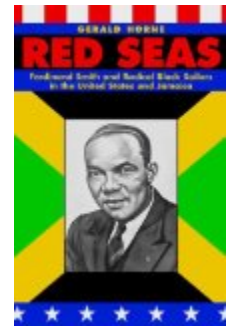


Gerald Horne. *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. xv + 359 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3668-5.

Reviewed by Peter Cole (Department of History, Western Illinois University)
Published on H-Caribbean (June, 2007)



The Most Dangerous Black Man in the Atlantic World?

Gerald Horne has written an important book about the fascinating and oft-forgotten life of Ferdinand Smith. Ferdinand Smith, does that name not ring a bell? As it is a sad reality that many readers have never heard of Smith, or have long forgotten him, we have Horne to thank for rescuing Smith from the proverbial “dustbin.” To those interested in the history of the maritime world, Caribbean peoples and their connections to the United States, labor and anti-colonial struggles, the global economy, and the “black Atlantic,” this book has something to offer. Smith’s life both reflected and shaped important labor, political, racial, and anticolonial struggles in the mid-twentieth century. Most importantly, he helped found and lead one of the strongest unions in the United States, the National Maritime Union (NMU), which had tremendous influence across the world. A longtime resident of Harlem who led a powerful union with a significant, militant black membership, Smith was at the forefront of the push for black equality in American and, later, in Jamaica. Central to his efforts to advance worker and civil rights, Smith was a longtime leader of the Communist Party in the United States and influential in Communist matters worldwide, thanks to his role in the NMU. Perhaps Smith’s disappearance from historical memory is a reflection of our post-Cold War world as well as one in which the labor movement seems to be in retreat on an international scale. However, from the 1930s into the early 1960s, Smith was a man both greatly respected and feared. Horne’s book is the first in-depth, well-researched look at Ferdinand Smith’s remarkable life.

Red Seas explores numerous important topics involving the struggles of working peoples to gain a larger share of the wealth that they create, of people of African descent to gain equal social and political rights in North America and the Caribbean, and of leftist political movements’ centrality to the two other aforementioned themes. But first, a somewhat in-depth knowledge of Smith is needed.

Born in 1893 in rural Jamaica, there was a bit of European blood in his veins, so he would have been considered “light skinned” on an island where most descended directly from African slaves and Marcus Garvey had learned much about the charged meanings of color and race. As Smith’s father was a teacher, Ferdinand was educated in a desperately poor land where, as late as the 1940s, fewer than 3 percent of the people started secondary school (p. 3). As Jamaica still suffered economically and politically from centuries of British colonialism, like many others he left his home—living in Panama and Cuba before moving to the States. Along this familiar migratory route, he witnessed the seething labor, racial, and political struggles of the World War I era. Like many of his fellow West Indians, he found his way to Harlem, where he proudly lived for almost thirty years. But what radicalized Smith was his work aboard ocean-going vessels, crossing the Atlantic and entire world.

Smith became a prominent Communist, leading one of the most powerful labor unions in the United States. For the better part of twenty years, Smith worked as

a steward in the highly segregated world of maritime work. African Americans and other men of African descent who worked aboard ships were systematically denied most jobs, including on deck as able-bodied sailors and below decks in the engine rooms. “Naturally,” they could not get work as officers, which left work as cooks, stewards, and porters on passenger vessels. A steward at sea was much like a Pullman porter on an American railroad; that is, stewards served white customers. In this maritime world, Smith—like so many of his fellow salts—became highly educated, well-traveled, cosmopolitan, and class conscious. Smith also became a union activist. No surprise as sailors worked collectively, were fiercely disciplined by ships’ officers, lived as well as labored in close quarters with their fellow workers, and “sailed the seven seas”—thereby witnessing how the world worked in many societies. Alas, it seems that far more has been written about sailors in the early modern world and black sailors in the nineteenth century, and thus twentieth-century maritime labor has been far less studied.[1] Even a large and powerful union like the NMU still awaits a scholar to examine it in the detail it deserves.

Though not a history of the NMU, a large portion of *Red Seas* is devoted to how Smith helped build the strongest sailors’ union in America during the Great Depression and World War II. In the late 1930s, the NMU arose and affiliated with the newly born Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The NMU chose to affiliate with the CIO in part because the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had, for decades, kept sailors divided by craft and race; the AFL’s International Seafarers’ Union was particularly committed to craft unionism and maintaining both a lily-white and “American” membership. As war approached, the maritime industry became increasingly vital to the economy and war effort, with NMU sailors playing a central role in the struggles against fascism in Europe and Asia. The NMU, more than 100,000 strong during the war, was respected and feared by shipping companies and the U.S. government. It successfully negotiated for tremendous contracts with the best wages in the industry and built-in anti-discrimination clauses.

As important, the NMU was one of the most democratic unions around and, during the war, proved essential in winning the war against fascism. Few today know that the merchant marine actually had the highest casualty rates during the war, not the Army or Marines. In this era, with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in its “Popular Front” period in which Communists worked closely with liberal and other leftists at home (e.g., in building CIO unions) and the fight against fascism world-

wide (from 1941 onwards), the NMU did not have to hide its leftist, even Red, tendencies. Due to FDR’s willingness to work with organized labor in exchange for labor peace, the NMU’s integral role in the Allied victory, and the sailors’ own militance, the NMU dominated the merchant marine and looked forward to a postwar world in which the NMU would become that much more influential.

