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John A Kirk. *Redefining The Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xi + 243 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2496-7.

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Local Black Activists and the Civil Rights Struggle

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At first blush it seems that John Kirk has taken on a Herculean task with his recent study of black activism in Little Rock from 1940-1970. Kirk succeeds, however and in less than two hundred pages. The research assembled in this short volume is impressive: archival work, interviews, as well as a thorough review of the major secondary works. Kirk's study of the role played by local black activists in the civil rights movement also fills a void in the historical literature. Using the Little Rock school crisis of 1957 as a focal point Kirk examines the struggle by black activists in Little Rock from 1940-1970. Kirk claims three purposes for his work on local black activism, the first of which is summed up in this quote from the Preface: "Although numerous studies have analyzed the Little Rock school crisis from a variety of perspectives, one striking omission in existing accounts is the role played by the local black community. . . ." (xv). Beyond this, Kirk's goals are to provide a local perspective of events generally viewed from national heights and to expand the traditional historical analysis of the civil rights movement to include the forties and early fifties. Kirk clearly succeeds in his effort in part by incorporating all three as the format for each chapter.

In chapter one Kirk takes a step back and reflects on pre-1940s black Little Rock. He discusses the major institutions of the black community: educational, religious, media, business, as well as the class differences within it. He concludes that the majority of black leaders followed the "accommodationist" philosophy of Booker T. Washington and rejected protest as a means to change race relations in Little Rock. Moreover, he argues that national organizations like the NAACP had little impact during this time and that the first real local change came through the action of the Arkansas Negro Democratic Association (ANDA). However, local black leaders continued to resist protest as a means of change until William Harold Flowers founded the Committee on Negro Organizations (CNO). Kirk claims "one direct consequence of the success of Flowers and the CNO was the increasing pressure on Little Rock's black leadership to take a more active and forthright stand in the emerging struggle for civil rights" (p. 33).

Kirk continues his chronological march to the 1970s

in chapter two by examining the impact of World War II on local black activists in Little Rock. Kirk demonstrates that the activist agenda increased through a discussion of three episodes. First was the continuing effort by the ANDA to get blacks involved in Arkansas state politics. Second was the legal battle by black Little Rock teachers to win equal pay. Third was the campaign by black Little Rock newspapers to change the face of Little Rock's police department. This campaign arose over the murder of a black solider by a white policeman. The perseverance of the *State Press* in keeping the story in the public eye not only unified blacks in Little Rock but also drew national attention to the story. Kirk concludes his discussion of the 1940s by maintaining "the tension between rising black activism coupled with federal pressure [particularly in the Supreme Court decision in Smith v. Allwright concerning southern black disfranchisement] and whites' desire to maintain the status quo helped usher in a new era in race relations" (p. 53).

An indication that Arkansas might be moving toward racial change voluntarily came in the 1948 gubernatorial election of Sid McMath. McMath was viewed as a social reformer – particularly in the areas of health, education, and welfare. However, Kirk argues that McMath and other southern progressives failed in their attempts to bring economic and social reform "due to a conservative retrenchment and allegations of corruption that haunted many . . . [such] state governments" (p. 54). Rather, according to Kirk, change in race relations in Arkansas and the South in general resulted from black activism and the continuing involvement of the federal government. Moreover Kirk examines the changes that were forced on Arkansas in the area of education culminating in the Brown v. Board decision, which is the focus of chapter four. Kirk's recounting of Brown v. Board and its affect on Arkansas is standard. However, his account of the Little Rock School Crisis in chapter five focuses the story back on the activities of the black community.

For example, chapter five highlights the part played by the Little Rock NAACP and its leader Daisy Bates and the courageous and determined Little Rock Nine. Although the forces of change were ultimately victorious, Kirk concludes that the desegregation of Little Rock schools was not without its costs. Once time passed and national attention was focused elsewhere, once the need for NAACP support was gone (and with it Daisy Bates), once the federal government was gone, the local NAACP was left weak and rudderless. These conditions forced local blacks to develop new ways and new organizations to push their agenda, "heralding the beginning of a new direct-action phase of the black struggle" (p. 138).

According to Kirk, the dismantling of Jim Crow (chapter six) did not truly come about until "business leaders . . . intervened in the school crisis when they realized that racial unrest struck at the economic prospects of the city" (139). Black activists began to attack the economic structure by employing boycotts, sit-ins and the like. Students from Philander Smith College led many of these activities. Many of these students were members of the Arkansas chapter of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Their protests met with mixed results, in part due to a lack of support from the larger black community. The violent treatment of Freedom Riders however served as a catalyst for uniting the black community in a common cause. Turning to the national SNCC organization for assistance in launching a sit-in protest was eventually successful and in January 1963 the major lunch counters in downtown Little Rock were desegregated.

Kirk concludes by examining new challenges for the Little Rock black community. Despite victories much remained to be done for African Americans to enjoy completely their basic civil rights as the 1970s began. As Kirk points out "events in the 1960s marked the end of one black struggle and the beginning of another. From 1940 to 1970, the central focus for black activists was the goal of legal and political advancement" (p. 182). The economic disparity between the races, however, had not been addressed. This issue and the question of how blacks should move forward in their struggle for equality were the unanswered questions facing African Americans as the decade of the sixties came to a close.

Redefining the Color Line is a fine work by a solid scholar. An index, bibliography, notes and photographs enhance this fine study. The book is well researched using materials from an abundance of manuscript collections as diverse as the somewhat obscure Floyd Sharp Scrapbooks, 1933-1943 to the overworked Orval Eugene Faubus Papers. Kirk also makes good use of personal interviews, newspaper accounts of significant events as well as a review of the important historical literature.

Kirk's work fills a void in the historical literature of the civil rights movement on several levels. This book not only adds to the already voluminous studies of the Little Rock school crisis, but does so from the very different perspective of the local black community. Moreover, by expanding the time period generally studied by historians of the civil rights movement to include the 1940s, Kirk has deepened our understanding of the later period.

In fact Kirk's work should lead to a reassessment by historians of the Little Rock school crisis.

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