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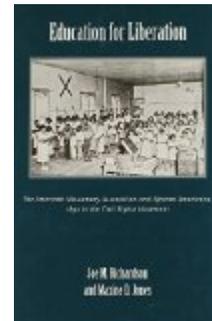
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joe Martin Richardson, Maxine Deloris Jones. *Education for Liberation: The American Missionary Association and African Americans, 1890 to the Civil Rights Movement*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. xvii + 287 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1657-0.

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Race and Education: Another Look at the Missionary Tradition in U.S. Education

A first read through the leading works of educational history could leave students with a decidedly negative image of what might be called the missionary tradition in U.S. education. Books such as James Anderson's *Education of Blacks in the South* (1988) and David Wallace Adams's *Education for Extinction* (1995) paint a convincingly dark portrait of missionary educators. Ignorant and condescending at best, aggressively genocidal at worst, these well-intentioned busybodies come off as a lesson for today's teachers of what *not* to do.

Joe M. Richardson and Maxine D. Jones offer another perspective in *Education for Liberation: The American Missionary Association and African Americans, 1890 to the Civil Rights Movement*. The book picks up where Richardson's *Christian Reconstruction* (1986) left off. Like Richardson's earlier work, it is notably sympathetic to the black and white educators behind the American Missionary Association's (AMA) long career in African American education.

During the period the authors focus on in this volume, the educational mission of the AMA shifted. As Richardson and Jones describe, the organization's wide-ranging efforts in the Reconstruction era to educate all African Americans changed to a focus on higher education and civil rights activism. As soon as they were able, AMA administrators turned over elementary and secondary schools to local public administration.

In the early years of this story, the AMA maintained a

number of "common" schools. There were fifty-one such schools in 1891. By 1920 the number had dwindled to four, and by 1930 to only one. In most cases, according to Richardson and Jones, the schools closed as soon as public schools became available for African Americans. In many cases, the AMA sold or gave away its schools to municipal school boards.

A more important goal for the AMA in the decades between 1890 and 1930 was training African American teachers. Most of the teachers in African American schools, public or private, were African American, many of them trained in AMA secondary and normal schools. Some of the Reconstruction-era stereotypical "Yankee Schoolmarm" remained but, by necessity and design, the AMA hired mainly younger African American teachers. As the authors note, by 1931, of 560 AMA workers, 340 were African American, 30 were Native American Indian, 29 were Puerto Rican, 5 were classified as "Spanish-American and Japanese," and 171 were white (p. 46).

By the 1930s, however, the AMA shifted its focus to concentrate on liberal arts higher education for African Americans. Such institutions as Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama; Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana; Tillotson College in Austin, Texas; LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee; Straight University (1868-1934) in New Orleans; and Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi became the focus of AMA efforts to educate south-

ern blacks. One of the challenges that faced the AMA administrators was the sensitive question of leadership. The AMA had been dedicated since its inception, at least in theory, to encouraging African American leadership of its institutions. However, throughout much of the South, violent white supremacist sentiment forbade black leadership of white workers. To have an African American college president would mean, in practice, the abandonment of an interracial faculty. Both national AMA leaders and the faculties of many AMA colleges rightly considered their interracial faculties among their proudest accomplishments and they were loath to give them up for any reason.

Another difficulty the authors described for AMA colleges, especially before the Great Depression, resulted from the relatively low numbers of academically qualified African American college students in the South. In 1925 AMA colleges taught only 305 students in college-level classes. Many more students at AMA colleges studied at the elementary or secondary level. With time, the numbers of students in higher-level academic classes increased. By World War II AMA colleges taught over two thousand students at the college level (p. 135).

By the time Japan invaded Pearl Harbor, the AMA had decisively changed its approach to African American education in the South. In 1942 it officially shifted its focus to its colleges and its civil rights activism. That activism, centered in a new Race Relations Department, became an important tool in the formation of the civil rights movement. For example, starting in 1944, the AMA hosted institutes at Fisk University that brought together church, labor, academic, and legal experts to discuss interracial democracy and activism. The institutes, as the authors describe them, tended to the dry, academic side. And, as the authors note, it can be difficult to assess the impact of such institutes on the fledgling civil rights movement. However, with hundreds of participants over the twenty-five years of their existence, including such luminaries as Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, it is not a stretch to assert, as the authors do, that these institutes contributed a great deal to the developing ideology of the movement. If nothing else, as Richardson and Jones argue, bringing together a group of white and black men and women for weeks of living, eating, and working together in an aggressively white supremacist southern city made an important statement.

