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2009

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Watson, Denton L., "One-Dimensional History" (2009). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 78.

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One-Dimensional History

Denton L. Watson

I began attending the annual ADE conference on a regular basis in 2000. Since then, I have often wondered how many of you have been aware of my distinction? The lone black in a sea of white. Not the first, of course, just the lone one. Nevertheless, I have always reveled in my distinction, even though, to be truthful, I would have welcomed some company. My distinction, I am sure, has been due to the reality that I am one of just a tiny handful of black documentary editors, which has been the result of a combination of factors. I will touch on these very shortly.

Suffice it to say that I was therefore most happy when Cathy Moran Hajo asked me to participate on this panel and to address the issue of African American history and editing projects in an attempt to develop a greater awareness about a significant gap in this area of documentary editing. I therefore accepted the invitation to participate on this panel, which is designed to “make people think” about the progress that has been made since the 1974 report by Edgar Topping, entitled, “Special Advisory Committee on Publication of the Papers of Blacks.”

As a result of my publicly expressed frustrations a couple of years ago over my inability to get any funding at all from the NEH for the Clarence Mitchell, Jr., Papers, a distinctly one-of-a-kind project, I know that many of you here are aware of how I joined the ranks of this elite documentary group. Yes. I did not come to documentary editing by the normal, academic route. I began as a journalist, a former public relations director for the NAACP who had gotten to know Roy Wilkins, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., and other leaders of the NAACP on a first-hand basis through my working relationships with them.

Very fortunately for me, too, was that early in my ten-year mission of writing a biography of Clarence Mitchell, Jr., Mary Giunta was very encouraging when I met with her to enquire about obtaining NHPRC support for editing the papers of the NAACP Washington Bureau director. That was just after Mitchell had died in 1984, when I mentioned to her my interest in extending my biographical work of Mitchell. Of course, I knew absolutely nothing about documentary editing then. But Mary had known about Mitchell’s reputation in Washington as the “101st senator” who had led the struggle for passage of the civil rights laws in Congress. She was very supportive of the idea, even though

she informed me that I had to wait ten years after a person's death before the NHPRC could fund a project based on that person's work.

When I did return to the NHPRC, Roger Bruns was now interim executive director. Fortunately, he, too, was from the old Washington school, so he was also very aware of Mitchell's reputation as THE civil rights lobbyist in the nation's capital. Thanks to Roger, I was therefore able to launch the Mitchell Papers project in 2000 with SUNY College at Old Westbury as my sponsor. And to the consternation, I am sure, of some of those reviewers who had previously thrown up niggling roadblocks to approving funding for the project, Volumes I and II were published in 2005. The manuscript for Volumes III and IV are now at Ohio University Press, the publisher. And I am well into Volume V.

Now, why do I belabor my sorry experiences in this area? My experiences, I do insist, go to the heart of the black experience in historical documentary editing and to its one-dimensional character. What is striking is that, based on several of the standard, negative reviews of my funding applications to the NEH, for one, I strongly suspect that some of the naysayers are black. One negative comment was that I was fiercely pro-Clarence Mitchell. Some of the naysayers seem to be reflecting attitudes of those among the younger generation of blacks in the sixties who had dismissed the granddaddy NAACP as too slow and out of touch. One reviewer even dismissed Mitchell as a "technician" working in Congress, whose papers were not worthy of precious funding. Well, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., a technician?

Pity that poor reviewer, for, surely, he or she is abysmally ignorant of the complexity of the NAACP's operations, and of the multifaceted nature of modern civil rights leadership. Those seem to be obvious reasons for the paucity of projects involving blacks. This assertion therefore brings me to the mid-point of my presentation and thus to the central thrust of my paper to illustrate one reason for the very few black projects, especially those involving the NAACP.

Let us, therefore, revisit the efforts of Edgar Allan Toppin, a history professor from Virginia State College who in 1974 sought advice in establishing priorities for publishing papers of blacks. Since its reorganization in 1950, Topping noted, the then NHPC had supported sixty letterpress publication projects and more than one hundred microfilm projects. Only two of the sixty letterpress editions involved blacks. They were the Booker T. Washington Papers, sponsored by the University of Maryland, and the Frederick Douglass Papers, sponsored by Yale University. The four microfilm publication projects involving blacks were the Detroit Urban League Records, the George Washington Carver Papers, the Papers of John Hope, and the Tuskegee Institute News clippings. "These two letterpress and five microfilm projects comprise the total contribution of the NHPC to date toward publishing materials directly related to the history of Blacks," Toppin explained. And of those projects only

two began before 1972. So, he concluded pessimistically, it could be said that the efforts represented very little and very late. In the same breath, he added, very optimistically, that those projects could be viewed as “slow in starting, but picking up steam.”

Really? Today, despite the NHPRC’s considerable difficulty of obtaining funding from Congress, the number of distinctly black projects can be counted on one hand: They are The Frederick Douglass Papers, The Marcus Garvey Papers, The Howard Thurman Papers, and The Papers of Clarence Mitchell, Jr. Cathy Moran Hajo, in her invitation to editors to participate on this panel, also included the African-American Religion Documentary Edition. Given the range and depth of African American history, especially the extent to which this history has shaped the soul of America, there is no need to emphasize the gross inadequacy of this representation. So, where do we begin with expanding this representative collection?

