

# THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE (NAACP): A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE, 1909-2005

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## The 1910s to the 1940s

The NAACP was founded in an era that has become known as 'the nadir' in American race relations. Reflecting this fact mainstream historians and other scholars of the period attached little importance to either the work of the Association or African American history in general. This was even the case when the subject matter of their research would appear to require it.

In his influential 1918 study American Negro Slavery Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, himself descended from a slave-owning family, thus examined the institution of slavery almost exclusively from the perspective of white slaveholders. In a wry review of the work Carter Woodson tellingly observed that 'in just the same way as a writer of the history of New England in describing the fisheries of that section would have little to say about the species figuring conspicuously in that industry so the author treated the Negro in his work'. (Quoted in Meier and Rudwick 1986: 4)

Before the 1950s African American history was seen as a matter of interest only to African Americans themselves or white scholars, like August Meier, with a particular preoccupation with the subject. In the absence of interest by mainstream historians early publications on the NAACP were dominated by memoirs of leading members of the Association, most notably:

Johnson, James Weldon 1933. Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson, New York: Viking Penguin

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1920. Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1940. Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept, New York: Harcourt, Brace

Ovington, Mary White 1947. The Walls Came Tumbling Down, New York: Harcourt, Brace

White, Walter 1949. A Man Called White, New York: Viking

Collectively these works were invaluable in providing insider insights and in highlighting the Association's achievements and the adverse conditions in which it was forced to operate. At the same time they had limitations. 'Historians mistrust biography', as the British scholar Peter Ling has observed, and that is not just because 'skepticism is their preferred stance on everything'. Specifically, a biography 'tends to inflate the role of its subject and, by placing one person consistently in the foreground, it can overlook the contribution of less celebrated figures. It can also distort historical understanding by giving too little weight to structural forces that require less personal, even quantitative, analysis.' (Ling 2002: 1)

The problems of autobiographies are even greater. Authors, either consciously or unconsciously, are likely to present their own role in events in a positive light. They may use their reminiscences to vilify perceived enemies, or omit information that might embarrass friends or colleagues.

Such tendencies can be highlighted by a variety of examples. For the best of motives the works by Johnson, Du Bois, Ovington and White played down internal divisions within the organization for fear of damaging the work of the Association. In particular, they contain little or no references to the conflict between White and Du

Bois in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Conversely, in his later autobiography Standing Fast Roy Wilkins acknowledged the rift between White and Du Bois in the early 1930s but played down his own role in events. (Wilkins and Mathews 1994: 116-7)

In a broader context the autobiographies by early NAACP leaders focused attention on national events and the work of the National Office in New York rather than the activities of the Association at state level.

### **The 1950s to the 1970s**

These years were marked by political and social upheaval, as reflected in the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, urban race riots, antiwar protests and campus demonstrations. In short, it was a time when the United States was a country at unease with itself.

The changing times saw unprecedented interest in African American history by scholars. Many of these, such as Leon Litwack and Howard Zinn were at the forefront of their subject, not only in their research but also in actively taking part in civil rights protests. In the words of August Meier, who took part in protests to desegregate lunch counters in Baltimore and attended Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) meetings, they had a 'participant-observer' relationship with the Movement. (Meier 1992: 24)

Within the historical profession the 1960s and 1970s were also notable for seeing the rise of the 'New Social History' – studying the past not from the perspective of monarchs or presidents but from the viewpoint of hitherto neglected groups. In short, looking at history 'from the bottom up'. For example:

Hill, Christopher 1972. The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Genovese, Eugene 1974. Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made, New York: Vintage Books

Genovese's study was just one of a number of new works that rejected the earlier philosophy of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and examined slavery from the perspective of slaves themselves rather than slave owners.

Paradoxically, researchers on the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement though radical in their choice of subject were conservative in their methodology, adopting a leader-centred rather than a 'bottom up' approach. This was reflected in a focus on the policies of presidential administrations and the actions of nationally known civil rights leaders and the organizations they headed. In particular a 'King- centric' approach and a preoccupation with the 'Montgomery to Memphis' timeline became the norm.

This paradox can be explained by a number of factors. The political climate of the day encouraged a 'Great Man' view of history. The 1950s and 1960s were notable for the emergence of a number of youthful charismatic individuals who featured prominently on the still comparatively new medium of television – John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. The subsequent tragic martyrdom of all these individuals further reinforced their iconic status.

Furthermore, practitioners of the 'New Social History' were motivated not just by radical idealism but also by the need for originality – the search to find new perspectives on well-worn historiographical debates. Civil rights scholars were not in this position. The very nature of their subject meant that they were the pioneers in the field. The upside of this was that they were not under the same pressure to come up with original ideas. The downside was that they did not have a familiar and well-used body of primary source materials to utilize in their research. They had to discover them for themselves. Faced with this challenge, as historian Charles Eagles has observed, it

was natural for scholars to turn to the kinds of primary sources with which they were most familiar – political archives, the writings of leading individuals and the records of national organizations. (Eagles 2000: 822)

In respect to the NAACP the developments of the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a proliferation of new studies, but also the continuation of a biography-centred approach, borne out by the publication of a number of important works:

Broderick, Francis 1959. W. E. B. Du Bois, Negro Leader in Time of Crisis, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Rudwick, Elliott 1960. W. E. B. Du Bois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1968. The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century, New York: International Publishers

Hixson, Walter B. 1972. Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition, New York: Oxford University Press

Ross, B. Joyce 1972. J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939, New York: Atheneum

Levy, Eugene 1973. James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

New studies also appeared on the national organization and initiatives of the NAACP:

Vose, Clement E. 1967. Caucasians Only: the Supreme Court, the NAACP and the Restrictive Covenant Cases, Berkeley: University of California Press

Kellogg, Charles Flint 1967 NAACP: A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Volume I, 1909-1920, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

Rudwick, Elliott and Meier, August 'The Rise of the Black Secretariat in the NAACP, 1909-35' and Meier, August and Rudwick, Elliott 'Attorneys Black and White: A Case Study of Race Relations Within the NAACP', both in Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience, by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 97-127, 128-73

Black Power radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s emphasized the need for African American to assume leadership responsibilities in their own civil rights organizations. This concern was reflected in the work of Kellogg, Meier and Rudwick who focused attention on the development of the NAACP from being a white-run to a black-run organization in the early 1920s. This line of enquiry was also prompted by claims made by Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) leaders in the 1920s that whites dominated the NAACP.

