lynching, saying in part, "Whereas protection against lynching was the minimum and most basic of Federal responsibilities, and the Senate considered but failed to enact anti-lynching legislation despite repeated requests by civil rights groups, Presidents, and the House of Representatives to do so ... therefore be resolved that the Senate Ã¢?Â¦ remembers the history of lynching, to ensure that these tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated."[1] Later that same month, a jury of nine whites and three blacks convicted Edgar Lee Killens, a now elderly preacher and KKK member, of manslaughter in the murders of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi during the "Freedom Summer" of 1964. The conviction came 41 years to the day after the murders. It seems America is finally, if not coming to terms with, then at least acknowledging its brutal and racist past. *Before His Time* fits into this pattern of recognizing and illuminating old wounds and calling for justice, no matter how delayed. By telling the story of the life and assassination of Harry T. Moore, author Ben Green places Florida in a central point in the civil rights movement and also builds on emerging literature that sees the 1950s as a crucial decade in the development of that struggle. Re-released as a paperback in 2005 by the University Press of Florida, *Before His Time* attempts to bring "that story [of Harry T. Moore] out of the shadows and silence of the past fifty years" (p. ix). Green's success in that attempt makes this book a valuable contribution to both Florida history and the history of the civil rights movement in general.

Ben Green tells the story of Harry T. Moore, a leader of Florida's nascent civil rights movement in the 1930s, 1940s, and into the 1950s. Born in Suwanee County, in rural north Florida, in 1905, Moore grew up in the heart of the segregated South. The Florida of Moore's youth

was a far cry from the tourist state of beaches and orange groves that boosters sought to portray. Tied to an agricultural and extractive economy in which workers, overwhelmingly black, were brutally exploited, this area represented the worst of the Jim Crow South. Lynchings of black men for crimes real and imagined were an all-too-familiar part of the landscape. Justice, if it could be called that, was enforced by racist and corrupt sheriffs more concerned with maintaining white supremacy and increasing their own wealth than with law enforcement. Blacks lived under the veil of the caste system of segregation, forced to endure second-class citizenship with little hope of change. Yet Moore managed to not only survive but thrive within the world blacks in Florida created for themselves. Upon the death of his father in 1914, his mother sent young Harry to live with relatives in Daytona Beach and then Jacksonville. By 1925, Moore had received a high school diploma from a private segregated black high school and become an advocate of the importance of education in improving the lives of black Floridians. Upon graduation, Moore moved to Brevard County to take a job teaching at Cocoa's black elementary school. The "Space Coast" boom was thirty years in the future for this part of Florida, which in the 1920s remained relatively undeveloped and isolated, dependent on citrus for its economic well-being. An urbane, literate straight-laced young teacher, Moore seemed an ill fit for this frontier-like region. Meeting his wife, also a teacher, at a whist party, Moore married in 1926, and settled in the small community of Mims, living the life of a black community leader. Not content to simply improve his race by teaching school, Harry Moore moved gradually into the field of racial activism, joining the NAACP in 1933. Green concludes that "in the eight years he had been in Brevard County, Harry T. Moore had been biding his time, building his family and a teaching career, and waiting for the right moment to get involved" (p. 26).

