

Walking the Walk

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

David Halberstam, *The Children*, New York: Random House, 1998.

For readers who view the modern Black freedom struggle largely through the prism of Martin Luther King, Jr., both John Lewis's new autobiography and David Halberstam's history of the young Black collegians who launched the Nashville sit-ins of 1960 are potential godsend. Most movement scholars have long emphasized that many under-heralded activists like Lewis and Diane Nash, both of whom helped lead the Nashville sit-ins, often deserved far more credit for the movement's victories than news accounts of the 1960s ever gave them. Anyone who reads either *Walking With the Wind* or *The Children* will come away with a clear and salutary understanding of how the civil rights struggle was indeed a "mass" movement, rather than any sort of hierarchical effort commanded by King or anyone else.

For me, any autobiography that's written "with" or "as told to" some collaborator always has to prove its historical "bona fides": are the words and recollections really those of the "author," or are his or her real voice and memories lost among narrative regurgitations strung together by a ghostwriter?

Well, in the case of John Lewis I'm happy-very enthusiastically happy-to report that *Walking With the Wind* is without a doubt the best "movement" autobiography yet published. Its content is rigorously true to Lewis's own personal experiences and stories, and its voice is very much the direct and candid timbre that everyone who knows John Lewis immediately will recognize.

Direct and candid also describe the way in which Lewis recounts his feelings toward many of his old allies. No one will accuse *Walking With the Wind* of pulling any punches, whether with regard to Lewis's hotly-contested 1986 congressional campaign against fellow movement veteran Julian Bond or with regard to other relationships that also date back to the early 1960s. Lewis says that Congress of Racial Equality executive director James Farmer "struck me as very insincere," and that Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) executive secretary James Forman "wasn't quite upfront. There was something about the man that was just not real."

No one will be surprised by Lewis's respectful treatment of Martin Luther King, Jr. ("I owe more of myself to him than to anyone else I have ever known," Lewis confesses), but many eyebrows probably will raise at Lewis's characterization of his successor as chairman of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael, as "the last person I'd respect."

Lewis powerfully and poignantly relates his childhood in rural Pike County, Alabama, and how his role in the Nashville sit-ins led to his involvement in both the founding of SNCC and the 1961 Freedom Rides. Lewis identifies the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's defeat at the 1964 Democratic National Convention as "the turning point of the civil rights movement," and he mourns how SNCC itself began to crumble because of "the growing climate of suspicion and mistrust within our ranks" and "the loss of that unity of spirit and purpose that we had shared in the beginning."

SNCC's decline culminated in Lewis's own replace-

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ment as chairman by the more media-hungry Carmichael in 1966, and Lewis says that "the pain of that experience is something I will never be able to forget." After a brief sojourn in New York working for the Field Foundation, however, Lewis returned to Atlanta to work for SRC and the Voter Education Project and, in 1981, following a short stint in the Carter Administration, won election to the Atlanta City Council. Ever since his 1986 election to Congress, Lewis-unlike some other civil rights veterans-has demonstrated again and again how the values that first brought him into the movement in 1959 - 1960 have not been forsaken or forgotten.

David Halberstam's *The Children* is a huge and sprawling account of the full life histories of eight Black college students-including John Lewis-whose participation in the sit-ins against white-only lunch counters in Nashville in the spring of 1960 helped spark the entire southern protest movement of the 1960s.

The Children is a valuable book but far from a perfect one. One of its two most glaring weaknesses is its very title, for twenty or twenty-one year-olds were not then and are not now usually spoken of as "children." Halberstam's rationale for his title is that the label originated with one of Nashville's most supportive Black ministers, Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, but it's a usage that may be misleading even if it is not actually demeaning. Three years later, when King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) did indeed recruit junior high school students to take part in protests in Birmingham, Alabama, "children" were indeed in the forefront of the movement, but the Nashville collegians were young adults whose courageous choices were carefully considered, not teenagers out on a lark.

