

Book World

A Man Seized By History

BEARING THE CROSS
Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference
 By David J. Garrow
 Morrow, 800 pp. \$19.95

By James H. Jones

CERTAIN SCENES will live forever in the memories of those of us who came of age during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—angry white men lunging at frightened black children in Little Rock; Eugene (Bull) Connor's snarling police dogs attacking peaceful marchers in Birmingham; and the blood-splattered faces of black demonstrators in Selma falling before the savage blows of George Wallace's state troopers. Yet one voice, and one voice alone, still echoes in our ears. The cadence, with its dramatic oscillations in volume, might have been heard in any black pulpit in the South, but the rich, beautifully modulated baritone belonged unmistakably to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. More than any other leader of our century, white or black, he forced America to confront its racism and to abolish segregation. Close your eyes and listen; can't you hear him proclaiming his faith in his dream, a vision of a land where white children and black children joined hands as sisters and brothers in the spirit of Christian love?

David J. Garrow, a political scientist at the City University of New York, has written an important new book on King. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* is an honest and penetrating portrait of a troubled, heroic man and a series of richly detailed case studies of the reform movement he led. Together with his earlier books (*The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*), *Bearing the Cross* establishes Garrow as one of our most thoughtful (and prolific) students of the civil rights movement in America.

Bearing the Cross is both massive and impressive. After briefly discussing King's childhood and college years, Garrow

James H. Jones, associate professor of history at the University of Houston, is the author of "Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment." He is currently at work on a biography of Alfred C. Kinsey.



Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his "I have a dream..." speech before the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963

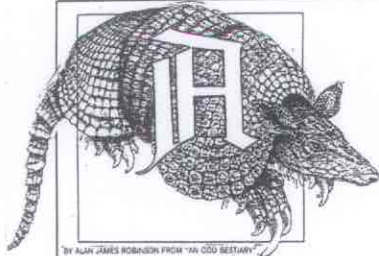
offers what is nearly a day-to-day chronicle of King's adult life, from his obscure beginnings as pastor of a black congregation in Montgomery, Ala., to his rise to national prominence as the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the leading spokesman for the civil rights movement in America. His odyssey began in 1954 in Montgomery when Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. From that day forward, King found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the civil rights movement. It was for him a moral issue, a matter of right and wrong and, eventually, it eclipsed the ministry and took over his life completely.

According to Garrow, King was from the outset a reluctant reformer, a man who spent a good deal of his time feeling that history had seized him by the throat—that his life was no longer his to control but merely an instrument of the cause he

served. He became a leader not because he craved power or reveled in the limelight but because his sense of responsibility to his race and duty to his religion would not permit him to lay down the load he had shouldered.

In fact, Garrow is careful to present King as a life-size man, complete with strengths and weaknesses and glaring contradictions. Outwardly calm and self-assured, he was actually very anxious, insecure and (especially toward the end of his life) given to frequent and severe bouts of depression. Part of his anxiety stemmed from the fact that he expected to be murdered at any moment. He felt as though his leadership of the movement had painted a giant bull's-eye across his body, inviting every sick racist in the country to open fire. And yet though he lived under the sword of Damocles, King found the courage to go forward. Sustained

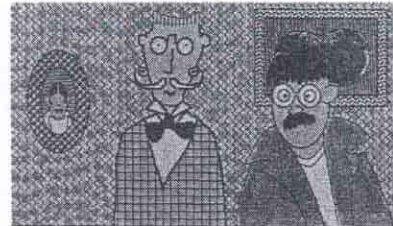
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