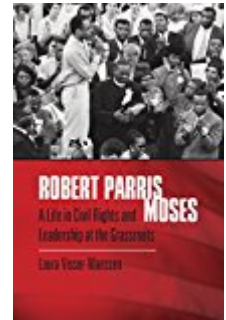


Laura Visser-Maessen. *Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 456 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2798-4.



Reviewed by Jeff Donnelly

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

Laura Visser-Maessen, of Holland's Utrecht University, has written an extensive and thoughtful examination of Bob Moses and his practice of leading by organizing for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). At the same time, Visser-Maessen develops an extraordinary and useful picture of the frozen political, economic, and social system of white supremacy in Mississippi in the mid-twentieth century. The history of Moses, SNCC, and Mississippi includes many events in a short period--McComb organizing, the Freedom Vote, Freedom Summer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party--and Visser-Maessen attempts to do justice to each.

Bob Moses is an almost mystical figure in the popular history of the southern civil rights movement from 1960 to 1965. That theme runs throughout this account of Moses in the Deep South. Visser-Maessen quotes Aaron Henry, a Mississippi NAACP leader then, much later in 2000: "The arrival of Robert Moses ... marked a high point in the Mississippi civil rights movement" (p. 89). From another point of view, Stokely

Carmichael, a later Black Power advocate, averred in 2003 that he had been "influenced" by Moses "in fundamental and lasting ways" (p. 313). For Visser-Maessen, Moses was "more of a leader than he sought to be" even from the start of his work in Mississippi (p. 93).

Reflecting later, Moses admitted that before his first trip through the Deep South in 1961, "I didn't know enough to be afraid" (p. 49). He learned. Visser-Maessen describes the death of Herbert Lee, ambushed in 1961, as a turning point for Moses. Did organizing in the Deep South make him complicit in Lee's death? Did his insistence on local participation and leadership simply make these local leaders more vulnerable? Visser-Maessen charts the development of Moses's thought and practice fully and usefully.

Now, more than fifty years later, Visser-Maessen brings back to life how white supremacy penetrated the whole of society in Mississippi in the middle of the twentieth century. While white Mississippian complained about the conspiracies

of “outside agitators,” they spent a great deal of time and effort plotting against the SNCC workers and their work. Reading this book is a useful reminder of how deep and solid the “iceberg” of a segregated society was.

Moses first used the phrase “a tremor in the middle of the iceberg” in a letter from the Magnolia jail where he and other SNCC workers were imprisoned. Visser-Maessen brings to life the density of the iceberg and the courage of those who made it tremble.

At times it is not always clear from the text (though usually clarified in the notes) when a comment about those fateful Mississippi days is made. Even a brief date insertion in the text would have been helpful in supporting the interpretation of these events and how the participants thought about them.

Visser-Maessen includes a narrative of Bob Moses after Mississippi, allowing his life in Africa and America as a math teacher to provide a larger context for the leading by organizing that characterized his Mississippi experience.

Readers with an interest in but not much exposure to the story of SNCC will find the historiographical essay both informative and intriguing.

Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots will reward anyone with an interest in Moses, his companions, and those event-filled years when the iceberg of a segregated system began to break up.

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