Green effectively shows Moore as a tireless crusader for the improvement of black rights in Florida. For Moore, education and civic responsibility were the keys to black improvement. He saw the ballot as crucial to ensuring the death of Jim Crow and the full participation of blacks in public life. Educators, whether they followed the intellectual path of W. E. B. DuBois or the vocational beliefs of Booker T. Washington, were integral members of the small African-American intellectual elite. Using his position as a teacher and principal, Moore crisscrossed Florida in the 1930s and 1940s trying to convince blacks to join the NAACP and challenge the state's voting laws. He also became a frequent and vociferous letter-writer to members of the state's white power structure, often pushing them to investigate horrific incidents of racial violence and lynching. By 1944, he was a guiding force in the establishment of the Progressive Voters' League, organized to enfranchise blacks and end the practice of the all-white primary. Buoyed by the 1944 United States Supreme Court decision of *Smith v. Allright*, in which the court struck down Texas's white primary statute, Moore oversaw the registration of hundreds of black voters. His activism cost him his job, as the Brevard County School Board did not rehire him and his wife in 1946. With this major change in his life, Moore became a full-time activist and organizer for the Florida NAACP. Living a peripatetic lifestyle, Moore visited small towns and communities throughout the state, encouraging NAACP membership and voter registration. He also continued his letter-writing to state officials, getting few results but making his name known across the state as an important (and dangerous) figure in the black community. Moore's tireless campaigning brought increased support for black community activism but gave him little financial security. By the late 1940s, Moore was a recognized figure throughout the state, but had alienated many NAACP officials, who saw his organizing as self-promotion on the one hand and counterproductive on the other as his relentless attacks on the white establishment of Florida made many in the black community uneasy. These problems came to a head in the 1949 Groveland case, in which Moore squared off with Lake County sheriff Willis McCall, the epitome of white southern legal racism.

Willis McCall, the archetypical Florida cracker, was born in Umatilla in 1910. Growing up in rural backwoods Florida, McCall developed the fierce independence and overt racism that marked poor whites that came of age in the Depression. After working his own farm, running a dairy, and working as an agriculture inspector for both the state and federal governments, McCall was elected sheriff of Lake County in 1944. In the tradition of Southern law enforcement officials, McCall quickly used the office to aggrandize himself and scrupulously enforce the color line. His actions, particularly regarding vagrancy arrests of black workers, quickly became a flash point in Florida race relations. But the July 1949 arrest of three young black men for the rape of a white woman put McCall on the front pages of newspapers around the country. A white mob rampaged through the black section of the small Lake County community of Groveland, demanding vigilante justice for the suspects. McCall simultaneously stood down the crowd and fanned the flames

of its rage with juicy newspaper quotes. He led a posse that hunted down and killed a fourth suspect. A short trial with an utterly predictable guilty verdict quickly followed, and two of the defendants were sentenced to death, the third given a life sentence because of his age. Harry T. Moore, however, would not let the trial follow the course of so many other Southern cases. Moore became a leader in the NAACP's appeals in the case, now dubbed "Florida's Little Scottsboro" (p. 107). In April 1951, the United States Supreme Court ordered another trial for the two adult defendants. Moore applauded the decision and wrote to members of the Florida NAACP that "these boys are Negroes–they are members of our race. And when the life of any innocent Negro is spared, all of us should rejoice" (quoted, p. 128).

The Groveland case was played out in an incendiary atmosphere of slowly changing race relations. Moore, through his Progressive Voters League, was instrumental in getting thousands of blacks to vote in the 1950 elections. The Senate election of that year featured a vicious campaign in which George Smathers defeated incumbent Claude Pepper in a no-holds-barred primary. Although race was a not a major issue in the campaign, the implication was clear–white Floridians would not brook "an unreconstructed New Dealer" like Pepper to represent them in Washington (p. 117). Moore and his new black voting bloc vigorously supported Pepper in the primary. Moore's voting tactics were more successful on the local level. Black support was critical in helping to unseat the long-time chairman of the Brevard County Commission. Whites did not take kindly to the attempts by blacks, and especially Moore, to rework the state's political and social landscape. A wave of bombings, often accompanied by KKK cross-burnings, during the summer and fall of 1951 put the state on notice that white supremacy was still a potent, and deadly, force. Then on November 6, as McCall was transporting the two Groveland defendants back to Lake County from the state prison for their new trial, he shot both prisoners, killing one and grievously wounding the other. Claiming the prisoners were trying to escape, McCall was exonerated by a coroner's inquest that concluded that the incident was "justified by reason of the fact that Willis V. McCall was at that time acting in line of duty and in defense of his own life" (quoted, p. 148). Moore was furious at the whitewash and continued his attacks on Florida's white establishment in general and McCall in particular. It seemed events were coming to a crisis. Moore was also under attack from the Florida NAACP, who saw his views as too confrontational and political. At the November 1951 state convention in Daytona Beach, NAACP officials demoted Moore to an unpaid position, announcing that he had spent too much time on PVL business and not even attended to NAACP concerns. Green concludes that "as Christmas drew near, everything had changed for Harry T. Moore–and yet nothing had changed. One day after his removal at the Daytona Beach convention, he drove to West Palm Beach for a Groveland fund raiser" (p. 161). And Christmas proved to be the cruelest time as Moore and his wife were killed by a huge dynamite blast that blew their house apart and created a gigantic crate under their bedroom. Blacks were put on notice once again–assaults against the Jim Crow color line would not be tolerated.

