How King Borrowed

Reading the Truth Between Sermons and Footnotes

By David J. Garrow

THERE IS little that is either pleasant or simple in the controversy concerning Martin Luther King Jr.'s extensive plagiarism in his graduate school term papers and doctoral dissertation in the early 1950s.

It is unpleasant both because plagiarism is a distasteful subject, and because this scholarly discovery provides longtime opponents of the civil rights movement with one more opportunity to call into question the goals and meaning of the struggle that King came to symbolize. Perhaps the one bright spot is the commendable frankness with which both the King Papers Project researchers and the press have handled the story.

Nor is the King plagiarism a simple matter. First, neither the project editors nor those of us in the scholarly community who have reviewed their findings have any dependable explanation for why King did what he did, nor can they say how aware King was of having done wrong. There is no getting around the fact that the scale of King's unattributed borrowings—almost word-for-word copying of sentences and whole paragraphs without benefit of quotation marks on scores of occasions, often without minimal footnoting—is extensive and substantial. In particular, King's heavy reliance on an unpublished dissertation completed three years earlier by Boston University doctoral candidate Jack Boozer is especially egregious.

Further, King's offense cannot be minimized, and any temptation to understate the extent of the problem would simply play into the hands of King opponents, who are no doubt anxious to discover further borrowings. When King came to Boston University in 1951 as a doctoral candidate, he was, after all, no first-year student still learning how to write an essay or prepare a bibliography. Four years at Morehouse College—a proud and demanding institution where King achieved only a C+ average—had certainly taught him the basic rules; and faculty members at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where King spent three years,

See KING, C5, Col. 3

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KING, From C1

knew King as a serious and dedicated student. (It bears emphasis that there is absolutely no intimation that King ever cheated on his Crozer or Boston examinations, and his grades on those tests were consistently B's and oftentimes A's.)

At Crozer, King was elected student body president, became class valedictorian (despite two C's in public speaking!) and received the top prize for further study. His major professor, George W. Davis, recommended him to B.U. and other doctoral programs as "a man of high character" and "exceptional intellectual ability," and the seminary's dean, Charles E. Batten, termed King "one of the most brilliant students we have had at Crozer." In other words, not only did King know better than to borrow as extensively and repeatedly as he did, he also was smart and skillful enough to do the work, and do it well, without any need to plagiarize.

Attempting to explain King's transgressions is a highly speculative and tentative undertaking. By far the most valuable resource at hand is the work of a young scholar at Arizona State University, Prof. Keith D. Miller, whose book on King's sources and preaching will be published next spring by The Free Press.

Miller's work has not dealt with King's term papers and thesis, but the rich and insightful interpretive framework Miller has put forward in two academic articles ("College English," March 1986, and "PMLA," January 1990) analyzing King's sermons and writings can shed light on what went wrong in King's career as a student.

Thanks to interviews with schoolmates and friends, King scholars have been aware for several years that King as a young man pursued his aspiration toward preaching and the ministry both by carefully observing notable Atlanta preachers such as the Rev. William Holmes Borders of Wheat Street Baptist Church and by painstaking study of published "collected great sermons" by such Protestant orators as Harry Emerson Fosdick.

At the simplest level, Miller's research illuminates that King's ability to memorize—and to retain portions of memorized texts for years—was phenomenal. Multi-sentence segments of published sermons by Fosdick and by such other prominent mid-century preachers as George Buttrick, J. Wallace Hamilton and Robert McCracken turn up almost word-for-word in many of King's sermons. To cite simply one notable example highlighted by Miller, King's February 1968 "Drum Major Instinct" sermon, in which King seemingly delivered his own epitaph and which was played at King's own funeral, is extensively modeled upon a similarly titled 1952 sermon by Hamilton. Such parallels can be found in many ministers' sermons, including King's, but the rhetorical power of King's sermons was profoundly his own.

King almost always spoke extemporaneously, often giving sermons with no more than a brief outline in front of him. His oratorical repertoire was composed of notable quotations, extended metaphors and sermonic images that he had committed to memory. As Miller explains persuasively in his PMLA article, assumptions about words as property are fundamentally different within the preaching tradition than they are within the written culture of publishing. "Oral culture fails to define the word as a commodity," Miller writes, and King, like many other preachers, operated on the premise that "words are shared assets, not personal belongings." Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Rev. Joseph Lowery made the same point about preachers in a recent newspaper interview: "The first time they use somebody else's work, they give credit. The second time, they say some thinker said it. The third time, they just say it."

Miller's interpretive work leads to one more point: King's learning style did not produce an awkward or jerry-built pastiche, but rather what Miller, in a nice phrase, calls "a tapestry instead of patchwork." In other words, King's utilization of sermonic commonplaces was only one part of constructing a coherent world view, one that was fundamentally rooted in the Christian teachings of the Bible and in King's own initially very optimistic perspective on society's potential for betterment.

