

Los Angeles Times, Sunday January 15, 2006

Journey's End

* At Canaan's Edge America in the King Years, 1965-68 Taylor Branch Simon & Schuster: 1,042 pp., \$35

Book Review, Pages R4, R5. 56 inches; 1767 words

By David J. Garrow, David J. Garrow, a senior fellow at Homerton College, Cambridge, is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"AT CANAAN'S EDGE," the final volume of Taylor Branch's lengthy trilogy on the U.S. civil rights movement, picks up the story just as Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous voting rights campaign in Selma, Ala., gains momentum in 1965 and carries it forward until the very moment of King's assassination in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968.

Branch's trilogy centers on King -- "America in the King Years" has been the consistent subtitle -- but the first two books stood out because of their emphasis on other, less-celebrated leaders. "Parting the Waters," the Pulitzer Prize-winning book that covered the years 1954 to 1963, featured Robert Moses, a pioneering organizer in Mississippi for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. "Pillar of Fire," which examined an 18-month period from mid-1963 to early 1965, gave extensive attention to Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam for a courageously independent political path before being gunned down by Nation henchmen in February 1965.

"At Canaan's Edge" offers no similar successors. In his excellent treatment of the Selma campaign, Branch singles out Jonathan Daniels, a young white Northern seminarian who enlisted in the movement and was murdered in nearby Lowndes County by an angry racist in August 1965. He also focuses occasionally on Stokely Carmichael, a dedicated SNCC organizer who attracted national fame and controversy when he championed the cry "Black Power" in 1966. But neither become enduring characters. Instead, the figure who dominates perhaps more than King is Lyndon B. Johnson.

Branch emphasizes the president's tragic embrace of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam at least equally with his outspoken calls for racial equality. The emotional richness of his portrayal of Johnson stems primarily from thousands of White House phone calls the president secretly recorded, tapes of which are now publicly available from the Johnson Presidential Library. The difficulty is that two other well-received authors already have plumbed this material. Michael Beschloss' "Taking Charge" (1997) and "Reaching for Glory" (2001) made available extensive excerpts of those recordings through mid-1965. And last year's "Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws That Changed America," by Nick Kotz, featured the same conversations Branch uses to poignantly depict how awkward and at arm's length Johnson's relationship with King was even before Vietnam intruded so painfully in 1965. Branch downplays Johnson's appetite for the information J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was busy gathering from telephone wiretaps and microphone bugs of King and his associates. Johnson, Kotz showed, was highly susceptible to both the FBI's hugely distorted claims of "Communist influence" on King and the bureau's far better documented accounts of his energetic sex life.

Indeed, "At Canaan's Edge" offers disappointingly little new or original historical information.

After King's historic triumph in Selma and Congress' ensuing passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, he turned his primary focus to the big cities of the North, where racial inequality and endemic poverty already looked even more intractable than Southern segregation. In late 1965, he chose Chicago as his principal urban target, and many of King's veteran Southern staffers shifted northward to work in conjunction with Chicago's local civil rights activists. Their goal was to break down the discriminatory practices and economic barriers that restricted African Americans to decrepit ghettos and soulless public housing high-rises.

But Branch seems relatively uninterested in the Chicago movement's internal dynamics and questionable tactical shift from community organizing to street marches in hostile all-white neighborhoods. His lack of interest may stem from his wholly credible belief that King erred by framing Chicago at the outset as "a localized struggle," seeking only a metropolitan-level settlement. "For the

first time in his career," the author observes, a King "campaign for racial justice would aim short of decisive intervention by American citizens as a whole." King's 1963 Birmingham campaign also was ostensibly targeted toward municipal concessions, but Branch rightly observes that "what sharply distinguished the movements was the disparity in their wider impact."

Academic scholars have since argued that King achieved more tangible local gains in Chicago than he did in Birmingham, but in 1966 King's Northern effort was widely pronounced a failure. King tried again the following year, in Cleveland, in a campaign that helped elect Carl Stokes as that city's first black mayor, but Branch devotes even less attention to Cleveland than he does to Chicago. Nor does he emphasize how King came to advocate redistributive economic policies that would appear vastly more radical today than they did in the political climate of the late 1960s.

Many readers probably would be surprised to learn that King, who is universally celebrated across the American political spectrum, privately identified himself as a democratic socialist. Rhetorically, King is most widely remembered for the upbeat optimism of his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, but in his later years his outspoken denunciations of inequality in America became expressly anti-capitalist. "Our economy must become more person-centered than property-centered and profit-centered," King told his staff in late 1967. Yet that potentially unpopular aspect of King's leftward evolution is one that Branch all but ignores.

