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Book Review of But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle

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No city better symbolizes the brutality of racial repression in the American South and the courageous spirit of the black freedom struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s than does Birmingham, Alabama. From the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, dozens of bombings destroyed black homes, earning one black neighborhood the nickname "Dynamite Hill." During the spring of 1961, the brutal violence toward the Freedom Riders in Birmingham riveted the nation's attention. Two years later, in May 1963, the image of fire hoses pummeling black school children triggered a moral revulsion that directly contributed to the eventual enactment of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Glenn T. Eskew has written an excellent (and prize-winning) book analyzing the civil rights struggle in Birmingham during the 1950s and 1960s. The struggle in Birmingham was important to the overall success of the civil rights movement. Indeed, "but for Birmingham," the pace and perhaps extent of racial reform in the 1960s would have been different. But Eskew's primary focus is not the broader political ramifications of the Birmingham struggle. Rather, Eskew's concern is the interplay between national civil rights organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and local organizations, such as Birmingham's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). "To understand the civil rights struggle," Eskew writes, "one must understand the intersection of the local and national movements" (p. 14).

To Eskew, this intersection of the national and local movements was not a happy convergence of like-minded forces seeking a common goal through agreed-upon methods. In Eskew's narrative, the SCLC and the ACMHR had different goals and these differences produced conflict. In particular, Eskew is sharply critical of the SCLC and its president, Martin Luther King, Jr., for what Eskew describes as their accommodationist attitudes and desire to protect their own institutional interests, even at the expense of certain movement goals. Eskew contrasts King's actions in the Birmingham struggle with those of Fred Shuttlesworth, president of the ACMHR, whom he describes as an embattled, principled leader who refused to accommodate. To Eskew, "Shuttlesworth unflinchingly faced the establishment and demanded Negro civil rights," (p. 288), while King "accommodated the desires of the establishment while compromising the demands of the movement" (p. 296). In this clash of national and local movements, it was, in Eskew's view, the indigenous movement—"the stalwart ACMHR members and black college students"—that "embodied the civil rights struggle in its purest form" (p. 296).

Eskew's narrative of Birmingham directly engages the existing scholarly literature on the black freedom struggle. On many occasions, Eskew sharply contrasts his narrative and interpretations with those of earlier scholars. To offer one example, Eskew opens his book with a critique of Vincent Harding's *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (1991),

GLENN T. ESKEW. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1997. Pp. xv, 434. Cloth \$49.95, paper \$19.95.

in which, according to Eskew, Harding describes a “continuous struggle that glosses over discontinuities, levels differences, and reduces abstractions to generalities” (p. xi), while, according to Eskew, his book “strips away the romanticism surrounding the movement to tell the story of actual events as they happened” (p. xi). Eskew goes on to argue that most recent civil rights studies “have obscured the origins of the movement within a cloud of relativism that borders on ahistoricism” (p. 14). Eskew may go a bit far with some of these critiques. For example, he writes that “many scholars continue to posit the arcane notion that the black community was united in its outlook and belief” (p. 17), although all of his cited offenders wrote before 1964.

Eskew focuses his narrative primarily on the struggle in Birmingham, but he concludes his book with some provocative thoughts about the long-term legacy of the civil rights movement. Eskew blames the current persistence of a black underclass on the narrowness of the movement’s goals: “Thirty years after the movement . . . [m]any black people had no hope for the future, a legacy of the narrow focus of civil rights reform” (p. 334). Eskew blames, in part, the movement’s inherent conservatism: “The movement had gained access for a few while never challenging the structure of the system. The limited success of the struggle resulted from its conservative goals and the persistent white resistance that had helped narrow these objectives” (p. 331). Eskew’s critique of the civil rights movement’s primary emphasis on desegregation and nondiscrimination in public accommodations and employment while leaving larger economic structural issues untouched is legitimate, but it is difficult to fathom the movement gaining political and cultural support for the type of ambitious economic reform that Eskew apparently believes should have been undertaken.

Eskew’s book will invite critiques, but future analyses of the civil rights struggle in Birmingham will begin with his detailed and insightful study of this pivotal city.

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