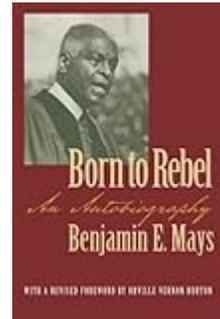


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Benjamin Elijah Mays.** *Born to Rebel*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2003. lxxvii + 380 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2523-1.



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Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays's *Born to Rebel* first appeared in 1970, some fourteen years before his death in 1984. Detailing his life as an accomplished scholar, social activist, educator, clergyman, and college administrator, Mays's autobiography should command more attention than it does, particularly given his tremendous influence on Martin Luther King Jr., on the trajectory of the civil rights movement, and on an entire group of prominent African Americans whom he trained and counseled (especially as president of Morehouse College for nearly thirty years). In a revised and at times eloquent foreword, fellow South Carolina native Orville Vernon Burton certainly fulfills Mays's wishes for this part of his autobiography, in that Burton's account does indeed describe life under Jim Crow in South Carolina and does "outline some of the discriminatory history of his [Mays's] native state" (p. xiv). Burton's opening piece is at once a brief biographical sketch, broad overview of South Carolina race relations from the first Reconstruction to the second, and heartfelt encomium to his "friend Dr. Mays." To be sure, Burton's foreword makes a compelling case for more attention to *Born to Rebel*, particularly as a lucid depiction of life under segregation, and for the reason of Mays's singular importance as the "godfather of the modern civil rights movement" (p. xliv).

What follows is not precisely a review of Mays's nar-

rative (which has been done by many different people in many different places), but a list of reasons to revisit Mays's account more closely—as a literary text in the genre of American autobiography, as a useful pedagogical tool, and as a possible venue for illuminating more recent trends in the historiography of the civil rights movement and the Jim Crow South.

First, Burton's suggestion that Mays was "the Benjamin Franklin of Black America" is both thought-provoking and insightful (p. xlvii). Nonetheless, considered in this light and against more "classic" American autobiographies, *Born to Rebel* is not without its stylistic limitations. Mays's autobiographical voice suffers from its own honesty; it corroborates too much; it insists far too much on setting the record straight in "objective" terms. Of course this admits only that Mays is not a literary artist (which he never claimed to be), and does little to denigrate Mays's heroic courage, honesty, and diligence. It may even be a compliment of sorts, as some of the best written American autobiographies are often those with a clear capacity for carefully engineered duplicity.

Though not a fictionalized account, *Born to Rebel* for example lacks Henry Adams's keen sense of irony so present in *The Education*, but not the latter's talent for underestimating his own accomplishments. Mays's efforts do not evince much of the lyrical quality of despair or res-

ignation in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, though Mays's boyhood hunger is something very real, if rather different in character and tone. Alongside Booker T. Washington's casting of the "black rite of Horatio Alger," in *Up from Slavery*, the Morehouse educator's account has elements of the former's immense desire for education, and certainly demonstrates Washington's work ethic. However, Mays's account also conveys deep hurt, profound if refined anger, and a clear sense of moral righteousness, demonstrated by his continuous refusal to compromise his and others' personal dignity.[1]

At least in terms of these sorts of broad considerations of tone and style, *Born to Rebel* stacks up quite well with *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. While Mays does not offer a neat laundry list of virtues and then demonstrate his ability to measure up to them, he does expound on virtue explicitly (in terms Christian and American), he consistently thanks those who have helped him, and his autobiographical voice has much of Franklin's scrupulous attention to detail. At times, *Born to Rebel* is maddeningly precise. In a characteristic example, Mays describes his first job offer after his 1921 graduation from Bates College in Maine: "The more I thought about that \$1,200, the bigger it looked: 10.7 times larger than the \$112 I would have received had I accepted a teaching position in Greenwood County [South Carolina] after finishing high school in 1916" (p. 66). This sort of reasoning would be strangely ponderous if it were not so consistent throughout. So it bears some of the character of Franklin's idiosyncratic (and apparently quintessentially American) mind.

The above reflections only scratch the surface of (and maybe even distort) *Born to Rebel*'s rich potential for comparison with other autobiographies, in particular those with a more obvious relation to Mays's experiences, namely other Southerners, white and black, male and female, especially those who experienced life under segregation, for example Anne Moody, Maya Angelou, William Alexander Percy, and Jimmy Carter.

Mays's narrative also belongs among source materials for scholars and students interested in the concept of memory and its relation to "history." Though any autobiography (and indeed the very notion of autobiography) merits this sort of investigation, this longtime educator's eye for detail invites special notice. At times Mays employs the tools of the social scientist or the historian, blurring and complicating the apparent distinctions between the remembered and the documented. Early chapters that attempt to depict life under Jim Crow are

carefully corroborated with oral interviews of 118 other African-Americans in his own age group, and statistics on lynching are offered. The final chapter begins with a history lesson on the attempted solutions to the race problem proffered by Americans in the past. In these places, *Born to Rebel* is a collaborative effort (Mays had others conduct the interviews and uses figures and materials from other sources), which raises even more interesting questions about the nature of autobiography, and when and where in the text Mays merely recounts his own memories, and when, where, and especially why he attempts to "set the record straight" apart from his own experiences.

Another striking aspect of Mays's text is his constant attention to social and personal dignity as demonstrated by Southern naming practices under segregation.[2] While these sorts of affronts, "Auntie" or "Uncle," "Professor or Reverend," but never "Mr. or Mrs.," are familiar in the long list of degradations heaped upon African Americans by whites under segregation, Mays's near obsession with respect can be fascinating. In his final chapter, he concludes that "Love is wonderful; but if I could not have both, I would prefer respect" (pp. 319-320). Mays's insistence on proper address is perhaps a product of New Negro sensibilities, but it is not without complexity. He admits, "I know virtually nothing about my ancestors" (p. 1), but by relating that his boyhood heroes were all black he insists that he "had identity" (p. 2).

