

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane McWhorter. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. 701 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7432-1772-9; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80747-8.



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“Bombingham” Revisited

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This is a book with epic designs. Winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction, widely lavished with praise in reviews, a *New York Times* bestseller, Diane McWhorter’s 701-page tome, *Carry Me Home*, is equal parts work of history, investigative journalism, and memoir. This very epicness, this scale, this ambition, provides the book both its greatest strengths, of which there are many, and its greatest weaknesses, which are also noteworthy. Its grandeur alone will earn it a place amidst the civil rights literature of this era, especially among general readers who like their history to be gripping, grand, purple and sometimes a bit overwrought. Given that the original manuscript was three times the length of the finished product, one both wonders what ended up in the dustbin and appreciates the judicious touch of her editor. Other reviewers have mentioned J. Anthony Lucas and Taylor Branch as models for this book, and those examples seem fitting, as they too were similarly ambitious and in important ways flawed. *Carry Me Home* nonetheless does not reach the heights these books scaled despite their shortcomings.

McWhorter is a native Birminghamian, and that fact is salient to her story both in its unraveling and in its content. Her prodigal daughter’s status gives McWhorter an insider’s perspective, but this viewpoint can also be grating in its solipsism. Her family still lives in Birmingham, and as we soon see, they play a role in this story, albeit perhaps not as important a role as she thinks they do. She now resides in New York where she is a journalist and freelancer who contributes regularly to *USA Today* and the *New York Times* and whose work has appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers. This is her first book, and as first books go, one can’t help but admire her reach even if it often exceeds her grasp.

Broadly speaking, this is the story of race relations in the American city where race relations were most contentious. Her telling stretches from the end of the 1930s through to 1963, when Birmingham took center stage in the revolving backdrop of locales that had provided the setting for the most dramatic events in the struggle for racial equality. Her epilogue takes the story from 1963 through the 1990s. Because of the recent resolutions to the Birmingham church bombing case that provides

McWhorter with her preface, her study of Birmingham's troubled past, a past that earned the city the sobriquet "America's Johannesburg," seems especially timely.

Despite what some reviewers might want to believe and have tried to convey, much of this narrative is not entirely fresh. From an historian's viewpoint, Glenn Eskew's *But For Birmingham* has not only told this story, but has done so with an analytic and contextual depth that McWhorter, for all her verbiage, can not match. Similarly, another recent book, Andrew Manis's *A Fire You Can't Put Out*, has explored Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's estimable role in Birmingham with sympathy and depth. S. Jonathan Bass's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* has recently provided us with the most insightful treatment of Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham jail.[1] Others have admirably addressed other important aspects of Birmingham's and Alabama's past that McWhorter reiterates without adding a great deal. But because of its comprehensiveness, even when *Carry Me Home* represents old wine in new skins, it comes from a fruitful vine.

By far the least useful element of the book is McWhorter's inclusion of her family's story as what she calls a "metaphor" for Birmingham's history. Birmingham does not need metaphors. It certainly does not need gratuitous and self-indulgent reflections on the author's past to illustrate why that past matters, why Birmingham was or was not, as her subtitle indicates, "the climactic battle of the civil rights revolution." The Birmingham story is bigger than any of its main participants, never mind being bigger than a family whose connections to the events of the age were peripheral at most. Just as a man running a marathon has no need for a treadmill, the Birmingham story hardly has need for an overarching metaphor. This is an ill-considered affectation that should have been excised. Readers interested in a more successful attempt to weave a personal story into larger civil rights events should take a look at Mary Winstead's newly published *Back to Mississippi*.[2]

McWhorter has been lauded for her writing style, and she writes well. Except for when she doesn't. As the book progresses, she develops a particularly noisome habit. Every few paragraphs, she inserts section breaks. In a long book such as this one, periodic breaks are important, as they can allow for transitions within a chapter that tries to cover a range of themes and ideas and plotlines. Many of McWhorter's section breaks do not do this. Instead, they seem to take the place of transitional sentences and segues. Chapter 20, which is four-

teen pages long, contains a dozen such breaks. The ten pages in chapter 26 contain an average of a section break a page. This is too much—and these chapters are representative, with some being even more excessive. It is hard to tell if these are places where she hastily cut her colossal original manuscript, if she is unwilling or unable to write transitional paragraphs, or if she does not trust her audience to be able to draw out the themes she is exploring. None of these possibilities is especially appealing.

Furthermore, for all of the grandness of scale of *Carry Me Home*, it sometimes gets bogged down in detail. Historians constantly hear about the telling use of little observations that pepper the works of journalists. And it is true that many historians could afford to learn from nonfiction writers who publish for readers outside of the academy and their use of anecdote and scene setting. But there is something to be said for economy of language. All details are not equally valuable, and when McWhorter mines every quotation, describes every facial trait, blurts out every ancillary fact, it becomes difficult to discern what is important as opposed to what is merely interesting.

