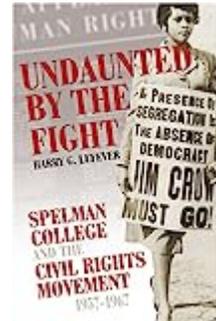


**Harry G. Lefever.** *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1967.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005. vii + 286 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-976-0; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86554-938-8.



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## From “Spelman Girls” to Civil Rights Activists

“‘You can always tell a Spelman girl,’ alumni and friends of the college have boasted for years. The ‘Spelman girl’ walked gracefully, talked properly, went to church every Sunday, poured tea elegantly and, in general, had all the attributes of the product of a fine finishing school. If intellect and talent and social consciousness happened to develop also, they were, to an alarming extent, by-products,” former Spelman professor Howard Zinn recounts (p. 15). Despite the school’s emphasis on respectability instead of social action, a small but dedicated and influential group of Spelman women emerged as participants in the civil rights movement. Harry G. Lefever traces the arc of their activism, as well as that of professors such as Zinn, in *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1967*.

By 1957, Spelman was the oldest institution of higher education for black women and one of the most prestigious. It was one of a number of black colleges that comprised the Atlanta University System. Lefever, a sociologist, joined the faculty in 1966 but largely was a non-participant in the civil rights movement. Nonetheless, he uses his insider perspective to uncover the relationship

of Spelman College to the struggle; in doing so, he increases our understanding of the local and national civil rights movement.

Both familiar and unfamiliar names surface in this story, including Spelman College women Ruby Doris Smith (Robinson), Herschelle Sullivan (Challenor), Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Robinson (Zoharah Simmons), Marian Wright (Edelman), Bernice Johnson (Reagon), and Betty Stevens (Walker); Spelman professors Howard Zinn, Gloria Wade Bishop (Wade-Gayles), and Staunton Lynd; and local and national civil rights movement figures Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian Bond, John Lewis, Bob Moses, and Lonnie King.

Placing women at the center of his narrative, Lefever uses character sketches to illuminate women’s participation in the Atlanta movement and to document their activism in such places as Laurel, Mississippi; Selma, Alabama; Washington, D.C.; and Rock Hill, South Carolina. He frequently uses women’s voices to share the students’ perspectives at the time and in hindsight. “It is important that the story of Spelman’s involvement in the civil rights movement be told by the women who lived it,” he ex-

plains. "Too often in the past, the story of the movement, both in Atlanta and throughout the South, has been told from the perspective of male activists" (pp. xi-xii). To capture women's voices and tell Spelman's story, Lefever uses a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, including oral histories, panel discussion transcripts, newspaper and magazine articles, books, letters, diaries, and poems.

Lefever organizes his study chronologically, beginning with a brief history of Spelman College from its founding in 1881 until 1957. He chooses the late 1950s as his major starting point because that time period saw a heightened movement for desegregation in Atlanta. Spelman women and Zinn became involved in efforts to integrate the library system and the public seating section of the Georgia state legislature.

The big push for desegregation, however, came with the advent of the sit-in movement. Inspired by the sit-ins by four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960, students from the Atlanta University System, including Marian Wright and Roslyn Pope from Spelman, prepared a document that detailed the inequities and injustices faced by local African Americans. Titled "An Appeal for Human Rights," it was soon approved by the Atlanta student bodies and published in the Atlanta newspapers. Shortly afterward, Atlanta University students began the sit-in movement in Atlanta. Lefever provides extensive detail on the involvement of Spelman students in this and subsequent direct-action campaigns, focusing on their nonviolent tactics, arrests and jail time, and successes in breaking Jim Crow barriers.

To coordinate their protest efforts, Atlanta University students formed the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights, and Spelman student Herschelle Sullivan co-chaired it. The committee was one of numerous local student groups that Southern Christian Leadership Conference official Ella Baker called to Raleigh, North Carolina, for a conference in April 1960 to discuss the sit-in movement sweeping the South. With Baker's encouragement, the student representatives decided to form their own organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to coordinate and facilitate the direct-action movement. With SNCC's headquarters in Atlanta, Spelman women soon became involved in its efforts, and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson (Smith married Clifford Robinson in 1964) became its executive secretary in 1966.

Early in the 1960s, Smith and other Spelman women

began to get involved in movement activities outside of Atlanta as well. Smith, for instance, was part of a delegation of SNCC members who journeyed to Rock Hill, South Carolina, to support jailed demonstrators and who were arrested after they engaged in nonviolent protests. She also participated in the Freedom Ride effort of 1961, in which blacks and whites boarded buses to test the South's compliance with a recent Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregation in interstate transportation facilities.