Though significant, it is possible that the emphasis on this development led to a skewed interpretation of the history of the Association and the neglect of other issues. The transition from white to black leadership in the NAACP was a process, not an event. The earlier white leadership was not expelled overnight but continued to exercise significant influence in the Association throughout the 1920s through to the early 1930s. Moreover, there were no major divisions between white and black members on the NAACP Board of Directors during the 1920s or between white Board members and salaried African American officeholders in the National NAACP Secretariat. (Cryer, 1977: 252, Schneider, 2002: 48 ).

Equally, emphasis on race ignored the importance of other issues, such as class. Both blacks and whites in the NAACP National Office came from educated, middle-

class backgrounds. In part this helps to explain the preference of the national leadership for courtroom actions rather than grassroots protests and the problems of the NAACP in developing an economic agenda during the early years of the Great Depression.

Similarly, a focus on the national Board of Directors and New York Secretariat diverted attention away from the need to analyze the relationship between the National Office and its local branches and the ongoing problem of how to give grassroots members a greater voice in the running of the Association.

### **The 1980s to the Present**

There has been a continuing publication of important biographies and autobiographies in recent years:

Wilkins, Roy and Mathews, Tom 1982. Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins, New York: Viking

McNeil, Genna Rae 1983. Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Avery, Sheldon 1988. Up From Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900-1954, Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press

Marable, Manning 1986. W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat, Boston: Twayne

Lewis, David Levering 1993. W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919, New York: Henry Holt

Lewis, David Levering 2000. W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963, New York: Henry Holt

Wedin, Carolyn 1998. Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the Founding of the NAACP, New York: John Wiley and Sons

Janken, Kenneth Robert 2003 White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP, New York: The New Press

The most important development since the 1980s however, has been the microfilm publication of The NAACP Papers (1982-.University Publications of America) by an eminent editorial team of historians led by the late August Meier. An edited selection of the full collection of NAACP papers housed in the Library of Congress, this initiative has opened up to scholars an unprecedented volume of source materials on the Association. In fact the principal dilemma facing researchers is that the papers are so extensive. This has encouraged a proliferation of works on specific aspects of the Association's history:

Zangrando, Robert L. 1980. The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950, Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Tushnet, Mark 1987. The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

Cortner, Robert 1988. A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press

Goings, Kenneth W. 1990. The NAACP Comes of Age: The Defeat of John J. Parker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Greenberg, Jack 1994 Crusaders in the Courts: How a Dedicated Band of Lawyers Fought for the Civil Rights Revolution, New York: Basic Books

Stockley, Grif 2001. Blood In Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press

Zelden, Charles 2004 The Battle for the Black Ballot: Smith v. Allwright and the Defeat of the Texas All-White Primary, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas

Berg, Manfred 2005. The Ticket to Freedom': The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration, Gainesville: University Press of Florida

General developments in the writing of civil rights history since the 1980s have seen more emphasis on the local organization of civil rights protests, recognition of the role of women activists, and better appreciation of the importance of class. Publications on the NAACP have reflected these broader trends:

Bates, Beth Tompkins 1997. 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', American Historical Review, 102, 340-77

Reed, Christopher Robert 1997. The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Pitre, Merline 1999. In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957, College Station: Texas A & M University Press

Green, Ben 1999. Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr, New York: The Free Press

Henry, Aaron. 2000 The Fire Ever Burning, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi

Ransby, Barbara 2003. Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

### **2005 and Beyond**

Despite the growing number of scholarly publications on the NAACP many aspects of the Association's history still require further exploration. Notwithstanding the publication of Gilbert Jonas's Freedom's Sword there continues to be no authoritative scholarly history of the NAACP since 1909. This reflects the fact that it is perhaps impossible to write a full history of the NAACP in just one volume.

Similarly, despite the work of Merline Pitre, Caroline Wedin, Barbara Ransby and others there is, as August Meier and John H. Bracey have pointed out, still a need for more work on women activists in the Association.(Meier and Bracey 1993: 19) There is thus still no full-length biography of Daisy Lampkin.

The Second World War may no longer be what historian Richard Dalfiume once called the 'Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution' (Dalfiume 1968) but they arguably continue to be the forgotten years of the NAACP. This is despite the fact that the war saw a ten-fold rise in NAACP membership, from 50,000 in 1940 to 500,000 by the end of 1945, as well as a radical internationalization of thinking on racial issues, particularly by Executive Secretary Walter White.

Perhaps most important of all much of the best work on the NAACP at local level remains scattered in journal articles, essay collections or in wider studies. (Autry 1997, Dittmer 1994, Fairclough 1997, Gavins 1991, Gillette 1978, Tuck, 2001a, Tuck 2001b) There is a need for full-length monographs on the organization at state level and also for a collection of writings on the work of the NAACP in different cities and regions, and the complex relationships between grassroots branches and the National Office in New York.

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