



Sarah Patton Boyle. *The Desegregated Heart: A Virginian's Stand in Time of Transition.* Introduction by Jennifer Ritterhouse. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xxxii + 388 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2029-0.

Reviewed by J. Michael Butler (Department of Social Sciences, South Georgia College)

Published on H-South (September, 2001)

<cite>The Desegregated Heart</cite>: A Civil Rights Classic Which Remains Relevant

The Desegregated Heart: A Civil Rights Classic Which Remains Relevant

While the written recollections of civil rights activists continue to increase as years pass, Sarah Patton Boyle's *The Desegregated Heart* remains a unique contribution to the existing movement literature. First published in 1962, the book traces Boyle's evolution from a defender of the Southern racial status quo to a public advocate for black equality in the late 1950s. It is a valuable autobiographical account of the obstacles and triumphs an upper class white woman experienced during the 1950s freedom struggle, yet also provides insight into many other elements of Southern society during a period of considerable social unrest.

The latest edition of *The Desegregated Heart* includes two features which enhance its appeal for students and scholars of the black freedom movement. An introduction by Jennifer Ritterhouse places the book in historical context, provides background information on the author and her influences not available in the original volume, and briefly traces Boyle's public life through the 1960s. In addition, the edition reprints fourteen letters written between Boyle and T. J. Sellers, the black newspaper editor who contributed heavily to her development as an integrationist. The new introduction and inclusion of the primary documents contributes intriguing elements for those familiar with the book, suggests directions for future research, and adds to the appeal it has for civil rights students and scholars.

The Desegregated Heart is divided into three parts, the first of which Boyle entitled "The Southern Never-Never Land." The initial chapters describe the customs which separated Southern whites and blacks in the first half of the twentieth century. Young Patty, as she was called since her 1906 birth, had several black playmates but their relationships changed when she turned twelve. Adults trained the child to become "a typical Southern lady" (p. 29), characterized by an intense love of region, social superiority, and white supremacy. She learned many features of the unwritten "Southern code" (p. 21), that separated the races in complex and subtle ways, such as speaking to blacks with a different accent, never addressing black adults with courtesy titles, and believing that blacks appreciated white acknowledgment of their differences. Patty thus concluded at a young age that the Negro "was our pet, often our child, but ... never our equal" nor "given human dignity" (p. 49).

The paternalism which also characterized the worldview Patty learned intensified after she married E. Roger Boyle III in 1932. In 1950 she discovered that a black male applied for law school at the University of Virginia, where her husband taught drama. Due to her maternalistic ideas, moral superiority, and faith that educated whites supported limited integration, Patty supported Gregory Swanson in his attempt to enter the school. Boyle contacted Swanson and offered her support, yet reprimanded him for using an extensive vocabulary, stated their friendship must remain private, and solicited gratitude for her efforts. After several uncom-

fortable meetings between the two, Swanson rejected an essay Boyle wrote that supported “nonsegregation” (p. 71), a word that summarized the condition between segregation and integration that Boyle desired. The lack of appreciation for her efforts confused Boyle, who asked black *Charlottesville Tribune* editor T. J. Sellers to read her article and explain Swanson’s response.

Jennifer Ritterhouse provides background information on the influential editor in her introduction to the new volume that Boyle did not mention in her original work. Thomas Jerome Sellers, a Charlottesville native born in 1911, graduated with a history degree from Virginia Union University in 1939. After working a variety of white collar positions, he started the *Tribune* only months before Boyle first contacted him. His outspoken nature and social status made him a leader in the black community and the person to re-educate the misguided idealist. Sellers agreed to read Boyle’s essay and responded with his first lesson in what she later dubbed “The T. J. Sellers Course for Backward Southern Whites” (p. 105). In their initial correspondence Sellers illuminated numerous flaws in her article, such as her slavery references, defense of the University, and condescending tone. He closed the letter by declaring “a New Negro” existed that insisted “America wake up and recognize the fact that he is a man like other men. He is entirely out of sympathy with the gross paternalism of the ‘Master Class’ turned liberal” (p. 84). The direct response shocked Boyle and encouraged her to prove his view of white resistance “an evil illusion” (p. 93). Simultaneously, however, she asked him to direct a re-evaluation of her racial ideals. Sellers accepted her request and Boyle intensified efforts to bridge the social gap between the races.

