

## Martin Luther King Jr

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Joe Street

Martin Luther King, Jr. remains arguably the most recognisable African American figure in world history. First thrust into the international spotlight courtesy of his leadership of a boycott of the public bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, where he was pastor of a local church, King became the lightning rod for the civil rights movement that emerged in the wake of the successful boycott. During the 1960s he gave innumerable speeches characterised by oratorical genius, led a succession of mass marches in the heart of segregated America and helped to reconstruct American race relations before his assassination in 1968. Ever since Montgomery he has attracted the attention of biographers and historians keen to understand what made him such a magnetic and inspirational leader and what made the story of the civil rights movement so compelling. John A. Kirk's succinct biography of King confirms that these two stories remain thoroughly entwined, and suggests that a traditional biographical approach is inadequate if we are to understand King's importance to black America and his significance in American history.

Studies of King and the civil rights movement have passed through three distinct phases. The initial surge of civil rights scholarship depicted King as the leader of the movement, suggesting that the movement took its cue from King's leadership of mass protest throughout the South. These works often directly relate the legislative successes of the mid-1960s – the 1964 Civil Rights and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts – to campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama during 1963, St. Augustine, Florida in 1964 and Selma, Alabama in 1965, all of which were coordinated by King's organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The early studies note that the movement stuttered after these events, not least because of King's opposition to the Vietnam War and his failure to define a new direction for the movement now that its initial aims – desegregation of public facilities and voting rights for African Americans – had been achieved. In doing so, the early civil rights studies established a 'Montgomery to Memphis' teleology, from King's first

appearance on a national stage during the Montgomery Bus Boycott to his final curtain at the Lorraine Motel, suggesting that the civil rights movement effectively ended at this point.

A second wave of scholarship took issue with the King-centred periodisation of the movement, deepening and broadening our understanding of the roots of the civil rights movement. State studies of Louisiana, Mississippi and Georgia, alongside studies of cities such as St. Augustine, Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery itself revealed the effects of the complex weave of long-term organising and intergenerational links in individual black communities, and the impact of municipal politics on the development of black protest. These rich studies suggested that local leaders in the South were perhaps as important to the dismantling of segregation as King. Local activists spent years slowly and quietly building up a grassroots movement that King almost inevitably took advantage of in his quest to redeem the soul of America. The local studies were complemented by a raft of biographical and autobiographical works devoted to other figures in the movement, which confirmed that King's leadership relied on a vast network of local leaders, and in some cases undercut King's claims to greatness. We are now in a third period, where studies are focused more on interactivity, between national and local, politics and culture and – importantly for Kirk's study – leaders and the led. This third phase has also seen a subtle transformation in the biographical approaches to King. Recent works, most notably Michael Eric Dyson's pugnacious interpretive biography and Peter J. Ling's more traditional yet highly nuanced study, have offered us a King steeped in the traditions of the African American church, a man whose own temporal fallibilities did not detract from his greatness as a human being, a deep thinker heavily burdened by his role within the movement and by his understanding of history, and an instinctive social democrat who became so radicalised by his experience of the 1960s that he was moving towards a thorough critique of America's moral, social and political rectitude. [\(1\)](#)

Kirk's biography arrives at an opportune moment for a concise reconsideration of King's importance. Its inclusion in Longman's Profiles in Power series, however, strikes a curious note. As King himself noted, his opposition to Vietnam might have made him a suitable candidate for a 'Profile in Courage' but he did not consider himself powerful in the traditional sense. In fact, much of his life was devoted to undercutting traditional American notions of power, to challenging the tyranny of white powermongers, and in his later years, to moderating the Black Power message of radicals such as Stokely Carmichael. Kirk addresses this paradox in his opening paragraphs, noting that King's leadership was largely interactive and heavily reliant upon the work of friends, colleagues and a vast network of African American and white activists – in a sense more reflective of Hegelian dialectic than of traditional conceptions of leadership. Thus King's power was more indicative of the cohesion of the black community than of his own charisma. This placing of King within the wider tapestry of local movements, national organisations and scores of individuals results in the book being more than a simple biography; it is also a potted history of the civil rights movement during King's life.

