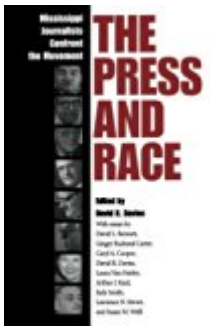
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David R. Davies, ed.. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. vii + 293 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57806-342-0.

Reviewed by Judith Sheppard

Published on H-South (April, 2002)

More Ghosts of Mississippi: Journalists View Journalists From Across Time -- and From Another World

Nothing comes more inexorably than judgment day, even for journalists, who are more accustomed to announcing its arrival for others than to facing it themselves. It has arrived, with all deliberate speed. Almost fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, nearly forty years after the riots over James Meredith's enrollment at Ole Miss, the murders of three Freedom Riders, the march on Selma and the gunning-down of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., scholars are opening the book of judgment on those Southern editors and publishers who put out newspapers during the Civil Rights Era, and the judgment is often, alas, harsh.

Yet it is important to examine our own hearts as we examine the record of the journalists of those times, times whose very nearness can confuse us into forgetting their almost incomprehensible strangeness. The South was then "the only place in the western world," noted Hodding Carter Jr., Pulitzer-Prize winning editor of the Greenville, Miss., *Delta-Democrat Times*, "where a man could become a liberal simply by urging obedience to the law" (9). Context, as always, is critical. That fact becomes clear upon reading this important book, *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement*, in which the influential work of seven editors -- one of them black, one female -- and one reporter in that Deep South state between 1954 and 1964 are evaluated with neither apology or applause.

As editor David Davies, chair of the Department of Journalism at the University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg, notes in the book's introduction, there was nothing "monolithic" about the response in newspapers across the state to *Brown v. Board*, or to any other development of the Civil Rights era. Heroes and villains alike were complex, and the purpose of *The Press and Race* is to show that individuals responded according to their personalities, their priorities and their honest consideration of how to best help their communities through the cataclysmic event that integration was to the Deep South (4).

Some, like J. Oliver Emmerich of the ***McComb Enterprise-Journal*** and George McLean of the ***Tupelo Journal***, were gradualists, sometimes remiss (Emmerich suspected attacks on black churches and homes were hoaxes, so had "bombings" put in quotation marks in headlines), but usually steady in inviting readers to grow toward acceptance of the new law of the land. Some, like Jimmy Ward of the ***Jackson Daily News***, spilled anti-integrationist venom onto their pages that made them heroes in their towns but pariahs to the country: a ***Columbia Journalism Review*** article in 1963 called the two Jackson dailies "possibly the worst newspapers in the United States" (85) Yet three Mississippi journalists -- including Carter -- won the Pulitzer Prize during these same times, risking everything close to home.

The Press and Race is clearly organized to offer readers the choice of absorbing the greater context of Southern and, particularly, Mississippi journalism during the "Second Reconstruction" or of reading about the separate lives of important journalists in the state. The introduction and first chapter offer the broad strokes. Demonstrating briefly why he is widely regarded as one of the top scholars in this area, Davies offers an introduction that should be required reading for students of Southern journalism. He notes that most Southern reporting was less balanced than Northern (13), though Northern papers were themselves slow editorially to advocate integration (8). In addition, the Mississippi press' performance during this time was probably no better or worse than any of its neighbors' and, flawed as the journalists themselves were, was probably no worse than their critics (12).

Susan Weill examines "Mississippi's Daily Press in Three Crises," offering snapshots into press reaction to ***Brown v. Board of Education*** in 1954, the integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962, and the Freedom Summer of 1964. In themes that will be resurrected in almost every profile following, Weill points out that what reporting there was on the local civil rights scene (and it varied widely; many papers largely ignored it) was factual in approach. But in editorials the hearts and minds of the publishers and editorialists were made clear, and in most of them were two stubbornly held beliefs: that the South was a permanently "closed society" that no federal court should or could open, and that ***Brown v. Board*** would not be enforced any more vigorously than ***Plessy v. Ferguson*** had been. It would take years of painful upheaval to disprove those cherished myths, and the newspapers would be, in some measure, both the agents and messengers of that change.

In reading the profiles of the journalists, be prepared for some surprises and for some disillusionments. (And a good deal of repetition --unavoidable in a structure where lives that were lived concurrently are reported as if they were lived separately.) For instance, Caryl A. Cooper delves into the mystifying psychology, motivations and actions of Percy Greene, publisher of the weekly ***Jackson Advocate*** and the only black journalist profiled. Yet it is a depressing venture, leaving even the profiler somewhat at a loss. In the heat of the movement, Greene was little more than a paid tool of the White Citizens Council and the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. Espousing the views of Booker T. Washington, Greene supported voting rights and equal opportunity for education -- but urged "outside agitators" to go home and blacks to watch their behavior; he attacked local and national civil rights leaders; he published a special "emancipation" issue praising then Governor Barnett, which the Sovereignty Commission distributed in Congress as proof that most blacks were happy in Mississippi.

"It is difficult to explain Greene's actions, beliefs, and editorials," writes Cooper. "Even when judging his actions within the context of his times, (his) actions defy understanding" (81). Perhaps he feared for his life, or had succumbed to one of the

"psychological ravages of racism," self-loathing (82); perhaps he simply wanted to make money.