For Mays this sense of identity is clearly connected to personal dignity, to his refusal to countenance white supremacy. To paraphrase Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Mays is not ashamed of being the descendant of slaves, and unlike *Invisible*, he has no reason to be ashamed for having at one time been ashamed.[3] His unflinching refusal to allow his wife to be called anything other than "Mrs." also unmasks the hypocrisy of white Southern civility with its emphasis on proper and ostensibly traditional forms of manhood and womanhood.

This near obsession of Mays's comes as no surprise given his social status and personal relationships, as well as his tremendous accomplishments, among them leadership in several national and international organizations, a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and a slew of honorary degrees from dozens of institutions of higher learning. Along these lines, Mays's autobiography acts as a topography of the talented tenth, and of an entire cadre of liberal African-American clergymen and educators—that generation who came before the civil rights move-

ment, lending to it their ideas about the proper function and purpose of American democracy, the nature of self respect, and the damaged moral contours of a segregated society. Here Mays is perhaps the most prominent among a group that included such figures as Howard Thurman, Mordecai Johnson, Vernon Johns, Archibald J. Carey, and many others; leaders who are now being given increased attention as scholars expand the periodization of the civil rights movement and further investigate its intellectual and social origins. Mays's account offers a glimpse into vast webs of social connection and into the organizations that formed the resource network for the civil rights movement in terms financial, moral, and intellectual.[4]

Taken as a primary document, *Born to Rebel* reflects the collision of Mays and Martin Luther King Jr.'s brand of militant nonviolence with black power and black nationalism. Particularly in the last chapter, "Retrospect and Prospect," Mays describes his affinity with black power and his ambivalence about and hurt due to the actions of some of its adherents, who, in his estimation, lacked a coherent vision to accompany their rhetoric. Especially interesting for this relationship is Mays's consistent use of damage imagery to describe the effects of segregation on the personalities of black people.[5] While this sort of imagery has garnered some attention in terms of its use by social scientists in pursuit of social policy (for example, Daryl Scott's *Contempt and Pity*), this language of damage has yet to be interrogated fully in terms of its importance vis-a-vis black religious thinkers, Mays being among the most prominent. It may be that this notion of damage reflects not precisely "the triumph of the therapeutic" in American thought and culture, but a strain in black liberal religious thought before, during, and even after the civil rights movement that attempted to preserve something of the wholeness of human personality when faced with an increasingly atomistic and morally confusing social world.[6]

More (or less) than this, by invoking the image of the damaged black psyche as the tragic result of white racism (and counteracting it with notions of dignity, personhood, and "somebodyness"), Mays and Martin Luther King Jr. departed at times from black cultural nationalist/black power thinkers, in that differing versions of self-respect emerged. Perhaps the clearest point of departure between the two sides was in terms epistemological, Mays and his cohort positing the human as their starting point, and many of their critics, "blackness." [7] The upshot of all this was confusing though; those who emphasized damage (taken as a sort of pathology) often

emphasized the repair of or therapy for that damage in the interests of self-respect, while those who chose not to employ damage rhetoric stressed instead the unique and culturally rich aspects of African-American life as an extant source of self-respect. Yet the line of demarcation between the two groups on the basis of these two opinions was unclear, both points of view were sometimes present on both sides, disagreements were often characterized by profound misunderstanding, and Mays's position on black power/black nationalism bore this out.[8] In short, *Born to Rebel* is another profound example of the fact that the relationship between older and younger generations of civil rights activists was more complex than many popular portrayals of the movement allow.

Ultimately then, Mays's autobiography has continuing relevance for scholars and students alike. It remains a compelling account of an impressive man's confrontation with a racist society and his tremendous success in spite of it. For this reason and for those detailed above, one hopes that Dr. Benjamin Mays and his autobiography will garner more attention in scholarly circles than he and it does at present.

#### Notes

[1]. "Black Rite of Horatio Alger" taken from Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Modern Library, 1994): p. 109.

[2]. On naming practices and African-American literature, see Kimberly Benston, "I yam what I am: The Topos of Un(naming) in Afro-American Literature," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Methuen: New York, 1984): pp. 151-172.

[3]. Ellison, p. 15.

[4]. Some examples of this sort of focus are in short articles by Ralph Luker, "Johns the Baptist: A Profile of Vernon Johns"; Randal Jelks, "Benjamin Elijah Mays and the Creation of an Insurgent Professional Negro Clergy"; Dennis Dickerson, "Archibald J. Carey, Jr. and the Founders of the Congress of Racial Equality"; and Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "C. T. Vivian: Disciple of Assertive Nonviolence," all in *The AME Church Review*, 67, no. 387 (July-September 2002): pp. 26-54.

[5]. Mays is most explicit about this problem in his introduction, "The segregated system was so cruel, so inhuman, and so destructive to the development of manhood and character that white America can never really know the damage it did to the mind and spirit of millions of Negroes who lived and died under that system" (p. lv).

[6]. Note Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966): “religious professionals have reason to hope for survival, precisely because they have become aware of their situation and are seeking ways to alter it, in a fresh access of communal purpose, centered in the Negro protest movement, or some other movement of protest against the effects of that very dead culture which they think, by protesting so belatedly, to survive,” p. 18.

[7]. A theological example is James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

[8]. This damage debate is one that continues to the present day. See Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche: 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997): pp. 187-202.

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