King Scholarship and Iconoclastic Myths
Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by David J. Garrow; To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. by Adam Fairclough
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KING SCHOLARSHIP AND ICONOCLASTIC MYTHS

Clayborne Carson


Adam Fairclough. To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987. x + 504 pp. Notes, chronology, illustrations, and index. $35.00 (cloth); $17.95 (paper).

These new important studies provide detailed, distinctive, and extensively documented portraits of Martin Luther King, Jr. Bearing the Cross weaves King into the texture of a complex movement with many competing leaders; To Redeem the Soul of America reveals him as the binding thread of an organization created “for him but not by him” (p. 4). The biography and the institutional study benefit from years of research and reflect the depth of contemporary scholarship about King and the modern black struggle. The two works will, I hope, stimulate interest in this thriving, interdisciplinary field without obscuring the fact that definitive statements on many significant issues remain to be written.

Garrow’s massive volume has received far more attention than has Fairclough’s also substantial study, for BTC is the most thorough King biography yet to appear. The product of an extraordinary research effort building upon two previous books focusing on King,1 Garrow’s new work displays a wealth of information and insights. The eighty pages of notes contain references to an extensive bibliography citing more than 700 interviews and more than 130 manuscript collections. Many historians have already acclaimed BTC as the most reliable study of King’s public career, calling it “monumental,” “brilliant,” and “a singularly impressive piece of research,” as well as applauding Garrow for dealing with controversial materials “in the spirit of plain-spoken, aggressive truth telling.”2 Awarded the Pulitzer prize for biography, BTC has exceptional qualities, and I am personally thankful to Garrow for uncovering important new sources, advising the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, and thereby easing my task of editing King’s papers.

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Garrow’s achievement should not, however, direct attention from the book’s defects or from other important studies, such as Fairclough’s. BTC’s reputed definitiveness makes the deficiencies described below even more troubling than would be the case for a less acclaimed book. Despite its 800-page length and its wealth of information about King’s day-to-day life, Garrow’s often myopic narration of events obscures major issues. As political or social history, BTC contains no sustained discussion of the cultural foundations of the southern black struggle nor an adequate assessment of the contrasting strategies pursued by King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the other major civil rights organizations. Garrow’s tantalizing one-page epilogue, which suggests that, in Ella Baker’s words, “The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement” (p. 625), provides an argument that might have been developed elsewhere in the book but was not. As biography, BTC lacks an adequate discussion of the relationship between King’s singular leadership qualities and his family background, which immersed him in a vital southern black Christian political culture.

Although the jacket cover calls it a “personal portrait” and Garrow certainly mentions intimate matters, the book does not explicate King’s worldview. As the title implies, Garrow invokes religious beliefs to explain why King continued to “bear the cross” of leadership, but he does not adequately explain the sources or the theological context of these beliefs. It is, therefore, difficult to understand fully the great importance that Garrow attributes to a King speech in which he recalled a particularly difficult night during the Montgomery bus boycott when an inner divine voice urged the discouraged and reluctant leader to “stand up for righteousness” and promised never to leave him alone. Was King referring to a decisive conversion experience that permanently altered his previously cerebral approach to religion? Despite repeated references to this episode, Garrow sheds little light on King’s spiritual life.

Although Fairclough’s study does not rest on as solid a foundation of original research as does Garrow’s, it offers concise statements on historical issues in place of Garrow’s implicit interpretations that emerge almost unperceptively from his chronologically arranged narrative. Illustrative of the two approaches is the contrasting manner in which the authors deal with King’s famous letter from the Birmingham city jail. Fairclough comments on the letter’s “flashes of anger, pathos, and mocking irony” and notes that “it soon became a classic document of the civil rights movement, its most cogent and persuasive defense of civil disobedience” (p. 124). Garrow does not even refer to the document as such and makes no mention of the letter’s broader significance. Instead, he quotes from it as part of his narration of King’s response
to the criticisms of white clergy in Birmingham (pp. 246–47). Similarly, while Fairclough concisely describes the 1963 March on Washington and then suggests its meaning—King’s “unremarkable,” “restrained, even mechanical” delivery of his “unoriginal” oration, Fairclough insists, achieved its impact “from its context rather than its content” (p. 155)—Garrow immerses readers in details. We learn precisely how, when, and where cautious march leaders forced changes in John Lewis’s militant speech. We are told that Coretta King reacted with “fury when she learned that her husband would not be taking her along to the audience with John Kennedy” (p. 285), that sandwiches were prepared in the White House kitchen for black leaders meeting with Kennedy, and that the moderator of a subsequent television interview program involving the leaders was a CIA informant.