The current edition of the NHPRC’s *Annotation* provides a very welcome—though not so obvious—hint as to the future direction of projects the NHPRC might wish to consider supporting in the near future, should sufficient funding drop down from Congress like manna from above. In an examination of the impact of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., on historiography, Christopher Phelps reverently observes that to view him

as the Man Who Brought About Civil Rights is to conflate movement with man, and biography is no substitute for history. King’s stature ought not obscure the vast variegated activity from below, in countless cities and rural districts, that made up the civil rights revolution. Too often King’s story is framed within a self-contented story of national progress that idealizes the extent to which the country has transcended race and minimizes the disruptive tactics necessary to bring about an end to Jim Crow.

Against this assertion by Christopher Phelps, let me ask you this: Who was the most influential leader during the modern civil rights movement? The expected answer is the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. And therein lies a considerable flaw in historiography, which has resulted in a slanted representation of the period. For the simple truth is that the most influential leader of the modern civil rights leader was Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP. His influence was based on, most notably, his leadership of an organization with an incomparable history, and which had branches in every state of the union. Furthermore, Wilkins was a founder and chairman of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the powerful coalition of civil rights, civic, labor, fraternal, and religious organizations, which was the political fulcrum of the NAACP’s lobbying operations in Washington.

Wilkins, of course, as was King, was one of the so-called “big six” among the civil rights leaders in the modern civil rights movement. The others were A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and grand-daddy of the modern civil rights movement; James Farmer, head of the Congress of Racial Equality; John Lewis, head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and Whitney Young, president of the National Urban League. Except for King, however, we hear little, if anything, about those leaders. Instead, the standard picture of the modern civil rights movement has been one-dimensional—all centered around King’s nonviolent protests in the South.

This is tragic because Wilkins led the flagship NAACP from 1955 to 1977. Preceding him at the helm of the NAACP were, in addition to Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, author of “Lift E’vry Voice and Sing,” the black national hymn, and Walter White, who spent more time knocking on President Roosevelt’s door than any other leader of his time. Christopher Phelps noted that excellent biographies of other activists, such as Bayard Rustin, a lieutenant of A. Philip Randolph in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Ella Baker, another noted NAACP activist, now exist. But Phelps is especially wowed by the many fine biographies of King *as typical of “Our scholarship of the civil rights movement”* (emphasis ours) which is “stunning in its quality.” By contrast, however, not even one exists of Wilkins.

To be sure, as a youngster in the NAACP national office who had unsuccessfully attempted to win Wilkins’s cooperation in writing a biography of him before I turned to Clarence Mitchell, Jr., I can well understand the reason for much of that oversight. Wilkins did not encourage the preparation of comprehensive histories of the Association. He just did not have the sense of history that motivated King in his development of strategy to dramatize the abysmal racial oppression in the South. Neither did Wilkins, an old print newspaperman, recognize the far-reaching and dramatic impact of the television medium anywhere near to the extent that King did. So King exploited television, to his historical benefit.

But there was also a more historically profound reason for the extent to which Wilkins has been overlooked by historians of the movement who are looking for dramatic subjects to write about in a fairly short time. And that reason is based not only on the complexity of the NAACP institution, but also on the manner in which it functioned. Just, for example, try comprehending the massive collection of the NAACP’s archives at the Library of Congress.

The fundamental difference between the NAACP and the other civil rights organizations of the 1960s, notably the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Congress of Racial Equality was that these younger organizations functioned in the South from outside the government, challenging the region’s Jim Crow prac-

tices with nonviolent, direct action protests that provided live theater for television cameras. Granddaddy NAACP, however, was a ponderous bureaucracy that worked from INSIDE the government to achieve change. The NAACP's work was not geared to the nature of the new broadcast medium anywhere as much as King's was. A lack of appreciation for this distinction seems to be one of the reasons the NAACP, despite its flagship role, has been dismissed by so many civil rights scholars.

Another, of course, is that it requires much, too much time and money to study the NAACP's history and to analyze the countless aspects of its contributions. The NAACP did not just work in the courts—and now the Congress, as I have been documenting. In every state of the Union it battled to protect the rights of the racially downtrodden. How many scholars, for example, would have devoted some thirty years of their lives to the study and documentation of the contributions of just one civil rights figure—namely, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., the “101st senator who led the struggle in Congress for passage of the civil rights laws? It took me ten years to write *Lion in the Lobby*, the biography of Mitchell. Five of those years were devoted to research; the other five were devoted to writing—literally, writing seven days a week.

Now I am editing just one of six categories of Mitchell's papers—his weekly, monthly and annual reports. And just very recently I had to face the reality that I could not complete this aspect of his papers in the five volumes I had unrealistically projected. I consequently have had to extend the edition to seven volumes—*of just his reports, mind you.*

I must emphasize, of course, that in making this comparison of the Rev. King with Wilkins I am not in any way seeking to disparage the contributions of the messiah from the South to the liberation of America from the shackles of Jim Crow. I am merely attempting to emphasize the one-dimensional nature of the documentary editing profession and to awaken interest in the vast archives of the mighty NAACP institution, whose contributions in the courts and Congress are essential for the continuing elevation of King's mythical place in modern civil rights history.

This paper was presented at the 2008 ADE Annual Meeting in Tucson, Arizona.