EXPERT’S PICKS: Civil Rights

We asked Clayborne Carson, director of the King Papers Project and author of the civil rights history “In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s,” to pick a shelf full of essential books on the modern African American battle for full citizenship.

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one of the most fascinating books on modern African American history have recast the civil rights movement as an expansive freedom struggle with visionary goals that reached beyond domestic legal battles and attained global significance. During the past quarter-century, these writings have shown that black political militancy sought not just civil rights legislation but also broader political and economic gains. Rather than assuming that this militancy was carefully orchestrated legislation but also broader political and economic gains. Rather than assuming that this militancy was carefully orchestrated, Lewis brashly lined us to the coercions to anticolonial movements in Africa and called for a “great social revolution” that would reach the world after World War II. Even King struggled to keep pace with the tumultuous protests that occurred in Southern communities during the 1960s.

This trend toward bottom-up studies reflects the experiences of historians such as myself who participated in the mass activism of the 1960s and ’70s. At the 1963 March on Washington, I admired King’s “I Have a Dream” speech but was also moved by the controversial remarks of John Lewis, then chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lewis brashly linked our cause to anticolonial movements in Africa and called for a “great social revolution” that would reach “every city, every village, and every hamlet of this nation.”

By 1985, when Coretta Scott King asked me to edit her late husband’s papers, the best studies of the modern African American freedom struggle had abandoned simplistic depictions of “King and his followers.” While not ignoring King’s uniquely visionary leadership, the most insightful studies of the past two decades have illuminated the complex relationship between him — as well as national civil rights leaders — and the grassroots organizers who pushed the black struggle in unexpected new directions.

LOCAL PEOPLE: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi, by John Dittmer (Univ. of Illinois)

I’VE GOT THE LIGHT OF FREEDOM: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle, by Charles M. Payne (Univ. of California)

These books are among the most notable titles that have focused on SNCC’s grassroots organizing efforts. They document the evolution of political strategies devised by courageous organizers and indigenous leaders as they battled the brutal forces of white supremacy.

CIVILITIES AND CIVIL RIGHTS: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Freedom Struggle, by William Chafe (Univ. of North Carolina)

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee, by Robert J. Norrell (Univ. of North Carolina)

RIVER OF NO RETURN: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC, by Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell (Univ. Press of Mississippi)

WALKING WITH THE WIND: A Memoir of the Movement, by John Lewis with Michael (D’Oro) Harvest

READY FOR REVOLUTION: The Life and Struggle of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), by Stokely Carmichael with Michael Tendall (Scribner)

SNCC’s internal debates reflect that divided African Americans as well as Americans of all races. Two books that originally appeared in the early 1970s — soon after those heated disputes — are still available. Forman, a former executive secretary of SNCC who died in January, offered a yeasty blend of social history and ideological combat in his book. Sellers, a former student activist and now a professor at the University of South Carolina, presents a similarly representative tale on the group’s tumultuous history. More recent accounts by SNCC leaders Lewis and Carmichael also reveal the internal arguments over the meaning and direction of black power.

SISTERS IN THE STRUGGLE: African-American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, edited by Bettye Collier-Thorn and V.P. Franklin (New York Univ.)

DEEP IN OUR HEARTS: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement, by Constance Curry et al. ( Univ. of Georgia)

SOON WE WILL NOT CRY: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Robinson, by Cynthia Griggs Fleming (Rowman & Littlefield)

FOR FREEDOM’S SAKE: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer, by Chana Kai Lee (Univ. of Illinois)

The origins of the modern women’s liberation movement can be traced to the indelible experiences of articulate female civil rights activists. Their stories have been told well in several anthologies, the best of which include the collection assembled by Collier-Thorn and Franklin as well as Curry’s project, which features her reminiscences along with those of eight of her fellow activists. Fleming’s biography of SNCC worker Robinson and Lee’s study of Hamer, a stalwart leader of the Mississippi freedom struggle, also shed illuminating and necessary light.

FREEDOM’S SWORD: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969, by Gilbert Jonas (Routledge)

THURGOOD MARSHALL: American Revolutionary, by Juan Williams (Three Rivers)

FROM JIM CROW TO CIVIL RIGHTS: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality, by Michael J. Klarman (Oxford Univ.)

Despite all the attention now being paid to the foot soldiers of the black struggle, it would be wrong to suppose that the gener­ als have been ignored. During the past two decades, many re­ vealing studies of major civil rights leaders have appeared. Jonas renders a sympathetic treatment of the NAACP, while Williams creates a riveting portrait of the NAACP leader most responsible for the landmark Brown decision, yet whose national­ prominence declined with the rise of mass militancy. Klar­ man’s ambitious effort provides ample evidence that national­ legal norms did little to stem the most egregious types of racial oppression.

BEARING THE CROSS: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, by David J. Garrow (Perennial)

PARTING THE WATERS and PILLAR OF FIRE, by Taylor Branch (Simon & Schuster)

There is no paucity of studies regarding King, the one national­ civil rights leader whose influence extended from the confer­ ence rooms of the Washington power brokers to the mass meetings of powerless Mississippi cotton pickers. During the mid-1980s, as my colleagues and I began preparing a definitive edition of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., two major studies of King were beginning to incorporate elements of SNCC’s bottom-up perspective. Thus, Garrow’s meticulously researched, Pulitzer Prize-winning book concludes with Ella Baker’s corrective judgment: “The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement.” Branch incorporates Baker’s sentiment into the first two volumes of his proj­ ected trilogy on “America in the King Years.” His sprawling nar­ rative, also a Pulitzer Prize winner, shows how national political leaders deftly channeled southern mass insurgency into a successful campaign for historic civil rights legislation.


RACE WOMAN: The Life of Shirley Graham Du Bois, by Gerald Horne (New York Univ.)

TOWARD THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King, by Louis V. Baldwin (Pilgrim)

THE COLD WAR AND THE COLOR LINE: American Race Relations in the Global Arena, by Thomas Borstelmann (Harvard Univ.)

The growing body of writings on King reveals his unique abil­ ity to express the visionary long-term goals of the mass move­ ment from which he emerged. He consistently reminded us that the African American struggle was part of a global battle for freedom. Anderson, Horne and Borstelmann’s books are among those published during the past decade that follow up on this in­ sight by reminding readers of the international dimension of Af­ rican American political militancy. We can expect, therefore, that some historians will continue to look closely at African American grassroots activism, even as others persuasively link that activism to a global freedom struggle that changed the lives of a majority of humanity.

35 VOLUME 35, NUMBER 16

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