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**Black Labor Mavericks Before the Civil Rights Era**

Review Author: David Hamilton Golland (Governors State University)

*Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power*

David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito

Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2009

xviii + 307 pp. \$35.00 (hardcover)

*New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South*

Claudrena N. Harold

Politics and Culture in the Twentieth-Century South

Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2016

Xi + 177 pp. \$54.95 (hardcover)

Theodore Roosevelt Howard—who legally took a second middle name, Mason, in honor of his benefactor and father figure, Dr. William Herbert Mason—was a generation older than Martin Luther King, Jr., and that is the main reason why few outside the movement have heard of him. Howard was an important civil rights leader in Mississippi from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, but by the time of the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the March on Washington of 1963, he had moved to Chicago to focus on his medical practice. But rather than someone who “missed the boat,” as it were, David T. and Linda Royster Beito present a thorough biography of a man who both never stopped being a civil rights leader and never stopped being a busy medical doctor. Howard never gave up one for the other, and managed to achieve distinction in his labors at both.

Born in 1908 in the “black patch” of western Kentucky—so named for its tobacco-producing soil—Howard endured early abandonment by his father. By the age of twelve he had become the protégé of a local white doctor, Will Mason, who encouraged and supported his dream of becoming a physician. Along with nurturing Howard's connection with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Mason sent Howard to college in Alabama (Black) and Nebraska (where he was the token non-white) and medical school in Los Angeles (barely integrated). After witnessing “the aftermath of two lynchings” (p. 18), Howard became what the authors call a “race man”—dedicated to the cause of civil rights. He wrote a column on civil rights for a local newspaper in southern California, became an accomplished public speaker invited to a multi-city tour, and supported political candidates whom he felt could further equal rights—including Upton Sinclair (despite *The Jungle* author's earlier dismissive references to Blacks as strikebreakers).

After a brief stint as titular head of a Black medical center under construction in St. Louis, Howard made his penultimate move—to the all-Black delta village of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, to direct the new Black hospital built by the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, an all-Black fraternal organization. But after falling out with the board, Howard founded a successful private practice. By the 1940s, this had given him the financial independence he deemed necessary for earnest participation in the struggle for civil rights. He engaged in public battles over voting rights with leading segregationists—including Senator Theodore Bilbo—and formed an organization, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership—to build support for his cause. By the early 1950s, attendance at RCNL events numbered in the thousands.

In 1955, Howard reached the apex of his career as a civil rights leader. Following the brutal murder of Emmett Till, Howard's home in Mound Bayou became something of a headquarters for The Movement, hosting Mamie Till Bradley and providing a safe haven for witnesses at the subsequent murder trial. During the trial, local blacks presented new evidence to Howard and other civil rights leaders there. And later, after the killers had been acquitted, Howard went on an NAACP-organized speaking tour to dramatize the need for voting rights in Mississippi.

Howard's outspoken nature and very public denunciation of the authorities in the Till case eventually led him to fear for his life. After two more high-profile lynchings, he sold his large estate and moved to Chicago, setting up a clinic that became known for safe illegal abortions. A Lincoln Republican, Howard lost a run for

Congress in 1958 against longtime black Chicago machine Congressman (and onetime guest at the Mound Bayou estate) William L. Dawson. He then focused on financing and building the Friendship Medical Center, an abortion-friendly hospital which was completed just as the Supreme Court legalized the procedure in *Roe v. Wade*. He went on safari in Africa, hunted in Alaska, and continued to support civil rights causes as a founding board member of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH.

The strengths of this book lie in its details: the turn-of-the-century black patch, segregated medicine, the Mississippi Delta, the world of illegal abortions, and the African-American argument for family planning (a timely antidote to the non-scholarly depictions of abortion as genocide) are all clearly and comprehensively discussed. Howard's on-again/off-again feud with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, his public battle with J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI, and the secret enmity of Thurgood Marshall receive excellent treatment. The authors pay particularly close attention to the events surrounding the Till case, incorporating the latest (2005) evidence in the killing. I would like to have seen more details on life for Black people in 1930s Los Angeles and 1960s Chicago, and the authors could have more deeply explored Howard's sometimes less-than-selfless motives, but this book is an important addition to the scholarship on civil rights.

