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Review of Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America

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BOOK REVIEWS

Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America. By Bruce Perry. Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, Inc., 1991. Notes, bibliography, index. xv + 542 pp. \$24.95.

For many African Americans, Malcolm is a shining black prince, a charismatic leader, and the ideological founder of the movement toward a black awakening. He is a cultural and political icon, and as such, belongs to all of us. For Bruce Perry, Malcolm is a chameleon and a man in conflict. His Malcolm is a political opportunist, who yearned for happiness and love but courted failure, longed for freedom but shunned it until it was too late, hungered for the approval of the very authority figures he defied. Rather than view Malcolm as an individual thinker who could publicly change his mind when new information warranted a different direction, Perry argues that we cannot begin to understand "the adult, political Malcolm," as well as his ambivalence and ambiguity, "without [first] thoroughly understanding [Malcolm's childhood] and the legacy that was bequeathed him by the people who raised him and by America's race problem." Consequently, what we have here is a psycho-historical biography of an important African American political figure and an historical overview of the African American's political awakening. Malcolm's Omaha birth, while significant to *Great Plains Quarterly* readers, plays little part in the book.

Using personal interviews from members of Malcolm's family and personal friends, accounts from various newspapers and periodicals, as well as FBI reports, and documents from the New York City Police Department, the U.S. State Department, the Secret Service, and the CIA,

Perry attempts to give us the definitive Malcolm. The work, however, falls short on several levels. The book is dense and episodic, and the author's analysis is often tentative, with speculative conclusions couched in psycho-babble. Perry's assertions about Malcolm's sexuality and homophobia are just plain nonsense. He is on much firmer footing in discussing the "symbolic Malcolm," who appeals to urban young blacks because his experiences symbolize their own. Malcolm confronted white society not as a passive spectator but as a vocal and assertive black man; he transformed blackness from what had commonly been regarded as a badge of shame into a symbol of pride; he singlehandedly changed the terms of the debate about the means of equal opportunity; and he made Islam a force to be reckoned with in black America.

The second half of the book contains useful information about Harlem in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Malcolm's political maturity, including his pan-African and pan-Islamic consciousness, his doctrinal and political differences with Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm's flirtation with socialism under the guise of the Socialist Workers Party and the Militant Labor Forum. Perry also informs us that Malcolm established the Moslem Mosque and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in order to broaden his political base after his expulsion from the Nation of Islam. Both were failures, however, primarily because of structural weaknesses and the lack of financial support.

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