Kirk offers a subtle depiction of the interaction between various movement factions, and especially between the complex and often conflicting goals of the national and local movements. He is also sensitive to the resentments that King's position as the nominal leader of the civil rights movement provoked with the local leaders on whose work he relied. He points out that many of the strategic decisions that led to King's greatest successes were made by others: the decision to campaign in Birmingham was taken at the behest of local leader Fred Shuttlesworth; the decision to start marches during lunch hours so as to maximise involvement was by committee; King's associate, James Bevel, made the potentially fateful yet ultimately triumphant decision to enlist schoolchildren to march in the city. Thus we understand that King relied upon a network of co-workers and that one of his major sources of power was his ability to build on the decisions of others – and in his sensitivity to their egos. In particular, Kirk is keen to point out that the SCLC's major campaigns were rarely successful in achieving concrete achievements for the local black community. While they often succeeded in revealing the brutality of segregation and the feral nature of white supremacy, they rarely transformed the local social structure. That King brought the media with him certainly aided local efforts to challenge white supremacy, yet his departure presaged the departure of the media, leaving local leaders to deal with the backlash from resentful white communities and exhausted black communities.

Kirk's King, then, is at heart a leader-by-committee who spends much of his time deliberating on the strategy of his campaigns with his team of advisers and fellow preachers. Yet one major aspect of King's leadership is missing: his oratory. Kirk frequently offers the voices of King's friends, enemies and colleagues but not enough of King's itself. Kirk acknowledges the problems inherent in documenting the words of a speaker so noted for his oratorical skill but his interpretation of King would have enriched by deeper engagement with these words. Certainly, a study addressed to the exploration of the sources of King's power must examine this aspect of King's public persona. This is not to state that Kirk ignores the significance of King's speeches but that the focus of his inquiry into King's oratory is the response of King's audiences. There is, for example, a long discussion of the acclamation for King's speech at the 1963 March on Washington but no systematic investigation into what made this speech (or, indeed, many of King's other speeches) so momentous. This was the point at which King's powers were at their peak and when, according to many observers, he held thousands, perhaps millions, of white and black Americans in the palm of his hand, but Kirk offers a short exegesis of this moment, quoting only the most famous phrases: 'I have a dream' and 'let freedom ring.' In overlooking how the speech explores the American relationship with democracy, race, honesty and good government, how it weaves the Exodus narrative with the African American quest for equal citizenship, and how the repetition in King's words transported the crowd into a future without racial discrimination, Kirk underestimates the power of one of the great American speeches of the twentieth century. Nor is there a sustained examination of key tropes in King's rhetoric such as his use of metaphor and frequent citing of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, both of which were particularly important to his popularity and success as a public speaker. Kirk also skirts around King's sermons, which were a hugely significant weapon in his armoury. Without a systematic inquiry into the relationship between King, the pulpit and Christianity, we read of King without one of the major sources of his power. In reducing the impact of Christianity to its political and organisational effects, Kirk loses a sense of King as a spiritual leader, instead offering a secular political leader. Thus we lose a sense of what made King special, why people responded to him in such numbers and with such passion. Shorn of his voice, this King is a rather uncharismatic presence, and certainly one at odds with the mellifluous preacher and spiritual leader of Dyson's biography. In fact, Kirk suggests that King's famously nettlesome critic, Ella Baker, was correct to suggest that the 'prophetic leader [sometimes] turns out to have heavy feet of clay'.<sup>(2)</sup> This is perhaps the heart of the book's strengths and weaknesses. Kirk's perspective offers an excellent understanding of King's leadership and organisational role within the civil rights movement and the SCLC and his sensitive mediation between the SCLC and various power brokers. Yet readers receive little evaluation of why King was such a compelling individual; they get little sense of why so many reacted so emotionally, politically and physically to King, and might conclude that King's leadership was more prosaic than prophetic. A greater appreciation of King the speaker would have given readers a greater sense of his power.

