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John A. Kirk. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* London: Pearson Education Limited, 2005. ix + 230 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-41431-0.

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All the King's Men

Biographies remain the most popular form of study for civil rights scholars. Over the last several decades, no single civil rights movement figure has received more attention than Martin Luther King, Jr. In this new, mid-size biography, British historian John A. Kirk adds his name to the long line of scholars who have devoted works to King. In the 1980s and 1990s, a host of scholars researched King's relationship to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the FBI's surveillance of King, and King's sometimes troubled private life. Kirk's study, although not based on primary research, provides a survey that falls in between the limited and extended books on King and utilizes the latest movement and King scholarship.

Kirk explains that his main task "has been to demonstrate how King translated … ideas, influences and abilities into action" (p. 184). He relates dissatisfaction with works that only focus on King's alleged plagiarism and sexual exploits and gives them scant attention. The book places King into the context of a larger movement. Because Kirk wrote the biography for the "Profiles in Power" series, he focuses on King's understanding of power as "'the ability to achieve purpose … the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic changes"' (p. 2). Most of the study concentrates on King's efforts to enact real changes in the segregated South and urban North.

The main content of the book deals with the career of Martin Luther King from 1955 to 1968. After a brief introduction, Kirk quickly moves into coverage of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Then, Kirk outlines King's relationship to the 1960 student sit-ins, the 1961 Freedom Rides, and the beginnings of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Next, Kirk narrates the most important failures and successes of King's career including the botched Albany campaign and the dramatic 1963 March on Washington, the violence in Birmingham, and the Selma protests. A final chapter deals with King's efforts to eliminate housing discrimination in Chicago, King's denunciation of the Vietnam War, the Poor People's Campaign, and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike.

Scholars and general readers should be aware that Kirk's biography does not provide new insights on the movement or King himself. The work also does not help correct the standard Montgomery-to-Memphis chronology of the movement, despite Kirk's concern about studies that promote that framework, but instead reinforces the idea that King's civil rights career defined the length of the movement. Even though the book's jacket claims that Kirk examines "the sources of King's power in the black community … focusing particularly on the role of the black church," the study fails to meet that promise. Kirk devotes six short pages to King's early life, ignores pre-1955 Montgomery civil rights work and leaders, such as Vernon Johns, and instead jumps into King's life after his arrival at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. The book provides lots of good, standard information on King, but the reader might ask: why another book on Martin Luther King? With so many books already devoted to King, civil rights scholars might shift their focus, for example, to Medgar Evers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the impact of the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts, and a number of other ignored topics.

Despite any problems with the book, Kirk's work should be entirely suitable for an undergraduate survey course. The biography reads well and highlights the crucial moments of King's civil rights career. It also pays attention to broader developments in the movement and puts King into perspective against other movement leaders and organizations. Kirk incorporates scholarship from the last two decades into the trim book that makes the work current. Scholars will enjoy the extensive bibliographical essay that covers most of the recent work on the movement and catalogues the dozens of mono-

graphs committed to King. Readers unfamiliar with the movement and King's life will also find Kirk's book to be a good introduction and a ready guide for further reading. If scholars want to learn more about new avenues for researching King, then Kirk's previous article, "State of the Art: Martin Luther King, Jr." provides a number of insightful ideas for future scholarship on King and a complete historiography of past King studies.[1] Kirk's book provides a general introduction to understanding Martin Luther King, Jr., and British historians will continue to provide a welcome, outside perspective for the growing scholarship dedicated to the Southern civil rights movement.

Note

[1]. John A. Kirk, "State of the Art: Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of American Studies* 38 (2004): pp. 329-347.

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