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FREEDOM ROAD: THE PATHFINDERS

By David J. Garrow, Garrow is the author of *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, which received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in biography and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award.

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FREE AT LAST?: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT
BY FRED POWLEDGE (LITTLE, BROWN: \$29.95; 711 pp.)

As a 25-year-old reporter for an Atlanta newspaper, Fred Powledge had the journalistic good fortune to cover many of the landmark events and personalities of the Southern black freedom struggle. He went on to work at the New York Times and to write a perceptive book on America's mid-1960s racial turmoil, "Black Power -- White Resistance."

Now, in "Free at Last?," Powledge returns to the formative times and locales of the Southern movement, painting lengthy but often compelling portraits of McComb, Miss., in 1961, Albany, Ga., in 1962, and Birmingham, Ala., in 1963.

Much of the history that Powledge recounts will be familiar to students of previous books and to viewers of public television's "Eyes on the Prize" series, but "Free at Last?" is especially significant and valuable because of its sophisticated and richly textured personal portraits of both movement activists and white opponents.

In a manner reminiscent of "My Soul Is Rested," Howell Raines' important 1977 civil-rights oral history, Powledge allows dozens of the black and white activists whom he has interviewed to speak extensively for themselves. The result is one of the most personally unforgettable accounts of the movement to date.

Like other writers on the movement, Powledge wants to emphasize that much of the black struggle in the South did *not* reflect simply the lengthened shadow of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Hence he devotes relatively little attention to King and his closest aides, and instead focuses upon the courage and insights of historically less-heralded participants, such as Charles Jones and Diane Nash of SNCC, the student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Powledge also devotes considerable attention to many significant white opponents of the movement, though he prudently compares their recent renditions to their public statements from times past, with telling and sometimes quietly devastating effect. Former Mississippi Gov. James P. Coleman firmly criticizes the way his successor mishandled the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi, for example, but Powledge then gently reminds the reader that Coleman at the times publicly endorsed his successor's actions.

Powledge's technique is more subtle, yet also more memorable, than any flat-footed lecture about how fallible and self-serving people's memories often are. And while Powledge is not shy about lambasting such classic, self-defeating segregationists as Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Eugene (Bull) Connor, he also offers careful, almost sympathetic portraits of

several FBI agents, particularly Albany's Marion Cheek, who have been extensively reviled by movement activists for more than a quarter-century.

"Were we friendly with the local police," Cheek said to Powledge, repeating the charge often made against Southern FBI agents. "Of course we were. We worked with them on a daily basis . . . When you have five men, you're covering 24 counties, you're working some 160 federal violations, who are you going to get the help from? . . . You asked them to go out and put their lives on the line with you, because you had nobody else to ask to go along with you but that deputy sheriff. And you asked him to go along because you sure as hell couldn't afford to take another agent with you. He had seven or eight counties to take care of himself. You relied on local help. You had to."

"Free at Last?" hence captures much of the complexity and much of what was personally as well as morally compelling about the Southern movement of the early 1960s. It may not be as emotionally gripping as the best activist or journalistic memoirs, such as James Farmer's "Lay Bare the Heart" (1985) or Pat Watters' long-out-of-print "Down to Now" (1971), but it is a first-rate work of journalism, repeatedly reflecting Powledge's superb skills as a portraitist.

However, "Free at Last?" does not seriously aspire to be a comprehensive history of the movement, most notably because of Powledge's apparent decision not to do any serious research in the extensive archival papers of SNCC, the NAACP, King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Powledge says in an afterword that he regrets the relative paucity of contemporaneous written accounts by movement participants, but those archival collections -- particularly SNCC's, which historians have yet to mine fully -- offer extremely rich and powerful first-hand documents that Powledge has not explored.

Perhaps most puzzling of all, however, is Powledge's unexplained decision to essentially end "Free at Last?" in early 1965 with the climactic Selma-to-Montgomery march. The book is almost openly winding down by the time Powledge reaches the story of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, which brought scores of white student volunteers into the Southern movement, and even Powledge's Selma chapter has the tone of a coda.

Powledge offers a very fair and accurate treatment of the internal tensions and disillusionment that were beginning to grow in the Southern movement by the fall of 1964, but he seems to want to shy away from any extensive treatment of the movement's less happy and less heralded years, those after the spring of 1965. The post-1965 evolution of Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC has received extensive attention both in books and in "Eyes on the Prize," but the post-1965 evolution of local-level struggles across the South, and of other groups such as SNCC and CORE, deserves additional analysis and discussion, and it is unfortunate that Powledge did not pursue it.

Powledge has a sharp and sophisticated awareness of how the movement's history might erroneously be used to convey a much-too-happy, much-too-self-congratulatory treatment of America's 20th-Century experience with the issue of race, but that awareness makes his choice of focusing "Free at Last?" almost exclusively on the most productive, best-remembered years of the struggle both ironic and perplexing.

Civil-rights historiography is moving more and more toward a view of the Southern struggle which stresses the long-term contributions of unheralded, local-level activists rather than the

well-publicized, dramatic efforts of national spokespersons and organizations, and important forthcoming books by scholars such as Charles Payne, J. Mills Thornton and John Dittmer will further accelerate this advancement.

"Free at Last?" represents a significant contribution to this journey, one that memorably captures many of the personalities and much of the emotional energy and emotional turmoil that made the Southern black freedom struggle so important a part of America's history.

GRAPHIC: Photo, 1939 image by Farm Security Administration photographer Marion Post Wolcott: "Negro using outside stairway for 'colored' to enter movie theater. Belzoni, Miss." From the biography *"Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey"* by F. Jack Hurley, foreword by Robert Coles (University of New Mexico Press: \$24.95).