From 1950 through 1954, Boyle encountered no resistance to her activities. Several of her white peers joined her efforts to remove segregation signs from public offices and flooded state newspapers with letters supporting black equality. Patty even wrote four articles each week for Sellers’ *Tribune*, even though the editor continuously doubted her optimism. The lack of resistance to her efforts supported Boyle’s beliefs that the “innocent ignorance” (p. 151) of many whites perpetrated segregation and that education would eradicate racial injustice in the South. Boyle’s positive experiences assured her that white Southerners “were readier for integration than we ourselves suspected” (p. 134). Her optimism began to decline on May 17, 1954.

The second section of Boyle’s book, “Bloodless Destruction,” began with the *Brown* decision and illumi-

nated the massive resistance to integration which followed the verdict. Boyle first encountered hostility at a November 1954 meeting held to discuss school integration in Charlottesville. While many of her white peers abandoned the struggle for racial equality after the meeting, Boyle remained optimistic and wrote an article the *Saturday Evening Post* published in 1955 entitled “Southerners Will Like Integration.” Hate mail, bomb threats, and burning crosses followed its release but came primarily from the lower classes that Boyle believed most likely to use terroristic tactics. Her greatest discontent came from upper class whites who ignored, ridiculed, and ostracized her. The NAACP also asked her to step aside in the struggle to integrate area schools in 1958, which increased her bewilderment. Although Charlottesville classrooms desegregated in 1959, Boyle remained bitter and disillusioned with whites and blacks who participated in the civil rights struggle.

“Thou Shall Love,” the final section of Boyle’s memoirs, examines the spiritual rebirth she experienced after her discontent peaked. Although Ritterhouse argues the chapters are “unfamiliar and even uncomfortable reading for secular audiences in the post-civil rights era” (p. xix), Boyle considers them her most important. In her preface, Boyle claims her book is not a history of integration in Charlottesville but “a simple document” whose core “is the solution I found to the problems of the human heart” (p. xxxii). Her rejuvenation stressed Orthodox Christianity and its three main components of God, love, and service. In fact, the phrase “God is love” (p. 306) formed the basis of her religious awakening and led to an eventual discrediting of her faith in liberal whites, black activists, and an idealized region. The section is a revealing odyssey that illuminates the theological motivations some white civil rights activists possessed.

The reprinted edition concludes with a series of letters between Boyle and Sellers which proves the most important contribution of the newest volume. The messages allow readers to trace Boyles’ transformation from her first arrogant and moralistic correspondence with Sellers to her 1968 proclamation, “I am one who does not identify myself with any race or region” (p. 388). The most intriguing notes reveal that Boyle retired from movement activism in 1967 due to the rise of black separatism and belief that she no longer had an audience for her efforts, reasons that conflict with the revelations she discussed in *The Desegregated Heart*’s final section. Sellers questioned her reasons for retirement, challenged her to reassess the decision, and called the continuing movement “everybody’s struggle” for “human dignity” (p. 385). The

exchange continued the dialogue the two maintained for nearly twenty years and illustrated the extent to which Sellers influenced Boyle's writings and life.

The 2001 edition of *The Desegregated Heart*, therefore, deserves consideration for a variety of reasons. The introduction frames the classic book in historical context, provides supplemental information the original volume did not contain, and raises several points which should stimulate interesting debates among contemporary students and scholars. Ritterhouse's declaration that "Boyle is best understood as a transitional figure in the history of the black freedom struggle" (p. xx), for example, is one such interpretation that provides a departure point for movement historians.[1] Most importantly, the sampling of the correspondence between Boyle and Sellers

encourages additional research into this intriguing relationship, and others similar to it which existed between white liberals, particularly females, and black intellectuals elsewhere in the civil rights South. Such examinations would contribute a unique methodology to the examination and expand historical understanding of the civil rights movement.

Notes

[1]. It is true that Boyle preceded women who participated in the movement and came of age in the 1960s, such as those examined in the essay collection Constance Curry, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), but it is debatable that Boyle's primary importance is her role as a "transitional figure" for future feminists.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: J. Michael Butler. Review of Boyle, Sarah Patton, *The Desegregated Heart: A Virginian's Stand in Time of Transition*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5489>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.