One of the great strengths of this book is in the authors' work to salvage some of the personal stories of AMA teachers, students, and administrators. Some, such

as that of white activist and long-time AMA leader Frederick Brownlee, are fairly accessible from other sources. But other stories can only be hinted at, such as the apocryphal students who walked six or even ten miles to their AMA elementary schools every day, both ways, through swamps and past lecherous white predators. Or the young women teachers, white and black, who devoted years to teaching in AMA schools. Sometimes the record of such teachers was only in the evidence they left behind of their painstaking extracurricular labor, such as a built-in sideboard and brick walk built by one of the young teachers at Cotton Valley School in Macon County, Alabama.

Richardson and Jones's book is at its best when it digs deeply into the Amistad Research Center archives, now at Tulane University in New Orleans, and recovers archival gems. However, due to the nature of that collection, much of the authors' material about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries comes from AMA fundraising materials. Although the authors note that the AMA's magazine, *American Missionary*, constituted the organization's primary "propaganda tool," they tend to repeat the stories in its pages rather uncritically (p. 64).

Another highlight of this volume is the chapter on the AMA's push to include a "functional" curriculum in its schools from the mid-1930s. Around that time, national leaders such as Brownlee became enamored of John Dewey and the possibilities of progressive education. Brownlee hoped that AMA schools could veer away from the deadening traditional curricula of "customary standardized mass education" (p. 73). However, as with other attempts to implement progressive pedagogy from the top down, Brownlee found that actual implementation of non-traditional teaching ideas was much harder to achieve. As Arthur Zilversmit described in *Changing Schools* (1993), traditional educational attitudes can prove persistent. This book confirms that notion and gives a fascinating case study of the interplay between curricular decisions at the top and teaching decisions in the classroom.

This institutional history of the AMA also provides an important perspective on the tension between public and private education for African Americans. In the case of the AMA, the national administrators pushed to make their schools publicly funded as quickly as possible. They had two goals: to defray the costs of running their schools and to force state and local governments in the South to acknowledge their responsibility for equitable African American education. However, many African

American parents and students protested when the AMA closed its schools as an inferior public school option became available. One AMA administrator chastised such parents as “selfish” for not thinking of the greater good for the greater number of African Americans (p. 108). Such administrators pointed to the significant increase in enrollment once tuition-free public schools became available for African Americans. However, they noted with chagrin that such public schools often offered education of a much lower quality and they no longer featured the interracial faculties that had made AMA schools such a haven.

The narrative also drops fascinating but unexplored hints about the important religious theme behind AMA activism. The organization, after all, began as an explicitly religious missionary enterprise. Its early schools, as the authors describe, were profoundly religious in nature (pp. 12-13). As it did at other schools, that education edged closer to secular norms as the twentieth century developed. However, even in the World War II years, the language of many AMA activists was consistently in favor of a “Christian” solution to racial difficulties. Perhaps it is too much to ask for a thorough inclusion of the religious backdrop of the times. After all, trying to include such weighty topics as the Social Gospel, the fundamentalist and modernist controversies, and the plunging participation in mainline Protestant denominational life that occurred throughout the period under study might make for a cumbersome project. But more consistent attention to the religious element of the AMA’s racial experience would have enriched the volume a good deal without getting it away from its central focus on racial activism.

Also of concern is a lingering sense that the authors are too ready to give the top leadership of the AMA a pass on difficult questions. For example, the authors assert that the “industrial education” aspects of AMA schools were not intended merely to train students for menial occupations, as James Anderson and others have argued (p. 5). But they do not demonstrate more than that the top leadership of the AMA fretted about the dilemma. The authors credit some of the white national leaders, such as Brownlee, as remarkably ardent and enlightened activists. But the narrative also includes passing references to white AMA leaders who held much less inspiring racial attitudes. As the authors note, “most early southern white trustees were strict segregationists and only tepidly supported liberal arts training for blacks” (p. 121). The only white Tougaloo College trustee in the early years, Charles B. Galloway, refused to share meals with black trustees. In the face of such attitudes among the white leadership, the question of whether or not AMA schools promoted education for true liberation requires a more critical analysis.

Despite these difficulties, however, Richardson and Jones have written a book that tells an important story. Their study fleshes out the history of northern philanthropic education. It fruitfully explores the tensions between northern missionary zeal and southern African American education. Not only will readers get a thorough and detailed history of this influential organization, but a look into issues of privatization, curriculum, and social activism that speak to educational themes of broad and enduring interest.

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