H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Stanton. *Journey toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 288 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2857-7.

Reviewed by Rebecca Tuuri (Rutgers University)
Published on H-Women (August, 2009)
Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

Paying the Ultimate Price: Juliette Hampton Morgan's Personal Struggle and Sacrifice for Racial Justice

Mary Stanton's *Journey Toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* is a riveting narrative biography of the life of Juliette Hampton Morgan, a white southerner and an anguished liberal who lived from 1914 to 1957. During her life, Morgan sought both to live within a white supremacist southern society and fight against it, and it was the impossibility of resolving these two existences that ultimately forced her to take her own life. This book makes an important contribution for professional scholars to the history of the early civil rights movement and white southern women, but it is also accessible to a wider popular audience.[1]

Stanton's title is somewhat misleading, for this work is not only about Morgan's role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Morgan did write a letter in support of the boycott to the *Montgomery Advertiser* on December 12, 1955, which Martin Luther King cited as the first instance of someone making the connection between Gandhi's salt march to the sea and the bus boycott (p. 213). But this letter was only one part of Morgan's longer history of activism. By using her personal letters, manuscript collections, interviews with friends and family, and a rich secondary-source literature, Stanton gives us insight into the *whole* life of a white liberal woman, who was not a leader in the civil rights movement, but worked behind the scenes in her support of black freedom efforts.

Juliette Hampton Morgan was born in 1914 into a privileged Alabama family with a politically ambitious father and a well-educated mother. For most of her life, she was caught between her desire to please her family and friends and her innate sense that she should challenge the racist structures of southern society. Morgan joined liberal organizations such as the United Church Women (UCW), the local Democratic club, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). She later joined integrated groups such as the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). She wrote letters to the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, other local newspapers, and politicians in support of liberal causes, of which integration eventually was one. Morgan also engaged in small acts of defiance, such as pulling the emergency brake and demanding to be let off of a bus when she witnessed the abuse of black passengers (p. 82).

As in her previous works–*From Selma to Sorrow: the Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (2000) and *Freedom Walk: Mississippi or Bust* (2003)–Stanton complicates our understanding of white men and women in the civil rights movement. She destroys our binary understanding of southern whites as "racists" or not by showing the subtleties of the white experience in which well-meaning white progressives attempted to fight for change. Some fought for full integration while others believed that the South could make the most progress through financial support of the black community while maintaining a system of segregation. Most still abided by a code of white supremacy (p. 57).

The power of Stanton's work lies in its exploration of the personal side (and toll) of white participation in the movement. Southern white women who were activists were often held back from the full realization of their radical visions by familial responsibilities and their related concern over reputation. Activism, after all, stripped white women of the privileges of a southern "lady." Her actions might also hurt her friends and family, and in Morgan's case, cost her employment. Stanton shows us time and time again how Morgan's inability to be fully vocal about her support of integration was not a product of some sort of weakness on her part, but of the multiple ties and expectations that women in the South faced at this time. Stanton writes that longtime activist Virginia Durr could see an inner turmoil in Morgan that consumed many educated southern women. Stanton quotes Durr: "'Juliette lived two lives,' Virginia recalled, 'and

tried so hard to keep her real self, her deep and feeling self under cover"' (p. 124).

Exploring the personal side of Morgan's life is also important for uncovering a political history of white southern women who were purposely private in their activism. Historian Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman writes in her article "Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women: A Retrospective for the Millennium," that secrecy has defined southern women's politics, as progressive women deliberately hid their political activity in order to trick their opponents. Wilkerson-Freeman has challenged historians to recognize this and redefine models of activism.[2] This is exactly what Stanton does so effectively. Her book fits into a growing body of literature exploring how women attempted to use their respectability to shield their efforts from criticism.[3] Groups like UCW and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) remained in a state of *de facto* segregation in Montgomery despite national policies of integration during Morgan's lifetime, but their financial and political support of black freedom efforts was crucial to the movement..

Overall the narrative strategy of the book is successful, offering compelling insight into Morgan's personal history. However, at times this format leads Stanton to make speculations that may be too forgiving of her subject's inability to take a stand. For instance, relating how difficult it was for Morgan to interact with blacks after joining her first interracial prayer fellowship, she writes: "In her heart, she believed in the equality of all people, yet in practice she was as uncomfortable as the most dedicated segregationist" (p. 99). Stanton does not make it clear how she surmised this, but as readers, we might have benefited from reading the excerpts from her letters or other documents that led her to this conclusion.

In addition, Stanton brushes over the fact that Morgan, who remained unmarried her whole life and formed deep friendships with female companions, may have been a lesbian. When Morgan refused to become romantically involved with interested suitor Louis Kaufman, Stanton speculates that it is possible that she "might have been repressing lesbian tendencies" but "there is no evidence to support it" (p. 113). While Stanton is correct to say that we can never know about Morgan's sexuality, she could have provided more information about the situation for single women or women in same-sex relationships in the South. This background is important in order to recreate fully the personal side of Morgan's life, for she most certainly had to adhere to respectable, heterosexual practices in order to maintain her reputation and that of her family.

Still, these criticisms are minor; overall this is a well-researched, well-written contribution to southern history, women's history, and civil rights history.

Notes

[1]. For more information on the early civil rights movement, see John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Linda Reed, *Simple Decency & Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For more information on white women in the early civil rights movement see Virginia Foster Durr and Patricia Sullivan, *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South (*New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Gail Schmunk Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); and Melissa Walker, Jeanette R. Dunn, and Joe P. Dunn, *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

[2]. Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, "Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women: A Retrospective for the Millennium," in Walker, Dunn, and Dunn, *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective*, 45.

[3]. For more on how southern progressive women used respectable dress and behavior to shroud their activism, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Refusing Racism: White Allies and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); and Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Rebecca Tuuri. Review of Stanton, Mary, *Journey toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24465

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.