Instead, Branch goes on countless narrative tangents, including various odd asides about baseball stadiums and players. More worrisome, he uncritically retells some anecdotes that are impossible to verify. Similar problems occurred in Branch's two earlier volumes, especially "Parting the Waters," but in contexts that were largely historically harmless. As historian Ralph Luker has detailed, contemporaneous records show that one of Branch's signature stories in his first book -- richly detailing King's first visit to Montgomery, Ala., in 1954, before he moved there as a pastor -- was wholly erroneous. The Mississippi scholar Charles Payne has commented that Branch "tells a great story, but not always the one that happened."

In "At Canaan's Edge," Branch relates several episodes that reflect King's private demons, but without context or explanation. He accurately shows how fatigued and often depressed King was during the last three years of his life and he recounts one incident that occurred during a heated discussion at a 1967 retreat attended by King's closest aides.

"Late one night, King literally howled against the paralyzed debate. 'I don't want to do this any more!' he shouted alone. 'I want to go back to my little church.' He banged around and yelled, which summoned anxious friends outside his room until [Andrew] Young and [Ralph] Abernathy gently removed his whiskey and talked him to bed." The following morning, Branch adds, King sheepishly told his colleagues, "Well, now it's established that I ain't a saint."

Branch gives no source for this particular story, but his book's 200 pages of footnotes attest to the thoroughness with which he has mined an extremely wide range of materials and three decades of interviews. Yet his propensity for uncritically accepting people's words at face value is a failing that can be dangerous. One notable tale, for which Branch cites only "confidential interviews," may be the most significant instance in which the author has been misled: In January 1968, when King's wife, Coretta, underwent a surgery that Branch identifies as a hysterectomy, he writes that the civil rights leader chose that occasion to confess to her his relationship with another woman. Branch doesn't name her but says that she was "the one mistress who meant most to him since 1963 -- with intensity almost like a second family."

The result, Branch writes, "was painful disaster." Abernathy's wife, Juanita, "exploded" in "fury," apparently after learning of the incident from Coretta. Branch then adds that Abernathy, King's trusted deputy, claimed he too was "so alarmed" by King's inexplicable conduct toward Coretta "that he canvassed [King's] regular mistresses for hidden fits of jealousy or romantic blackmail strong enough to break down the careful habit of secret, nonpossessive affairs, but he found no conventional clues to explain" what supposedly had transpired. Branch no doubt has rendered this incident exactly as it was related to him, but his source or sources may very well have invented or hugely distorted it

for base and petty reasons. King's marriage was not one of the stronger aspects of his life, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine him doing what this story alleges. King's relationships with numerous women, like his heavy drinking during at least the final year of his life, are unavoidable elements of his life story, but gratuitously cruel behavior was never part of his character.

Most King scholars agree that in addition to his numerous mistresses, the civil rights leader shared his deepest emotional bond in the years after 1963 with one female friend. Branch identifies her as a Los Angeles woman, giving telling details about her without explicitly naming her. But she is not the woman most King scholars would cite.

The latter chapters of "At Canaan's Edge" recount King's blunt criticisms of the Vietnam War, as well as how Lyndon Johnson coupled his private skepticism about the conflict with undisguised hatred for anyone who publicly attacked his policies. King began tentatively questioning U.S. military strategy in 1965, but in one phone conversation with Johnson he all but apologized for his statements: "I didn't want to add to the burdens because I know they're very difficult." Two years later, though, King bitterly denounced "my own government" as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." Yet as Branch stresses, given Johnson's obsessive secrecy, King "had no way of knowing" that doubts about the war were almost as great within the White House as they were within the country's burgeoning antiwar movement. Only on March 31, 1968, just four days before King's murder, with Johnson's stunning announcement that he would not seek reelection, were those doubts made clear to the general public.

Branch fervently praises Johnson for opening the door to the eventual U.S. withdrawal from the Southeast Asian quagmire, a passage that is perhaps the most dramatic example of the author's consistent elevation of Johnson's importance over that of King, the ostensible central figure of the book.

King was a complex and intensely private man. His greatest legacy, Branch suggests, remains his obsessive belief in nonviolence as "a force for freedom stronger than all the powers of subjugation." Nonviolence, Branch rues, "has nearly vanished from public discourse" nowadays, and even by 1966 it "had become passe across the spectrum." But King continued to espouse nonviolence "until he was nearly alone among colleagues weary of sacrifice." Such deeply principled, courageous strength of character, the author rightly believes, counts for vastly more in the long arc of history than all the foibles that FBI eavesdroppers or jealous colleagues chose to immortalize. *