And then Harry T. Moore slipped from both history and memory. After memorial services and failed criminal investigations, the story was lost. The civil rights revolution reshaped America (though not as profoundly as proponents hoped and more profoundly than opponents wished) but neither Moore's pioneering efforts nor his brutal murder were mentioned much. 1954 and 1955 became the birth years of the movement with Emmett Till as its first martyr and Martin Luther King as its first hero. The struggles always took place in the Deep South, as Birmingham, Montgomery, and Selma took their places as shrines to the cause. Never Florida, never Harry T. Moore. Ben Green's book provides a valuable corrective to the now traditional story of the civil rights movement. After reading this book, we cannot talk about this era in American history without at least thinking of Harry T. Moore–and Ben Green deserves much credit for taking Moore out of the shadows and placing him in the center of the movement. More than a biography of Moore, this book makes an effort to rethink the traditional chronology and geography of civil rights activism. Harry T. Moore was instrumental in getting blacks to vote in Florida over a full decade before the Voting Rights Act of 1965. His challenges to institutional racism, especially his questioning of the issues involved in the Groveland case, were some of the most eloquent appeals made for black equality. And Moore's presence in Florida reminds us that the Sunshine State was more than a tourist destination in the 1950s–it was an integral part of the Solid South, a backward-looking racist region where control was maintained by the brute force of lawmen like Willis McCall.

In this summer of 2005, the state of Florida reopened the still-unsolved case of the murder of Harry T. Moore. Attorney General Charlie Crist has posted a $25,000 reward "for information leading to the identification of the

perpetrators of the Christmas 1951 bombing murders of civil rights pioneer Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriette."[2] This book, along with the PBS documentary film "Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore," were instrumental in getting the state to attempt to solve the case. Green spends much of the last fifty pages of the book speculating on who killed Harry T. Moore. He concludes it probably was a group of Orange County Klansmen, centered in Sanford, who pulled off the killing. Who authorized it and paid for it, and its relation to the Groveland case, remains open to speculation. Willis McCall died in 1994, still unrepentant for his role in the Groveland shootings and still denying any involvement in the death of Harry T. Moore. By the time of his death, McCall was an anachronism, a throw-back to a time when justice in Florida meant justice for whites only. It says much about how far Florida has come regarding racial justice when one sees that the new Brevard County courthouse was named after Harry T. Moore. It also say much about how far Florida still has to go to really achieve racial equality when one realizes that Harry T. Moore's killers have never been brought to justice nearly 54 years after he was murdered. Ben Green's book, fleshing out the life of the man he calls "America's first Civil Rights martyr," should be required reading for all Floridians, as a sobering lesson that (in Moore's own words) "Freedom never descends upon a people–it is always bought with a price" (161).

Notes

[1]. http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=sr109-39, accessed July 15, 2005.

[2]. http://myfloridalegal.com/newsrel.nsf/newsreleases/A5AB44455F87414C852570 accessed August 17, 2005.

Citation: Steven G. Noll. Review of Green, Ben, *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10981