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**CIVIL RIGHTS POTPOURRI**

PARTING THE WATERS: AMERICA IN THE KING YEARS, 1954-63, by Taylor Branch. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988. 1064 pp. \$24.95.

**T**aylor Branch's massive *Parting the Waters*—922 pages of narrative text—aspire to be “a history of the civil rights movement” formed out of “knitting together a number of personal stories,” first and foremost that of Martin Luther King, Jr. Branch emphasizes that the book is “not a biography”—for he goes out of his way to consider other activists, especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Bob Moses—but he nonetheless builds the book around King, declaring at the outset “[M]y thesis that King's life is the best and most important metaphor for American history in the watershed postwar years.”

Notwithstanding the scope of the book, *Parting the Waters* does not in actuality sustain a clear organizing perspective or orienting theme, and the book's many virtues are constantly in danger of being swamped by its sheer size and inclusiveness. Branch is a good writer who has mined many of the important archives and interviewed a considerable number of the surviving actors, but at its core the book has only its chronological progression with which to bring the reader along. Many of Branch's textual strong points—his almost punch-by-punch rendition of the Freedom Rides, his beautifully evocative portrait of the penultimate Birmingham demonstrations in the spring of 1963—stand solidly on their own, but no consistent interpretive perspective links or interrelates them.

The crux of the problem is that Branch fails to offer a clearly articulated portrait of King, his central character. This is not to say that any of his major points about King are themselves seriously flawed, for they are not. Whether the subject is King's academically formative experience at Crozer Theological Seminary and his encounter with the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, or his tremendously important friendship with white New York lawyer Stanley D. Levison, or King's complicated and multilayered private life, Branch is a careful and trustworthy interpreter. However, at least to this reader, Branch does not offer a truly interwoven portrait of King, either because he is not fully certain what to make of the man or perhaps because he is not convinced that

all of King's seemingly disparate parts actually fit together.

Some King scholars, principally this reviewer and James H. Cone, have sought to use King's own tangible sense of calling and of mission—his belief that his civil rights leadership role was an obligation bestowed upon him by Jesus and by God—as the central organizing principle for understanding King's life. One need not agree with that in order to engage King's meaning, but Branch seems relatively unattuned to or uninterested in King's religious faith and spiritual life, even while manifesting an excellent understanding of the practical importance of black church politics—Rev. J. H. Jackson's National Baptist Convention—in King's career. Branch's few passing comments on King's inner life are generally on the mark, but he does not weave them into a clear or consciously articulated portrait of King the man.

Branch's picture of the many sets of actors who made up the early southern civil rights movement is generally quite solid, though his apparent unfamiliarity with some scholarly works, e.g., Mills Thornton's landmark analysis of the Montgomery bus boycott, detracts from its ultimate completeness. An academic reader can pick some small bones—Hulan Jack was the black borough president of Manhattan, not a white Unitarian church leader, who was Homer Jack; South Africa's Nobel Peace Prize winner was Albert Luthuli, not “Lithuli”; Jerome Cavanagh, not “James Cavanaugh,” was the mayor of Detroit—but with these few exceptions this is a remarkably error-free book. There are likewise a few small matters of interpretation with which one can take serious issue. Branch seems to believe that “guile” (defined by one dictionary as “deceitful cunning, duplicity”) was a major factor in the movement, for he uses the word to characterize King, SNCC activists' use of music, and Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers, but again this sort of problem is notable mostly for the very few occasions on which such questions of usage or interpretation appear.

Notwithstanding a few such dubious shadings—Branch also twice speaks of King and his black Baptist church allies as “fellow conspirators”—*Parting the Waters* is commendable for its clear-eyed understanding of some of King's complexities. Branch notes how King sometimes experienced “a turbulent conflict over the relationship between the public and private person” and says quite accurately that “it was never comfortable for a man who spoke all his life of consuming guilt to be held up as a public saint.” Such comments are on the mark, but they are relatively rare, for Branch never pauses long

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enough to offer any comprehensive view of how King's complexities interacted. He says at one point that one side of the private King featured "instability, fury, wanton merriment, and profane despair," but the characterization, while reflecting considerable truth, requires more discussion than Branch gives it.

Perhaps Branch's best portraits and insights concern not King and the southern movement but their most frequent interlocutors, the Kennedy brothers. Branch goes out of his way to involve the Kennedys as fully as possible in his story, but he rarely spares their actions toward the southern movement the critical treatment they richly deserve but seldom receive. Branch's accumulated brush strokes, particularly with regard to John Kennedy, capture nicely the mix of detachment and reserve with which the top men in "Camelot" actually dealt with King and other civil rights activists. That much popular history, or at least its received impact, leaves untouched the long-standing fiction that the Kennedys were enthusiastic supporters if not down-right sponsors of early 1960's civil rights activism is regrettable; but Branch's portrait represents at least a modestly corrective step. "In death," he writes cogently, "the late President gained credit for much of the purpose that King's movement had forced upon him in life."

*Parting the Waters* is a solid and commendable piece of work, but it is a book unlikely to stimulate any strong reactions one way or the other, at least among knowledgeable students of the civil rights movement. Somewhat disappointingly there is virtually no new factual information in it—about King, about Levison's complicated and once-controversial past, or about the stratagems of either the Kennedys

or the ubiquitous J. Edgar Hoover—but it does offer extremely valuable portraits of many activists and local movements, e.g., Greenwood, Mississippi, whose contributions to the southern struggle are not widely known outside of the small circles of movement alumni and civil rights scholars.

In the end, however, *Parting the Waters* is a book whose valuable contributions are truncated by the absence of any overarching theme. At his closing point, in November 1963, Branch offers what seems to be his two- or three-sentence long-term overview of the movement. "The reaction to Kennedy's assassination . . . enable[d] the movement to institutionalize its major gains before receding. . . . Kennedy's murder marked the arrival of the freedom surge, just as King's own death four years hence marked its demise." If this is to be taken as Branch's shorthand summation, with "major gains" meaning the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and perhaps the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as well, it errs in at least two, and perhaps three, particulars. A fuller weighing of the political history of the 1964 Act is required before one attributes its passage largely to reactions to Kennedy's death, and "the arrival of the freedom surge" was marked not by the November assassination but, as Branch's own narrative beautifully shows, by the dramatic national impact of the Birmingham demonstrations six months earlier. Lastly, the movement's later demise, as was quite clear at the time but is not always the case in retrospective accounts, had very largely run its course well prior to King's own death in Memphis. Thus, while *Parting the Waters* offers some excellent portrayals of the people and events that made up the southern movement's history between 1954 and 1963, it does not provide any interpretive perspective that students of the era will find new or challenging. □