At this high tide of power the NMU worked to better the conditions for all sailors, but Smith worked particularly hard for black sailors in ensuring equal treatment on the job and in the union. Horne notes that the economic gains made by black NMU sailors most definitely were part of the larger civil rights struggle, which too often is imagined solely in social and political terms. In return, black sailors, who never comprised more than 15 percent of the NMU, were fiercely committed to Smith and many joined him in the Communist Party. Smith was so influential among African American unions, civil rights groups, and political organizations that when a race riot erupted in Harlem in 1943, Smith was called upon by local and federal officials to end the tensions. Smith also worked with maritime unions throughout the Caribbean and South Atlantic, and tried to help the home islands in myriad ways through his militant and wealthy union. Horne’s study compliments Winston James’s research on left-wing radicalism of West Indians. Though Horne’s focus remains firmly on Smith’s career, far more connections could have been made to other individuals, groups, and movements; really there is room for more work here.[2]

Of course, that Smith worked in the maritime trades helps explain why he developed such wide-ranging interests and influence—in the labor movement in the United States, Caribbean, Latin America, and even Europe, along with the anticolonial struggles of the Caribbean (especially Jamaica but also in British Guiana, Cuba, and elsewhere). His political interests were wide-ranging, though often with a focus on race matters. Through his position at the NMU, he gave money and spoke out on many issues: the racist hiring practices of New York City employers, the election of the black Communist Ben Davis to the NYC city council, the effort to oust notoriously racist senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, etc. Other struggles were anticolonial—as when he pushed for the independence of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, India, South Africa, and Ghana. Interestingly, in 1944, Smith was one of the most prominent labor or black leaders campaigning for Franklin Delano Roosevelt until being “red-baited.” Smith embodied the ideal of the sailor as a

working-class intellectual and cosmopolitan internationalist.

Given his tremendous power in the NMU, well-known Communist affiliation, and willingness to speak out, and given the fast and furious rise of the “Red Scare” after World War II, it is no surprise that Smith came under attack. Of course, the U.S. labor movement was initiating its own “Red Scare” and Communists within the NMU were purged, including Smith, in some vicious infighting, prior to later CIO purges. Conveniently for those who feared or hated him (particularly the U.S. government, shipping companies, and Smith’s former ally/recent foe, NMU president Joe Curran), Smith’s immigration status remained unsettled. Like many immigrants before and after him, especially maritime workers, it turned out that Smith had stayed beyond his legal welcome in the States by many years! It is unclear how Smith let this issue slide but nevertheless he did. Ferdie Smith was forced to leave the country.

Deeply hurt, psychologically as well as physically, by the brutal battles of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Smith lived in Vienna for a while before returning to the only land that would have him, his native Jamaica. Fanatical labor and political organizer that he was, Smith proceeded with typical skill and energy to line up Jamaican laborers. Though not as central to the Jamaican economy as it had been, he targeted sugar and other agricultural workers through his newly established Jamaica Federation of Trade Unions. He organized so effectively that Washington, D.C. and London worked hard to squash these nascent efforts, using among other tools bitter rivalries between other Jamaican leaders as well as traditional “Red Scare” tactics.

Given the depth and breadth of Ferdinand Smith’s activism, Horne’s book actually could be longer than 292 pages, though it “feels” longer. Horne quite effectively proves that Smith was one of the more important labor leaders of the mid-twentieth century. That he also happened to be Jamaican and a Communist makes him all the more interesting. While not a history of the NMU, Horne also demonstrates how powerful this sailors’ union was, as well as how red-baiting fatally weakened it. Indeed, if there is a thesis in this biography it would be that Communists have proven to be effective and passionate defenders of labor and civil rights in the United States and Caribbean. Equally true, when Communist organizers were red-baited, particularly in the late 1940s and 1950s, these social movements, not just the Communists, were permanently hurt. The NMU became a shadow of

its former self and proved either unable or unwilling to prevent U.S. merchant ships from flying “flags of convenience” (Panama and Liberia especially, both de facto U.S. colonies); the result was that the number of U.S. sailors and quality of the work declined, as shipping companies outsourced their labor to nations with weak labor laws. Similarly, Horne suggests less forcefully that the U.S. civil rights movement, bereft of its Communist allies, won important social and political victories but African Americans still lag behind their lighter-skinned counterparts by most every economic measure. These issues remain of tremendous import at the start of the twenty-first century.

Horne’s research is particularly strong in his reading of NMU newspapers and the seemingly voluminous and essential papers of Smith’s closest Jamaican friend and comrade, Richard Hart. However, he could have made far better use of the rich literature on U.S. labor history in the 1930s and 1940s as well as the seemingly relevant literature on race and labor, which is quite well developed. Highly polemical in tone, readers who disagree with Horne’s politics might put the book down when there is much to be learned from it. At times the book does not feel like a biography, as Horne engages in diatribes against the U.S.-led Cold War, Jamaican infighting, NMU infighting, the Red Scares, and other matters. Moreover, Smith disappears from many pages of the book and little detail is given about his personal life, family, and interests. Rather, this book is a political biography with emphasis on the politics. The title also is something of a misnomer; aside from Smith, no radical Jamaica sailors appear. Nor is the book about radical black sailors in the United States, really. Instead, the book examines Smith and his central role in the early years of NMU and then the anticommunist politics of America, Britain, and Jamaica after World War II. Those who know only one name in African American labor history (A. Philip Randolph’s) should take notice. Though largely lost from the historical record, those who study Caribbean history should not be surprised that perhaps the most important black labor leader in the United States was, in fact, a Jamaican.

Notes

[1]. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[2]. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-*

Century America (London: Verso, 1997); *A Fierce Hatred: Rebellion of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of* (New York: Verso, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean>

Citation: Peter Cole. Review of Horne, Gerald, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13346>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.