A group of Spelman women traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1963 to attend the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, and Wright and Zinn later joined the second of two Selma-to-Montgomery, Alabama, voting rights marches in 1965. During Freedom Summer in 1964, a number of Spelman faculty and students headed to Mississippi to participate in efforts to provide education and voter registration to the state's black residents. Gwen Robinson, for example, served as director of volunteers in Laurel, Mississippi, where the activists opened a day-care center, operated a lending library, and conducted a mock voter-registration campaign.

Lefever ends his study with the untimely and tragic death of Smith Robinson in October 1967. He argues that her death symbolically marks the demise both of SNCC and the civil rights movement: As she was dying from terminal cancer in 1967, SNCC began to unravel as a result of economic hardships and political divisiveness, and Lefever points out that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death came only six months after Smith Robinson's. Although Lefever ends his examination of the movement in 1967, he provides an important epilogue in which he discusses the later careers of his main characters, revealing their continuing efforts to promote social justice at home and abroad.

Lefever's book has a number of strengths, particularly his international perspective on the civil rights movement and his discussion of intraracial divisions. First, he provides a brief but important and fascinating discussion of the impact of international affairs on Spelman's female activists. Determined to provide their students with environments isolated from the segregated South, Spelman administrators began study-abroad programs in the late 1950s. Wright, Sullivan, and Pope were among the Spelman students who spent time in Europe as part of this effort. Lefever writes, "These international experiences greatly broadened the students' horizons and made them more aware of the inequities

and injustices that existed in the United States. Study abroad also helped students realize that social injustices [could] be challenged and that students [could] be powerful agents for social change” (p. 19).

In a different chapter, he discusses a 1964 trip of SNCC activists, including Smith Robinson, to Guinea, which had won its independence from France some six years earlier. There, they were further exposed to the parallels between the anti-colonialism movement in Africa and the civil rights struggle at home. Thus, Lefever’s work adds to the current trend in civil rights movement scholarship to look at the international aspects of the struggle.

Second, although Spelman College provided these international opportunities for its students, Lefever’s study also makes clear the opposition of the school to civil rights efforts. As a whole, scholarship on the black freedom struggle tends to be hagiographic and to minimize intraracial dissent. Lefever provides an important corrective by exploring intraracial issues and thus revealing the complexity of the struggle and the diversity of African American views. From the start, he makes clear that less than 5 percent of Spelman women and professors participated in the movement. Some even faced repercussions for their efforts, such as Zinn and Bishop, who were both fired.

Gwen Robinson remembers that college administrators “made it pretty clear that any young ladies who got involved [in the movement] could be summarily dismissed” (p. 182). She and three other students were expelled for their activism, but they were reinstated after student protests. When they returned to the college, however, they were placed on strict probation. In response to these violations of academic freedom, Lynd resigned in protest. Though Lefever also discusses the opposition of whites to the movement, his discussion of opposition within the African American community is particularly valuable in further revealing the many obstacles civil rights activists faced.

Similar to Christina Greene’s recent book on female civil rights activists in Durham, North Carolina (*Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, 2005), Lefever’s work also augments the existing scholarship on the black freedom movement by focusing on women. His book is weakened,

however, by its surprisingly limited discussion of gender. He provides details on what women did much more than he examines how their activities and treatment were shaped by, and challenged, gendered ideas and conventions. For example, from time to time, he mentions the gender-based discrimination that female activists faced in jail, where they were subject to sexual assault from guards and fellow inmates. Yet, Lefever does not go on to provide a gendered analysis of this treatment. Indeed, this is a missed opportunity, especially given the salience of this issue for today as human rights groups report the widespread practice of sexual abuse of women in prisons.

Although Lefever mentions that Smith Robinson and other female activists faced sexism, he does not explore in depth its manifestations or how it affected their participation in the movement. Curiously, in places, Lefever can even seem dismissive of the seriousness of sexism in the struggle. For example, he provides an analysis of SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael’s infamous statement that “the proper position of women in the movement is prone.” In short, Lefever argues that this statement was simply a joke and has been taken out of context; he even includes quotes by SNCC women to support his case.

Lefever also could have looked further at the relationship between the civil rights and peace movements. He reveals that eighteen Spelman students and Lynd traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1962 to participate in a peace demonstration with other students from across the country to let President John F. Kennedy and Congress know that they supported a “peace race,” not an arms race. Although his chapter is titled “Twin Issues: Civil Rights and Peace,” Lefever writes less than two pages about the peace movement. Though Lefever’s book is too brief in places, it raises many promising questions and issues for other scholars to explore. In *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement, 1957-1967*, Lefever does an excellent job of uncovering the participation of Spelman College faculty and students in the movement. He adds to our understanding of the civil rights movement by placing women at the center of his account; looking at the role of a black college; exploring intraracial issues and dissent; showing the connection of a local movement with other regional, national, and international efforts; and using the words of women to tell this freedom story.

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