No less uncompromising is Arthur J. Kaul's explosion of the lingering myth that Hazel Brannon Smith, Pulitzer Prize-winning publisher of the *Lexington Advocate*, was a liberal. In fact, she editoralized in favor of Sen. Joseph McCarthy (240) and repeatedly reminded people she did not endorse integration or federal intervention into "Southern" matters. She won the Elijah Lovejoy Award for Courage in Journalism in 1960, named for an abolitionist editor killed by a mob in Illinois in 1837, but was furious when a rival newspaper wrote she'd won because she supported integration. Smith called that report "false, malicious and libelous" (249).

Yet Smith's courage in facing down boot-leggers, corrupt local law enforcement, unequal justice in courtrooms and the state-funded Sovereignty Commission, which worked with the White Citizens Councils and which she likened to "the Gestapo of Hitler's Germany," is beyond doubt (255). Kaul asserts that "the old-time religion of conservative Protestant moral fundamentalism that informed so much of American Progressivism does more to explain Smith's editorial legacy" than her belief in civil rights goals (261).

Also counter to today's assumptions about liberal bias against religion is the fact that several editors profiled here -- Emmerich, McLean and Ira Harkey of the *Pascagoula Chronicle* -- were motivated by their faith, though the degree of their zeal varied. McLean frequently appealed to the religious (the paper's motto was "Be just; fear not"), and, in fact, he used his pages as a way to advance both Christianity and commerce. His work to smooth integration of Tupelo schools was partially because he knew the dire economic consequences of its failure (155). But his hopes for Tupelo's prosperity were remarkable because they included blacks, and their success was lauded as the "Tupelo Story" by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

More zealous by far was Harkey of Pascagoula. As his words did in the *Chronicle* in the '50s and '60s, his profile burns bitterly in *The Press and Race* as the one unashamed, unabashed integrationist in the group. In fact, of the six editors in the entire South who won Pulitzers between 1954 and 1964 for their progressive editorials, he was the only one to urge integration as more than a legal but a moral imperative. It remains an astonishing stand; David L. Bennett attributes his fearlessness and perserverance to religious fervor. Harkey's writings "are best understood as jeremiads, a form of literary discourse that evolved out of the pulpit," Bennett notes (176). Jeremiads warn "of impending calamity if people refuse to turn from their sins (and) Vivid Biblical imagery and Protestant thought pervade Harkey's prose" (176).

But his was no religion of pacifism; he took to wearing a Smith & Wesson .38 in his belt; he was mocked and threatened on the street, and shots were fired several times into his office. "I have no friends here," Harkey told *Newsweek* bleakly in 1963, the same year he won the Pulitzer and left Mississippi. "Nobody can afford to associate with me openly" (202). (For a look at how different an editor's life can be if he agrees with the majority of his readers, see the chapter on Jimmy Ward, whose front-page column, "Covering the Crossroads" in the *Jackson Daily News*, featured ridicule of civil rights workers and racial jokes -- and who was beloved at home, excoriated outside the South.) Many years later, Harkey found himself finally inducted into the Mississippi Hall of Fame and given something of the due he believes he deserved.

Familiar to most readers of this review will be the life of Hodding Carter, who Ginger Rudeseal Carter (no relation) calls "a man squarely in the middle" -- advocating human, not black, rights and equality and failing to ever advocate integration, the "reconstructed racist" of his biography's fame. In fact, he forced his publisher to recall his

own book, ***First Person Rural***, because its jacket referred to him as "the foremost integrationist in the South" (281).

Yet his editorials were daring, his work on behalf of other Southern publishers -- like Smith -- tireless, and, unlike Ralph McGill, to whom he was often compared, he "put his own newspaper on the line every time he spoke out against injustice" (287). Ginger Rudeseal Carter's profile is well-rounded and rewarding. But her subject may be most admirable when glimpsed in other chapters, particularly those devoted to McLean, Harkey and Smith. Generous in financial and moral support, Carter worked to bring good journalism to even the remotest parts of the state and to sustain fellow journalists whose work he respected.

There are many good stories contained in these profiles. Readers can hardly help coming away from this book with, if not more respect for some journalists of that era, at least a deepened understanding. For the honest reader of this and other works of scholarship now being penned about that state and others (for people like myself who are both Southern and attempting to write some of that scholarship), perhaps the question should not be: How could it be that most journalists, of whom we expect and hope so much, advocated either the wrong things so virulently or the right things so tepidly? Journalists are only human, after all, and even their wrong-minded responses to events illuminate the history and causes of those events. Perhaps the question should be: How can we best understand how the press was both shaped and shaper of the Civil Rights Era, and what can be learned of the role it should play in current and future travail? After all, even today, how often does a newspaper sacrifice prosperity and popularity -- even its existence, as did Smith's -- for principle?

It may be well to close with Smith, who, like most of those profiled here was not literally a supporter of civil rights but wrote ringingly of the press' role in difficult times. "I flinch every time I am called a 'crusading editor,'" she wrote in a letter to readers on her newspaper's twenty-fifth anniversary. "But an honest editor who would truly serve the highest and best interest of the people will not compromise convictions to support a popular cause known to be morally wrong just to incur popular favor or support" (252). Would that editors in her times, and ours, always obey this standard.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-south

Citation: Judith Sheppard. Review of Davies, David R., ed. *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6153