These qualms aside, and they are not insubstantial, especially given the gushing response this book received in much of the popular press, McWhorter does contribute a great deal. She has told (or re-told) a story that weaves together a number of the important themes of the civil rights movement, viewing them through the lens of Birmingham's history as well as its political and social environment. The standard cast of characters appears as do literally hundreds of others. Fred Shuttlesworth and Jim Bevel, Bull Connor and George Wallace and John Patterson, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. (whom McWhorter seems to try to go out of her way to slight at every opportunity, apparently to try to debunk a mythology that many historians have been addressing for several years now) and Gary Thomas Rowe, the Klansman and FBI informant. And appropriately, as it marks the climax and in many ways the *raison d'être* of her book, we meet the four victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, as well as "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss and Bobby Frank Cherry, two of the Klansmen responsible for that atrocity from which the segregationists of Birmingham would never fully recover their fiefdom. McWhorter begins the book with the story of the church bombing and ends it with some fine investigative work bringing the perpetrators of that evil deed to light.

In beginning with the church bombing, McWhorter commences *in medias res*, but she quickly jumps back in time to sketch Birmingham's, and where she sees fit, Alabama's, social and political development in the years prior to World War II and then thereafter. We learn especially about the "Big Mules," Birmingham's industrial elite, and of the schisms characterizing white Birmingham's upper crust. The book is as much about these schisms as about civil rights, and sometimes race relations seems merely a tableau against which the city's social tensions play themselves out. This is not to say that McWhorter does not try to keep race front and center, but since her focus is so clearly on white Birmingham and its Byzantine inner workings, we sometimes lose sight of what social historians might call the agency of black characters. McWhorter admires the civil rights workers, and she clearly believes that Fred Shuttlesworth and the other locals struggling to make a go of a movement for social justice in perhaps the least receptive city in America for such a movement are heroes, but they still seem to revolve around the constellation of white Birmingham throughout the book rather than the other way around. In a sense this would be fine—white supremacy, white resistance, white politics in the Jim Crow South, these are all fertile regions for exploration and much remains to be done on them. But this is not the book that McWhorter or Simon & Schuster have presented her as having written. There is thus a dissonance here that is unsatisfying for those of us who know the story she tells, and who were looking for more (though in some ways, perhaps, also less).

An example of this comes with her sections on the Freedom Rides. In some ways, her handling of this epochal movement, which still and inexplicably has not received full historical treatment, embodies her strengths and weaknesses.[3] Her detail is marvelous, if excessive. Future scholars of the Freedom Rides will have to consider closely her work on the events in Birmingham. Nonetheless, she gets so caught up in the minutiae she has unearthed (much of which has appeared before), especially about the white comings and goings, that she only tepidly presents the Freedom Riders and their perspectives. This is not damning, but it does seem representative of the sometimes misplaced emphasis at work throughout the book.

In the end, after the long struggle, there were enough whites in Birmingham who felt like Sid Smyer, a local lawyer and, as McWhorter identifies him, "perfect servant of the status quo," who, during negotiations over the city's fate in 1963, said, "I'm a segregationist, but I'm

not a damned fool" (pp. 40, 407). Slowly some of the city fathers came around, but not without a fight, and not without considerable bloodshed and loss of prestige to the city.

McWhorter does not really proffer an argument about Birmingham representing the climactic struggle of the civil rights movement so much as she shows (sometimes) telling detail after telling detail and expects that the conclusion is self-evident. She certainly tells the story and often she tells it well. But as important as Birmingham was, it fit into a larger national context. The Freedom Rides reached a crescendo in Birmingham, but they hit others in Montgomery, Anniston and Jackson too. King periodically showed up on the scene in Birmingham, revealing the city's importance, but he also acted in Atlanta and Albany and countless other places. (King had a lot on his plate, which might be one reason why he occasionally had mixed feelings about Birmingham, though McWhorter rarely shows the complex King, preferring most of the time to go with the self-serving caricature that allows her to pit locals against King in eternal zero-sum struggle.)

Birmingham, if it was one movement—and her presupposed argument clearly implies that it was—was a turning point. But so was Montgomery. So were the Freedom Rides. So were the student sit-ins and the voting rights campaigns and the March on Washington and the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the integration of Little Rock Central High and Ole Miss and the University of Alabama. So if Birmingham was "the climactic struggle of the civil rights movement," and I'm not convinced that it was not, she still needs to do a better job of demonstrating the whys and not just the whats of the events in that benighted city in the years in question.

This is thus a good but flawed book. It is big and intends to be comprehensive. It is worth reading, but despite the confirmation of greatness implied in the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize and the fawning reception of many reviewers, it is a work with many flaws. There are many wonderful books out there on the civil rights struggle that will get swept up in the undertow of this book, books that do a better job of elucidating their subjects and expanding our understanding of an era that still fascinates, repels, amazes and awes us. One wishes that those books would get more of the attention that they deserve while still leaving a place for ambitious works like McWhorter's.

Notes

[1]. Glenn Eskew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999); S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter From Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

[2]. Mary Winstead, *Back To Mississippi: A Personal Journey Through the Events that Changed America in 1964* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).

[3]. There are two works forthcoming on the Freedom Rides that should help to rectify this glaring gap in the historiography. One is Ray Arsenault's forthcoming book with Oxford University Press. The other is my own project, which is my dissertation from Ohio University and which I hope to publish in late 2003.

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