Halberstam invests considerable energy in detailing his characters' childhoods long before they arrived in Nashville. Some readers may wonder whether these Black young people, as distinct from others, came to nonviolent activism in part because of what Halberstam portrays as well-above-average parenting, but Halberstam never pauses to analyze the larger possible meaning of the individual stories he richly relates.

Another major influence in moving these particular young people to challenge Nashville's racial discrimination was James M. Lawson, a young Black clergyman whose own spiritual commitment to nonviolent activism instructed and motivated others. Many people may not know

the extent to which spiritual and religious faith sustained young activists like John Lewis, but Halberstam's narrative captures that aspect of their lives powerfully and impressively.

One thing Halberstam does not capture, however, is his characters' own voices, and this is *The Children's* greatest disappointment. No matter who the person or what the context, Halberstam describes their thoughts and feelings exclusively in his own voice, rather than in theirs. This is both puzzling and, as the book proceeds, increasingly infuriating.

The problem is most starkly displayed in the book's final paragraph, where Halberstam recounts a 1995 commemoration of the Nashville sit-ins' thirty-fifth anniversary. "Of the many speeches that day, perhaps the most moving was given by Diane Nash," Halberstam writes. Nash spoke "with a rare kind of modesty and elegance. She had been proud, she said, to be a part of something noble and generous, something which was larger than herself." It sounds wonderful, but Halberstam never quotes a single word of it.

The absence of Nash and Lewis's own voices from Halberstam's account deprives *The Children* of added emotional power. It also sometimes leaves Halberstam repeating his own renditions of his characters' feelings over and over again. For Curtis Murphy, one of the least known Nashville activists, the sit-ins "had been the most exhilarating and fulfilling experience of his life," Halberstam writes. One hundred pages later almost the exact same description "the most compelling experience of his life"-again reappears.

Halberstam often reiterates the valid and emotionally crucial observation that for all the activists, not just Curtis Murphy, "their days in this cause would remain the most exciting and stirring of their lives." Some early reviewers have criticized Halberstam for devoting the final third of his very long book to the "post-movement" lives of his main characters, but those chapters have at least as much emotional power as those that relate the sit-ins themselves. Readers will find themselves rooting for Curtis Murphy to overcome several post-movement years of depression and heavy drinking, as indeed he does. They also will be deeply drawn into the subsequent challenges successfully endured by Rodney Powell and Gloria Johnson

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Powell, two Meharry Medical College graduates whose marriage eventually ended after Rodney realized late in life that he was gay.

Halberstam's willingness to report the private as well as the public lives of his characters is perhaps *The Children's* greatest strength. All of us who have written extensively about the movement know full well that private life developments such as the marriage and subsequent divorce of Diane Nash and James Bevel (whom Halberstam correctly characterizes as "a considerable womanizer"), are important pieces of the movement's interior story, but no one has come close to doing as good a job as Halberstam with this portion of the history.

The Children also does a commendable job of presenting Martin Luther King, Jr., from the vantage point of other activists whose private feelings about King sometimes were highly

ambivalent. King intentionally avoided taking part in any of the 1961 "Freedom Rides," and in the wake of that avoidance young student activists such as Nash came to doubt King's courage and commitment. As Halberstam writes in relating Nash's feelings, "leaders were not truly leaders unless they were willing to do everything that they asked of others."

Relying on Lawson, Halberstam also accurately conveys what he calls King's "increasing awareness that he had been selected by forces outside his reach for a task far larger than any he had either sought or wanted." King always knew that sooner or later his task would end only with his own assassination, and Halberstam also faithfully depicts the despondency that overcame the entire movement after King's 1968 murder.

But the emotional core of *The Children* is Halberstam's wonderful ability to capture how all of the early activists never lost their profound and defining attachment to the days and events that overshadowed the entire balance of all their lives. For Diane Nash, "nothing she did ever quite equaled the sheer sense of fulfillment she had gotten in those early days." She "missed desperately," Halberstam writes, "not just the sense of purpose . . . but that of their selflessness" too.

Nash "often wondered if the Movement had attracted exceptional people, or whether instead had been a magnet for ordinary people who had been transformed into uncommon people because of their cause." In the end she rightly decided that it had been "a little of both."

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