

Michael Vinson Williams. *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011. 453 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55728-973-5.



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Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

Throughout the twentieth century, activists in Mississippi sought to address attacks on African Americans as they challenged the southern status quo. Indicative of the traditional civil rights movement period of activism was the work of Mississippian Medgar Wiley Evers. His tenure as field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) represented the convergence of a national organization working on the local scale and exposed the strictures that often constrained localized activist efforts. Evers was an ideal example of dedicated local activism at whatever cost, illustrated through his claim that "I may be going to heaven or hell... But I'll be going from Jackson" (p. 267). Evers argued that the way to reform the South was not to leave it, as many African Americans had done before him. Instead, he believed in his home state and in the ability of the South to change to such an extent that he sought to reform it from the inside, a decision that affected his life forever.

Michael Vinson Williams, assistant professor of history and African American studies at Missis-

sippi State University, provides *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*, the first definitive biography of Evers. The only similar volume, a work from historian Manning Marable with Myrlie Evers-Williams, is an autobiography of Evers produced through a compilation of Evers's writings, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (2006). Scholars familiar with civil rights historiography will find that Williams's work is similar to Taylor Branch's trilogy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (*Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* [1988], *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* [1998], and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* [2006]) in that Williams illustrates the trajectory of the civil rights movement through the eyes of Evers.

Williams utilizes a nearly exhaustive collection of primary documents, including oral histories, the Evers Papers, and Citizen Council and Sovereignty Commission files. These sources are supplemented by an equally impressive collection

of secondary materials, which include theses and dissertations. The book is both thematic and chronological. Though Williams's story opens in the early twentieth century, his narrative extends through Evers's lifetime and concludes in the present day.

Williams begins by introducing Evers's parents, James and Jessie Evers, and explains how their struggle in the early twentieth century provided the young Evers with "examples of manhood and self-sufficiency, which molded his independent character and cultivated a devotion to the welfare of humankind" (p. 16). In establishing this background of resistance, Williams defines an extended timeline of civil rights activism as depicted through Evers's life. Williams's analysis of Evers's character throughout the work is critical. For example, Williams argues that "Evers demonstrated to those around him that he was willing to suffer in the struggle for equality and to place his family and their safety on the frontlines right along with theirs and this drew people to him" (p. 67). These analytical touches enrich and shape *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*.

Each component of Williams's account deals with a particular situation from which Evers and the movement learned. For example, chapter 3, perhaps the most valuable in the book, specifically addresses the NAACP's efforts in Mississippi. Williams exposes the shortcomings of the organization's activism on the local scale and illuminates Evers's efforts to negotiate within that system. Williams's thematic approach is also evident in chapter 4. It focuses on 1955, a tragic year that included the death of Emmett Till, struggles with the Sovereignty Commission, and efforts to enroll Clyde Kennard at Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississippi). By weaving in a history of the civil rights movement through the narrative of Evers's life, Williams provides the reader with a clear sense of Evers's place in the movement and the movement in Evers.

Perhaps the most compelling contribution that Williams makes in is his elucidation of the relationship between the NAACP and local activism. Much has been written about the conflicts that took place between local organizations and the NAACP. Williams's account provides a crucial understanding of how that relationship ultimately caused organizations like the Forrest County Action Committee, based in Hattiesburg, to emerge.

Though Williams's contribution to civil rights scholarship is considerable, his approach presents some limitations. By using the analytical biography format, civil rights scholars will find that Williams's work offers crucial details and critical analysis about Evers's life, but the context of the movement that is also an essential part of Williams's work is more appropriate for broader audiences. Because he provides vignettes about Evers's father's background and follows up with current civil rights issues, however, Williams's work depicts a clear chain of activism throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Overall, Williams's work is a well-written and informative installment in a prolific civil rights scholarship. *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* is an accessible volume for a wide range of historians

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[1]. Myrlie Evers-Williams with Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006).

[2]. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

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