Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980. by August Meier; Elliott Rudwick
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Vance’s profile is an informative contribution to the increasing visibility of women.

University of South Alabama

Betty Brandon


August Meier and the late Elliott Rudwick have written the most extensive study yet to appear regarding the development of Afro-American history as a scholarly field of study. Their current work supersedes Earl E. Thorpe’s Negro Historians in the United States (Baton Rouge, 1958) and complements John Hope Franklin’s masterful George Washington Williams: A Biography (Chicago, 1985) and Darlene Clark Hine’s useful collection of essays, The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future (Baton Rouge, 1986). Studying “the ways in which historians came to do their scholarly work in the history of American blacks” (p. xi), Meier and Rudwick trace the changes that have occurred during the past seventy years as “black history, originally a Jim Crow specialty ignored by nearly the entire profession, became legitimated into one of the liveliest and most active fields of study in American history” (p. xii).

Instead of critical assessments of writings in the black history field, the authors have relied upon prosopographic analysis of scholars who have chosen to enter the field. Their study is most revealing, however, when they move beyond brief biographical sketches and probe deeply into the lives of particular historians. Especially rich is their incisive portrait of Carter G. Woodson, whose single-minded determination and entrepreneurship resulted in the creation, during 1915 and 1916, of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) and the Journal of Negro History. Combating the intense ideological racism of his time, Woodson popularized Negro History Week celebrations and inspired many of the pioneering black historians. Meier and Rudwick deftly delineate the contradictory aspects of Woodson’s volatile, domineering personality—“he went out to meet opposition before it arose . . .” (p. 70), W. E. B. Du Bois observed. Identifying himself with neo-Washingtonian black conservatism, Woodson initially attracted support from paternalistic white foundations, but his fierce, idiosyncratic sense of racial mission alienated white backers and confounded many of the blacks to whom he turned for support.

Although Meier and Rudwick make superb use of archival materials in examining the pioneering generation of black historians, their conclusions become less insightful as they become more dependent upon interview data used to identify trends in the field after World War II. The increasingly spare minibiographies describing the growing number of scholars in the field are neither detailed enough to explain motives nor sufficiently systematic to support precise conclusions. The authors achieve comprehensiveness at the expense of depth, offering generalizations about what motivated
historians to enter the black history field without giving much attention to the interconnections between the backgrounds of individual scholars and their scholarly writings.

As a result, the anecdotal details that Meier and Rudwick relate are more interesting than their cautious conclusions. They describe, for example, the difficulties John Hope Franklin and other black scholars experienced as they sought to gain entry into the white-dominated professional organizations. In 1955, discouraged because southern racial practices (which continued until the 1960s) prevented blacks from attending all functions of the Southern Historical Association, Franklin complained to a white historian, "'Even my thick skin can be wounded by a repetition of the insults and indignities I have received'" (p. 156). While mentioning the recent efforts by the historical organizations to overcome racially discriminatory practices, Meier and Rudwick also remind readers just how long racial exclusion continued. Franklin's 1979 American Historical Association presidential address, they note, was the first article by a black to appear in the American Historical Review since a piece published by Du Bois in 1909 (p. 29n).

After the Woodson chapter, the most perceptive section of the book focuses on the historians who transformed the historiography of slavery during the two decades after the publication of Kenneth M. Stampp's The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South (New York, 1956). Meier and Rudwick survey broad historiographical trends in the field, but even in this chapter they refrain from offering what might have been stimulating critical assessments of the scholarly writings on slavery. They are thus unable to capture fully the intellectual excitement that accompanied the debates about Stanley Elkins's controversial "Sambo" thesis and about the emergence of an alternative view emphasizing black resistance to racial subordination. They also almost completely ignore the storm of criticism that followed the publication of Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston, 1974). They limit themselves to the observation that the new "community and culture" (p. 275) perspective in the historiography of slavery did not result from interactions within a community of scholars; instead, "individual historians, coming out of varied intellectual origins and theoretical assumptions, and arriving at their conclusions through diverse routes, each in his own fashion responded to the social and intellectual climate of his generation" (p. 276).

Elsewhere in the book Meier and Rudwick offer intriguing hints regarding the ways in which the changing composition of the scholarly community altered prevailing trends in the Afro-American historical literature. Far more could have been said, however, regarding the differences between the race relations focus evident in the work of pre-1970 scholarship, written by historians who generally did not see themselves as black history specialists, and the institutional and cultural emphases of more recent scholarship. In addition, although their interviews indicate that most black historians writing in the 1970s and the 1980s were greatly influenced by the black activism of the 1960s, Meier and Rudwick also might have explained more ade-
quately the varied ways in which contemporary scholars have incorporated Marxian as well as black nationalist ideas in their work. The unevenness of their biographical data is reflected in the disproportionate attention given to a few scholars who self-consciously identify themselves as black nationalists as opposed to that given to the important scholarship that analyzes the historical development of Afro-American racial consciousness.

Meier and Rudwick have given us, therefore, a useful compendium of biographical information regarding black history scholars, but a comprehensive intellectual history of the emergence of the black history field remains to be written.

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The annual cycle of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association had reached its climax at its August 1922 convention in New York, a convenient point to check the pulse and the general health of the movement. Founded in 1914, the UNIA by August 1922 had passed its prime and had started to age rapidly. Attended by some 155 delegates from twenty-five states, the District of Columbia, and eleven Caribbean countries (pp. 1072–76), sometimes the month-long convention also drew thousands of non-delegates to hear the speeches and to cheer, or to jeer, the cause. Journalists and FBI agents reported on the sessions and on the delegates' morale. Outside, men argued on Harlem street corners, and large groups heard anti-Garvey speakers.

Most of the issues that had concerned Garvey and the UNIA during the year surfaced during the convention: Garvey put down rival leaders by impeaching them from office—the acrimonious trials took days and were held in full view and hearing of the public and the press. His liaison in June with the Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan (including an aborted invitation to the Kleagle to speak at the UNIA convention) alienated many, and Garvey spent much time and energy defending his action on the grounds that both the Klan and the UNIA endorsed racial nationalism. Speakers showed continuing interest in Africa; the League of Nations would soon decide the fate of the African territories formerly held by Germany, so the UNIA sent petitions and a delegation to Geneva to lobby for the creation of independent black nations. But controversy racked the UNIA; the Black Star Line had virtually collapsed during the year, and disappointed investors called for Garvey's dismissal. External critics, including A. Philip Randolph, Cyril V. Briggs, and W. E. B. Du Bois, also hammered away at him. Garvey lashed back in speeches and in newspaper editorials that had changed their tone during the year; the metaphors of race war disappeared, and his chief targets were no longer white oppressors but black traitors. By the end of