Garrow’s copious details and spare analysis do not elicit intellectual engagement but nevertheless produce a powerful cumulative impact. Indeed, Garrow’s resolutely narrative approach gives his account authority and the appearance of definitiveness. Readers may be misled by his approach, however, for his “facts” are sometimes inferences drawn from ambiguous sources. Descriptions of indisputable public events are intermixed with dubious assertions regarding behind-the-scenes occurrences, which interest Garrow more than King’s public life. Garrow’s reliance on FBI documents contributes to this emphasis on sub rosa happenings, for he, like many scholars who acquire previously secret documents, seems at times to assume that what has been hidden from view is more plausible than what has been publicly revealed. FBI surveillance reports can be useful sources of information when used critically. In the absence of extensive correspondence, Garrow makes effective use of King’s taped telephone conversations to depict King groping with difficult issues. His handling of the FBI’s controversial allegations about King’s ties to alleged Soviet agent Stanley Levison is admirably balanced against other FBI evidence documenting Levison’s break with the Communist Party and revealing King’s ideological independence from Levison.

Garrow is not so careful, however, in his treatment of the FBI’s assertions about King’s extramarital sexual relationships. For more than a decade, the existence of the FBI reports on King’s sex life has been widely reported in the press and mentioned in scholarly works.3 Garrow’s The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr., however, placed the sexual revelations in the context of J. Edgar Hoover’s racist hatred of King, which led the FBI director, even before ordering the bugging of King’s hotel rooms, to assume that King had unrestrainable sexual desires. Despite the fact that FBI surveillance reports were efforts to provide information that agents knew Hoover wanted, Garrow, in BTC, uncritically uses these documents to validate many aspects of the FBI’s
unfavorable image of King. Although this reviewer was initially tempted to avoid an extended discussion of Garrow’s treatment of King’s sex life, BTC’s references to King’s supposed affairs are aspects of an overall depiction of King as a reluctant leader who responded to the enormous and unwanted burdens of leadership not only through promiscuous sex but also through overeating, obsessive guilt, and a preoccupation with death. Moreover, while previous reviews and journalistic summaries of BTC have called attention to Garrow’s sexual revelations, no previous reviewer indicated that he or she had carefully examined the FBI surveillance reports on which Garrow relies. Thus, Garrow’s depiction of King as a man obsessed with sex (and, as a consequence, with guilt) has become no longer simply a facet of racist propaganda nor merely a scholar’s interpretation but, increasingly, a widely accepted notion of historical reality.4

The main body of materials on King’s alleged sexual transgressions are a series of FBI surveillance reports that date from January 1964, when King’s room at Washington’s Willard Hotel was bugged. After constant surveillance during 1964 and 1965, Hoover and other Bureau officials succeeded in obtaining compromising but hardly clearcut evidence. Bugs at the hotel recorded what the FBI and Garrow describe as “a lively, drunken party involving King” and other SCLC colleagues (p. 310), but Garrow later indicates that the tapes did not reveal King’s sexual activity but rather his “dirty jokes and bawdy remarks” (p. 373). During the next few months, other FBI attempts to compromise King through surveillance were even less productive. Hoover stubbornly insisted, however, that more intense surveillance would prove successful, for King was “a ‘tom cat’ with obsessive degenerate sexual urges” (p. 312). Unlike Garrow’s earlier study of the FBI’s vendetta against King, which demonstrated the eagerness of Hoover’s subordinates to give their boss what he wanted to hear, BTC does not always separate the FBI’s observations from its interpretations. Thus, when television and air conditioner noise made bugs in a Hawaii hotel ineffective, Garrow accepts the FBI’s conjecture that King and his associates kept the appliances running in order to counteract surveillance. Garrow does not indicate that the FBI produced anything more substantial than these reports during the remaining months of 1964, although he titillates readers: FBI executives, he writes, were “pleased” with recordings made in King’s hotel room during a July visit to Los Angeles (p. 340). When Hoover ordered taped “highlights” sent to SCLC headquarter along with a letter suggesting that King should commit suicide, King’s associates who listened to the recording early in 1965 found King’s sexual repartee potentially embarrassing but also described much of the tape as unintelligible, which may explain why journalists who also heard the tape declined to use it.
After mentioning the threatening note to King, Garrow makes one of the few departures from his narrative framework in order to explain what he labels King’s “compulsive sexual athleticism.” King, he asserts, had serious marital difficulties and “there were some things [he] badly needed that he could not find at home.” Many activists, Garrow claims, were aware of King’s “various sexual involvements with a number of different women” (pp. 374, 375). This characterization of King as a sexual athlete implies knowledge of King’s intimate affairs that goes beyond what Garrow can derive from the FBI’s surveillance. Garrow’s main supporting evidence, as far as can be determined from his somewhat cryptic notes on sexual matters, are interviews with King’s associates and friends. These interviews have limited adequacy as evidence, however, because they were conducted many years after the events in question and long after revelations about FBI surveillance. It is often difficult, therefore, to determine whether Garrow’s interviewees are commenting about what they personally knew or about what they later heard or read. Despite Garrow’s implication that King’s sexual partners were numerous, none of his information was obtained from them. Although Garrow interviewed the woman he believes became the “emotional centerpiece” (p. 375) of King’s last years, he did not question her about her alleged affair with King. When I asked Garrow about his best interview source regarding King’s affairs, he referred me to an interview with William A. Rutherford, who was not a close confidant of King and who had lived for decades in Europe before being recruited during King’s final year to work at SCLC headquarters. Rutherford’s observations about his months of working with King reveal his belief that “the movement altogether was a very raunchy exercise,” but disclose only that Rutherford had heard about King’s liaisons. He indicates that he had no personal grounds to believe the stories until he encountered Coretta King one evening and was surprised to learn that she believed her husband was at a meeting at Rutherford’s place (pp. 586, 587).