One further problem is due in part to the tight word limits on the 'Profiles in Power' series. Given the need to detail the genesis and day-to-day micromanagement of the SCLC's major campaigns, there is little room for King's intellectual history. Since the discovery of King's plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation, scholars have become increasingly interested in King's intellectual development and in his relationship with black and white cultural and intellectual traditions. While scholars agree that King offered very little original philosophical thought, there has been considerable investigation into the roots of King's philosophy. His published writings were at pains to demonstrate the influence that King took from his academic training. Consequently, some scholars have stressed the importance of white liberal intellectuals including Reinhold Niebuhr on King's thought. Others challenge this interpretation, pointing to the fact that King's books were written with a white liberal audience in mind, one which would respond more favourably to an African American who could demonstrate his erudition. These scholars emphasise the African American influences on King, who had a long apprenticeship in the ways of the black church: his father, after all, was a preacher of some renown, and he had grown up in a segregated community in the South. These influences offer great insight into the development of King's thought in the late 1960s and into the righteousness of the mature King. Similarly, King's first meeting with the legendary civil rights activist and pacifist Bayard Rustin is dismissed too readily. Rustin was an indefatigable foe of oppression, and an important figure in transplanting the nonviolent philosophy that had been so successful for Gandhi to the United States. He and King first met during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, soon after King had experienced a long night of the soul when he heard God's voice tell him to continue his (and His) work. Kirk acknowledges the importance of this moment, but offers little comment on the transformative effect that the meeting had on the young leader. Rustin convinced King to do away with his bodyguards and to embrace a lifestyle that rejected violence as a solution to any problem. This meeting arguably represents the moment at which King began to understand the power and the true meaning of nonviolence; when he recognised that nonviolence was more than a mere tactic calculated to prove the humanity of the practitioner but was a way of life designed for higher purposes. King's commitment to nonviolence only grew after this point, reaching its apogee in his 1967 attack on US involvement in Vietnam. An inquiry into the power of King's message for the world must emphasise the importance of this moment; without a sustained discussion of King's intellectual development we get little sense of what made King tick.

Yet the final chapter offers a deeper and richer appreciation of King's internal life. Where the King of the first third of the book is a slightly bewildered figure, buffeted by the winds of change that were swirling around him, and the King of the second at the eye of the storm, the King of the third act rages against the tempest, attempting to summon the power with which to neutralise the maelstrom. During the last three years of his life, King became an uncompromising critic of the Johnson administration, particularly over the impact of the Vietnam War on the administration's domestic policy. He spent less time organising and conducting demonstrations, and more pondering the question of an all-out attack on discrimination. His rhetoric broadened to encompass a critique of western militarism and capitalism as well as racism. This allows Kirk greater room to discuss King's words and deeds as well as his deliberations. While Kirk is sceptical of Peter Ling's assertion that during these years King was a heroic figure whose failings on an organisational and practical level were compensated for by the moral force of his convictions, he tacitly accepts that the King of these years was a more complex, and perhaps more interesting, figure than the man who led the most successful American social movement of the twentieth century between 1956 and 1965. This section is the first in which Kirk truly grapples with the dilemmas that King faced as a public figure in the midst of the 1960s and is the most successful and wide-ranging of the book.

Kirk's *Martin Luther King Jr* – like its subject – is flawed, but it has many strengths. While the demands of British academic life prevented Kirk exercising his considerable talents as an archival researcher, he demonstrates a mastery of the secondary sources. He is a little overreliant on King's autobiography, which was patched together from numerous sources in 1998 by Clayborne Carson, the senior editor of the Martin Luther King Papers, but he adeptly forges conclusions from occasionally contradictory evidence. Kirk offers considerable insight into King's successes and failures as a civil rights leader. While greater use of the available archival sources would have given a more authoritative hue to his portrait, it still serves as a very

fine introduction to the major themes of the civil rights movement and will certainly find its way onto a number of undergraduate course bibliographies. Kirk's main intention was 'to demonstrate how King translated [his] ideas, influences and abilities into action, by formulating a strategy to pursue social, political and economic change for blacks' (p. 184). In this, he succeeds. General readers wishing to understand King's role within the movement will certainly achieve a sound understanding of King as a social and political activist and will definitely be led away from lionising the man. Kirk's work will certainly compel readers to investigate King and his times in greater depth. Indeed, Kirk demonstrates that to understand the civil rights movement is to understand King rather than vice versa; that King's leadership was as much dependent upon his followers as they were on him.

## Notes

1. M. E. Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 2000); P. J. Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ella Baker, 'Bigger than a Hamburger', *Southern Patriot* (June 1960) quoted in R. Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow, 1998) p. 154.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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