Both Miller's analyses and the discoveries of the King Papers Project will in the years ahead increasingly point us towards the understanding that King was more the product of the black oral tradition in which he grew up than he was shaped by the philosophical texts to which he was exposed in school. As L. Harold DeWolf, King's principal adviser at B.U., put it in 1968, King "did not learn from his professors his convictions about civil rights nor his easy assumption of personal equality with any man. He had grown up with such convictions." Academic commentators such as myself and Union Theological Seminary's James H. Cone have argued for several years that King the student was simply attracted to those authors whose analyses helped articulate values that King already held as a result of his church-centered upbringing in Atlanta.

But if appreciating the young King as a product of oral traditions makes his academic bad habits more understandable, it does not make them excusable. Some may find it tempting to argue that King was simply sloppy or careless when it came to the composition of his dissertation, but the same problem is all too readily apparent in most of several dozen previous papers. Furthermore, no fellow student or instructor, either then or since, has ever spoken of King the student as sloppy or careless.

Likewise, to highlight King's creativity—Miller's "tapestry"—is not sufficient answer either. For as Judge Learned Hand wrote some decades ago (in *Sheldon v. Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corp.)*, "No plagiarist can excuse the wrong by showing how much of his work he did not pirate." Unfortunately, present evidence suggests that, perhaps more than any other factor, the learning style that King acquired as an Atlanta teenager was carried over into an academic context where the rules explicitly barred the imitation that was widespread among white and black Protestant preachers.

In retrospect, perhaps I and others should not have been as wholly surprised as we were. As early as 1971, Ira Zepp's valuable dissertation on King's thought had highlighted "exact reproduction or paraphrasing" from the noted religious writers Paul Ramsey and Anders Nygren in the central chapter of King's first book, "Stride Toward Freedom" (1958). But, given the extent to which that volume, like some of the other books and magazine articles that followed, was in significant part either sculpted or drafted by King aides and advisers, there was no reason to attribute the manuscript's shortcomings to King. Nonetheless, now, in the cold, hard light of the King Papers Project's disheartening findings, there is no gainsaying the depth of one's emotional disappointment over King's plagiarism.

No doubt there will be additional discoveries of non-originality in King's language. But the sophistication and persuasiveness of Miller's analysis ought to keep everyone calm if, for example, anyone tries to market as "news" the fact that a few sentences of "I Have a Dream" or "Letter from Birmingham Jail" are direct echoes of Fosdick or someone else.

Only speculation is available to answer the question of whether King was conscious of his offense and whether in later years he regretted what had been done. My own tentative guess is that it did gnaw at him, even though in later years King's daily life was so hectic as to leave him few opportunities to reflect upon the past.

Still, after 1965, King spoke movingly of his own shortcomings and imperfections, of how he, like everyone else, is inescapably a sinner. It was that inner toughness and self-questioning that gave to King's public leadership an integrity that few public figures will match.

Non-academic readers should not be surprised at the failure of King's professors at Boston, as at Crozer, to detect his errors. They had come to know him as an intelligent and hard-working young man. Hence it is plausible that DeWolf—and other doctoral committee members—could write enthusiastic evaluations of King's dissertation without subjecting it to the sort of scrutiny which they might well have applied to the work of a marginal student. No one since, quite frankly, has ever been much impressed with King's dissertation or term papers; indeed, the dryness of the dissertation seems as unlike King the man—either public or private—as anything one might imagine.

In the end, of course, none of King's real contributions and courage had anything to do with those academic submissions. Ironically, one can perhaps get the truest sense of King's greatness and uniqueness from reading the hundreds of his telephone conversations wiretapped and transcribed by the FBI, and released pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act. One comes away from those transcripts with an increased, indeed elevated appreciation of King's integrity and courage. I would hazard that the same thing could be said of few others, although fortunately few comparisons will ever be available for review.

That is what commentators such as William Raspberry and Ellen Goodman have remarked upon in recent days. They have quite properly focused on the fact that King's greatness lay in his public achievements and private courage, not in his schoolwork nor in his sexual relationships. But we need to remember too, amidst all the relentless talk about the importance and value of "role models," a simple truth that Howard University's E. Ethelbert Miller succinctly articulated: "We must tell youngsters that role models aren't perfect humans."

Martin Luther King Jr. viewed himself as highly imperfect, once telling his Atlanta congregation, "I make mistakes tactically. I make mistakes morally, and get down on my knees and confess it and ask God to forgive me." Indeed, "God does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes that we make, but by the total bent of our lives."

No longer will King be an easy symbolic vehicle for inculcating schoolchildren with a "great man" approach to history whereby significiant achievements are registered only by those who are perfect. Instead, a more sophisticated picture of human greatness and contributions will be required.

Heroes needn't be perfect to nonetheless be heroes, nor should too much focus on one individual obscure the fact that the civil rights movement witnessed heroic courage and contributions from thousands of largely unsung individuals. In the years ahead, history will increasingly recognize that widely-shared aspect of the movement's achievements. And Martin Luther King Jr. will remain safely ensconced within what properly will more and more become a plural pantheon.