

Books of The Times

By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

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

DAVID J. GARROW'S huge "Bearing the Cross" begins on Dec. 1, 1955, with a tired Rosa Lee McCauley Parks deciding she would prefer not to move to the back of a Montgomery, Ala., bus. It ends on April 4, 1968, with a minister named Samuel (Billy) Kyles standing over the body of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. "Kyles looked down and thought he could see the color of King's complexion change right before his eyes. He turned away and sobbed."

Between these momentous events, Mr. Garrow, who teaches political science at City College, pauses once to give us a 20-page sketch of his subject's first 26 years. But otherwise his approach is strictly chronological.

The result of massive research — including interviews with Dr. King's closest associates, readings of Dr. King's personal papers and the archives of many other organizations and individuals and the use of newly released F.B.I. documents, among them hundreds of wiretapped, transcribed phone conversations between King and his advisers — "Bearing the Cross" proceeds almost hour by hour through the last 12 years of Dr. King's life.

It is a difficult challenge that Mr. Garrow has set himself. The author of two previous books on the same subject — "The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From Solo to Memphis" and "Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965" — he eschews any attempt to put King's life in historical perspective, or to compare him with any previous civil-rights or religious leaders (other than Jesus Christ Himself, to whom his title, "Bearing the Cross," obviously refers).

While his book's 11 chapters carry titles like "The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956," "The Alabama Project, St. Augustine, and the Nobel Prize, 1963-1964," and "The Poor People's Campaign and Memphis, 1967-1968," Mr. Garrow makes no attempt to shape them into discrete entities. Chronology alone defines their beginnings and endings.

The author uses heavy-handed transitions: "King continued to wrestle with his personal and emotional tensions as SCLC turned its attention toward the upcoming Poor People's Campaign." At least three dozen sentences in the book begin with the word "additionally." The result is a tone of deadpan monotony whose rationale would seem to be that the wonder of Martin Luther King Jr.'s career is such that it needs neither shape nor commentary.

This is not altogether a misguided assumption. In the jungle of details one can dimly discern several versions of Dr. King that would justify the author's approach. There is King the martyr. At a low point during the Montgomery bus boycott, he sat alone in the kitchen of his home and confessed his fear to God. Then he heard the voice of Jesus speaking within him, promising "never to leave me, never to leave me alone." From that point on, Dr. King always believed that his fate was out of his hands, and that it would inevitably lead to death by violence.

There is King the victim of J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. Throughout the 12 years of Dr. King's apotheosis, Mr. Hoover remained obsessed with the leader's close relationship to Stanley D. Levison, in whose "inactive" membership in the American Communist Party the F.B.I. chief saw the potential for a major conspiracy. It was the Levison connection, along with taped evidence of King's active extramarital sexual activities, that the F.B.I. saw as a means to discredit the civil-rights leader. Far from explosive, however, most of this ma-



David J. Garrow

terial serves not to embarrass King, but rather to give us the details of his daily routine.

And there is King the all-too-vulnerable human being. Always exhausted, always harassed, he suffered bouts of tension and depression that he could relieve only with sex and alcohol. Toward the end of his life, his marriage to Coretta Scott King was all but over, Mr. Garrow reveals. Despite all the people in his life, he grew increasingly lonely. He longed for a confidant, and overindulged in food and drink to compensate. Yet despite his growing burdens, he never lost his humility or buoyant sense of humor. Hours before his assassination, he had a pillow fight with several of his co-workers.

These are glimpses of Martin Luther King Jr. that might indeed have constituted what the dust jacket of "Bearing the Cross," in a last-ditch effort to bring the book into some sort of focus, describes as a personal "portrait." But if these pages contain a portrait, it lies so widely fragmented throughout this tedious narrative that only the most selective reading can integrate it. What we really have here is a vast reserve of raw material for a portrait. I suppose we should be grateful to Mr. Garrow for the job that he has accomplished, which is to accumulate a storehouse of new information on Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil-rights movement from 1955 to 1968 and to put it into rudimentary order. But it remains for future historians and biographers to do the real work — to shape King's life and work into meaning and art.