Lacking more substantial evidence, Garrow is forced to rely on suggestive but hardly conclusive observations regarding King’s relations with women. His interviewees recall women “making passes” at King or describe King as a “male chauvinist” who “loved beautiful women.” Wiley Branton’s recollection that he warned King regarding rumors about his sexual life is used to substantiate Garrow’s inferences about King, despite the fact that Branton actually said in his interview with Garrow that he had no knowledge of King’s liaisons. Garrow also presents as confessions out-of-context observations attributed to King: “Fucking’s a form of anxiety reduction” or “Every now and then you’ll be unfaithful to those that you should be faithful to” (pp. 375, 376).

Such evidence may be the best that Garrow could be expected to obtain
about King's sexual behavior and may indicate that extramarital affairs did occur, but they provide a flimsy foundation for Garrow's assertion that King was abnormally obsessed with extramarital sex or casually engaged in it. It may be futile to argue that even national leaders should be accorded the right to a private life, for the boundaries between the personal and political are disappearing and the debunking of charismatic political figures may be necessary in a democracy. Nevertheless, Bearing the Cross demonstrates the dangerous possibility that we have become too willing to believe the worst about leaders found to be less than perfect. Perhaps the most troublesome aspect of Garrow's book is that he has not described King's sexual behavior with sufficient precision and sensitivity to make possible an understanding of its historical or biographical significance.

King's life was not sacrosanct, but it remains edifying. Because King was an exceptional leader within a historic social movement, the two books under review can be seen as the most recent fruits of research in a field containing much untitled yet fertile terrain. Fairclough, in particular, performs a useful service by extending his account to the years after 1968, when King's successors struggled to survive in an inhospitable political climate. Yet, although both he and Garrow are aware of the limitations of biography as a means of achieving a fuller understanding of the modern black struggle as a whole, King's exceptional life will continue to be a stimulus for research of broader scope. No other black leader of his time was so firmly rooted, through family, religious, educational, and political experiences, in the rich soils of both Afro-American culture and American reform thought.

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3. In his 1982 biography, Stephen B. Oates asserted that King "surrendered himself to his passionate nature and sought intimacy and reassurance in the arms of other women. . . ." Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1982), p. 274. Garrow's FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr. also described the Bureau's vicious campaign against King and became the basis for most subsequent discussions of King's sex life.
4. To note just one example, in a recent nationally syndicated newspaper magazine feature, Walter Scott responded to a reader who asked whether it was true that King “was uncontrollably oversexed” and “had harems” throughout the country. Scott stated that there was no evidence for these claims, but affirmed that King “attracted women of all races to his hotel rooms” and referred readers to *Bearing the Cross* for more information. “Walter Scott’s Personality Parade,” *Parade Newspaper Magazine*, February 22, 1987.

5. Branton responded to assertions Garrow made during a television interview with Tony Brown (Branton to Brown, January 19, 1987, copy in author’s possession).