

## THE BOYCOTT THAT MADE A RIGHTS HERO

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THE PAPERS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,

VOL. 3: BIRTH OF A NEW AGE, DECEMBER 1955-DECEMBER 1956

EDITED BY CLAYBORNE CARSON, STEWART BURNS, SUSAN CARSON,

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Forty-one years later, the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott of 1955-56 is far less celebrated than is the subsequent career of the young minister whom the Montgomery protest launched to national and international fame: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

While Dr. King's later achievements are staple ingredients in each January's national holiday celebration of his birthday, the full story of the movement that first placed him on the public stage is generally appreciated by only a small number of scholars. Dr. King himself published a memoir of the boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*, in 1958, and in recent years several of his most important but little-remembered Montgomery colleagues have done likewise. The late Jo Ann Robinson's *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, and Robert Graetz's *Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir*, both highlight how the black community's yearlong boycott of Montgomery's racially segregated city buses sprang not just from the happenstance arrest of Rosa Parks but from a far longer history of racial mistreatment that Parks' experience so perfectly symbolized.

Parks' arrest, for refusing to give up her seat so that a white rider would not have to sit next to a "Negro," sparked black Montgomery almost unanimously to abandon public transit, and at a time when far fewer citizens had private automobiles than is nowadays the case.

Robinson and other black activists had been discussing the possibility of such a boycott for more than a year before Parks' arrest, but her detention caused Robinson and fellow members of

the Women's Political Council to announce a one-day boycott of the buses, even before most of black Montgomery's male leaders knew what was afoot.

The 26-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. had been pastoring Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for not quite a year when the boycott began. The first day's remarkable success convinced black leaders that the effort should be extended until white officials agreed to improve the seating and treatment of black riders, and immediately they created a new organization to guide the boycott. One of Dr. King's parishioners nominated the young minister to be the group's president, and with no forewarning Dr. King found himself directing a difficult and potentially dangerous endeavor.

White officialdom refused to negotiate meaningful improvements for black riders, and Dr. King and his colleagues, who initially anticipated a brief protest, instead had to sustain a movement that extended first into weeks and then into months.

This third volume of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project documents the 13 months that stretched from Parks' arrest to the eventual desegregation of Montgomery's buses by order of the U.S. Supreme Court. The project's two previous volumes, published in 1992 and 1995, traced Dr. King's childhood and education. The project's research into his seminary and graduate school writings led to the highly publicized revelation that Dr. King had plagiarized extensively from the works of others both in his course assignments and in his 1955 doctoral dissertation.

The early months of the Montgomery boycott accelerated Dr. King's transformation from a misguided and sometimes foppish graduate student into a public figure whose courage and integrity became an important mainstay both for the Montgomery protest and in the many other civil rights campaigns that would follow. Dr. King found the death threats and anonymous phone calls that quickly came his way both frightening and disorienting; neither then nor later did he have any desire to be a famous public figure or celebrity.

But a sense of obligation and responsibility soon came to dominate Dr. King's life and his understanding of the role into which he had been thrust. Eight weeks into the boycott, seated at his kitchen table late one night, Dr. King experienced a spiritual crisis and vision that in later years he always would look back to as the crucial turning point in his life. Out of

that intensely personal religious experience came a willingness to commit his life to the struggle, come what may.

The impressively consistent selflessness with which Dr. King dedicated himself to his calling was manifest both to his colleagues in Montgomery and to friends and aides who experienced his remarkable private humility in later years too. Always eager to share credit for victories that news reports disproportionately credited to him, Dr. King's ambivalent and self-critical perspective on his public fame made him a uniquely unpretentious political luminary.

The project's compilation of Montgomery-era documents that relate primarily to Dr. King's role in leading the boycott represents a magnificently produced scholarly achievement. The editors, led by Stanford University historian Clayborne Carson, have painstakingly sought out all surviving texts of Dr. King's writings and recordings of his speeches. They also have superbly utilized other observers' previously unpublished firsthand accounts of Dr. King's participation in boycott strategy sessions.

The result is a volume that will absorb anyone interested in Dr. King for many hours. Dr. King's sermons don't read as inspirationally as they sound, and a profusion of speaking-engagement and thank-you letters can sometimes be tiresome, but "Birth of a New Age," as the book is subtitled --Dr. King's favorite phrase for interpreting the boycott--is full of memorable small gems. My favorite? A Massachusetts woman writes Dr. King, wanting "to be sure you drove a Dodge and not a Cadillac." He replies, "I am driving an old Pontiac and I never anticipate buying a Cadillac." He never did.

The University of California Press has done a highly impressive job of producing the King volumes. California already has to its credit a strikingly original, multivolume edition of the papers of an earlier black crusader, Marcus Garvey, edited by Robert A. Hill. The two series represent as large a contribution to African American scholarly publishing as any press can claim.

Whether the King family's newly announced movie and publishing deals with filmmaker Oliver Stone and Time Warner will impinge negatively on California's impressive series will be answerable only in future years; the King Papers Project anticipates producing 11 more volumes in the next decade and beyond. In addition, one of this volume's editors, Stewart Burns, will publish this fall an additional documentary volume on the

Montgomery boycott, Daybreak of Freedom, to be issued by the University of North Carolina Press.

Unless Time Warner beats California to the punch, those future King Papers volumes will contain the most important treasure trove of Dr. King materials. To date only a handful of King scholars have read all of Dr. King's sometimes very personal late 1960s sermons from his "home" pulpit at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. Those sermons are far and away the most important and impressive King texts, and they remain almost wholly unavailable to the public.

The King Papers Project promises to remedy that failing, and their ongoing work--just like this newest volume on Montgomery--represents a top-notch contribution to African American historiography.

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