Claudrena Harold's book, while not a biography, uses biographical techniques to flesh out a variety of individual stories which complicate our understanding of 1920s African-American labor history. *New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South* expands the geographical scope of the Harlem Renaissance to include the South, where writers and intellectuals steadfastly refused the lure of New York City; likewise she joins the growing trend of historians expanding the chronological scope of the Civil Rights era. While she makes an unimpressive case for first of these attempted expansions (the book relies primarily on northern-based thinkers like Marcus Garvey, and even its Southern writers published in northern-based periodicals like *The Messenger* and *The Negro World*), the second—the chronological expansion of the Civil Rights era—is an unmitigated success.

In an era of rampant lynching, the bravery of the Black women and men who fought for equal employment opportunity and voting rights during the eleven years preceding the Great Depression is remarkable; the breadth of the movement astounding. "Within a year of Wilson's declaration of war on Germany," she writes (p. 17), Black workers throughout the South demonstrated for equal hiring, promotions, and pay:

the list of black workers involved in labor disputes and work stoppages included sanitation workers and longshoremen in Savannah, Georgia; mill operatives and railroad helpers in Rocky Mount, North Carolina; oyster shuckers, domestics, and tobacco stemmers in Norfolk, Virginia; teamsters in New Orleans; steelworkers in Birmingham, Alabama; and laundresses in Mobile, Alabama, and St. Petersburg, Florida.

Activists pushed for the vote throughout the South immediately after the war, from Birmingham, Alabama, to Dublin, Georgia, to Greenwood, South Carolina, to Hampton, Virginia, appealing to state attorneys general and the federal government as well as studying for literacy tests (pp. 45-51). In an interesting twist, we learn that Southern white women trace their own voting rights to the agitation of Black women: after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the increase in Black women's registration applications so alarmed white men that they began urging their wives to register (pp. 49-50).

Important leaders make their appearances in this book, especially Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph, whose organizations (United Negro Improvement Association and Brotherhood of Sleeping-Car Porters, respectively) each rate a full chapter. But Harold uncovers more interesting stories when she looks into the Southern chapters of UNIA and BSCP and tells us about the local leadership. We have Walter Green, president of the Portsmouth, Virginia UNIA, who was also "one of the area's most respected trade unionists," worked tirelessly to improve Black participation and representation in the local AFL, and organized local donations for Garvey's Black Star Line (pp. 64-65). UNIA's New Orleans Division likewise included Black unionists among its leadership, including porter Sylvester Robertson and seamstress Mamie Reason (p. 69). When Randolph announced that the BSCP would be organizing in the South, that task fell to Savannah native William Des Verney, who had "worked as a Pullman Porter for thirty-seven years" (p. 90). Des Verney's

successful “Southern tour...included stops in Savannah, Atlanta, Charleston, Jacksonville, New Orleans, Richmond, and Montgomery. Bennie Smith, selling BSCP’s *The Messenger* in Jacksonville, was arrested on charges of disseminating “communist propaganda” and threatened with murder if he didn’t leave town (pp. 92-93).

To focus on the fact that the UNIA disintegrated after Garvey’s indictment for mail fraud and deportation, and that the BSCP’s activities in the South did not herald the rise of interracial, egalitarian Southern unionism, is to miss Harold’s point. As with T.R.M. Howard’s story, it was the impact on the next generation that mattered. Youths like Sylvia Woods, who followed her parents into the weekly meetings of the UNIA New Orleans Division, later became a CIO and Communist Party activist. The work of these mavericks who organized against white supremacy is an important early chapter in the story that would continue in the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s, the historic presidential election of 2008, and the ongoing struggle to end racial oppression in the United States today.

Two minor quibbles. Readers are hereby warned that the book’s overly-lengthy paragraphs will make it difficult to skim; Harold could have written better topic sentences and limited herself one thought per paragraph. Also, the book itself could have been a good deal longer by fleshing out more of the individual stories. I hope other authors will take the opportunity to research articles on some of the book’s more interesting characters.

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