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INVITED LETTER

Becoming a Historian

Dr. Robert G. Corley

RELECTING BACK ON HOW I became a historian, I have realized that growing up in Birmingham and reaching maturity in the 1960s -- a tumultuous and fascinating period of change -- I was surrounded by History. At times, it felt like History was literally pulling me into its widening vortex. Events with long lasting historical ramifications were unavoidable and met me at every turn: in school, in church, and even at home.

I was fifteen in the spring of 1963. Birmingham voters had recently decided that the city would have a new form of government, changing from a three-member city commission to a mayor and nine-member council. The primary purpose of this change, which had been led by nominally conservative (and suburban) business leaders in alliance with young progressive professionals, was to remove from office the notorious and increasing controversial Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor.

After more than 20 years in the office, Connor did not go quietly, and in March he had run second in the race to become the Mayor in the new government. Then in the runoff on April 2, Connor and former Lieutenant Governor Albert Boutwell vied for the top office. Boutwell won, apparently ending Connor's lengthy, and oppressive, reign. However, Connor and his fellow commissioners refused to leave office, claiming their terms did not legally end until 1965. The matter remained in dispute until May 26, when the Alabama Supreme Court affirmed the new government.

In the meantime, the City had been reeling from a wave of demonstrations, first at lunch counters and then in the streets, mounted by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These long planned demonstrations -- which had been delayed until after the election so as to avoid giving Connor a critical issue -- began on April 3, the day following the election. The story of these demonstrations and their eventual outcome on May 10 has been told in great detail and even greater eloquence by numerous historians (in addition to me), including the incomparable Taylor Branch, as well as Birmingham natives: Glenn Eskew (*But for Birmingham*), Andrew Manis (*A Fire You Can't Put Out*), and Diane McWhorter (the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Carry Me Home*).

The main thing one should know is that during the entire period in which the demonstrations were occurring, the City had two governments -- the new Mayor and Council, and the former Commission who refused to leave office and challenged the election in court. That is why Bull Connor was still in charge of the police during the demonstrations. Therefore, it was under his orders that the powerful fire hoses and terrifying police dogs were deployed against school children who joined the demonstrations in early May. And this police violence was actually a key to King's success.

As we all know now, these demonstrations carried significant weight in the history of 20th century America. The Birmingham demonstrations were not spontaneous events, but rather a carefully planned campaign designed to test

whether King and the SCLC could achieve success in the “most segregated city in America.” They followed years of combat between Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and Connor, during which the scrupulously nonviolent Shuttlesworth’s life had been repeatedly at risk; he had nearly been killed at least three times. King’s victory here, limited though it was in actual achievements, nevertheless riveted the attention of the national media, especially television news, and ultimately the direct involvement of President John F. Kennedy.

Overwhelmingly, historians and movement leaders all agree that Birmingham represented what McWhorter has termed “the climactic battle of the civil rights revolution.” In June President Kennedy finally addressed the issue of civil rights on national television. In what may have been his most passionate and personal speech, he announced that “because of events in Birmingham and elsewhere” he had decided to introduce comprehensive civil rights legislation for the first time since the end of Reconstruction. Kennedy later told Shuttlesworth and King when they met with him in Washington to discuss the legislation, “But for Birmingham, we would not be here today.”

As a white Birmingham teenager observing these events at a safe distance, and mostly through the news accounts on national networks (the local newspapers buried the stories deep inside), I was confused and concerned. I was confused because I did not have information to help me understand what was happening. I did not even know, for example, that thousands of the demonstrators who were being arrested were my age or younger. I was concerned because even from the relative isolation of my white middle class neighborhood, the demonstrations were perceived as dangerous and unprovoked, an insult to the citizens of Birmingham who had worked to remove Connor from office, just as my own parents had done, even though his residence -- with a cast-iron bull in the front yard -- was located just a few blocks away.

I was confused when I sought the opinion of my maid, Ophelia, whom I had known for two-thirds of my life and who dutifully came to wash our clothes and clean our house twice each week. Ophelia assured me that she did not understand why all of these young people were stirring up such trouble, that she had no problems with the way things were. I was also confused when I arrived at my church one Sunday in April and found a large number of ushers guarding the doors. I was told demonstrators were coming and “we” were not going to allow them “to disrupt our worship of God.”

I was also confused because just a few weeks before the demonstrations began I had been in the standing-room-only audience at Woodlawn High School for the Warblers Club’s *Farewell Minstrel Show*. After a run of shows stretching back more than thirty years, the traditional black-face minstrel that the *Birmingham News* described as offering the “old familiar songs, the bright young talent, the roars of laughter and the burst of applause...” was now coming to an end. Sitting and cheering in the audience for that last performance, I yearned to be on the stage. I wanted more than anything to be a Warbler, not because I wanted to black my face and speak in a crude Negro dialect, but because they seemed to be enjoying themselves so much. And the music was simply glorious. I was fifteen and not too worldly, and nothing about the *Farewell Minstrel* offended me then.

Only much later, as a historian, did I learn about the demeaning past of minstrel shows and about the white assimilation of those moving and beautiful songs the Warblers sang -- mostly spirituals whose music and lyrics were all composed by African Americans to reflect their deep pain as slaves, but also their great hope for eventual liberation. It would only be through my study of History that I would learn about the culture and spirit of this long-suffering community of people who were for me -- and for nearly all whites in 1963 -- quite invisible. Indeed, just in the last few years have I recognized the profound irony that this last, farewell minstrel show was being performed in my all-white, legally

segregated school at the same moment that Shuttlesworth and King were plotting to change Birmingham and the nation much more profoundly than anyone ever imagined. When the demonstrations began on April 3, it had barely been two weeks since the Warblers wiped the shoe black off their faces for the last time.

Since 1963, I have literally spent a lifetime studying and thinking about these events and their meaning, not just for me personally, but also for our city and our nation. For me and for many, these events echo through time, and this echo resounds into the present, shaping and reshaping our response to them as we engage each other through our deeper understanding of their history. It is a story that has not yet ended. It is the continuing story of this community and of this nation. It is not finished, and may never be.

Eventually I also came to understand that the reason I wrote my dissertation about race relations in Birmingham, and why I continue to study about race and teach civil rights history, is because I am still trying to know myself more clearly by understanding what really happened in the past. I want to understand the increasingly consequential changes that this history wrought in our nation, changes that not only destroyed an oppressive system of racial apartheid, but also eventually led to the election of the first African American President.

Finally, I have come to see more clearly that I am not alone. All of us are pulled into the vortex of History; whether it is through the Cold War; or September 11 and the “war on terror;” or the “Great Recession” of 2009; or the immigrants living among us. History is inescapable. Knowing History -- our own and that of our times -- is essential if we are to know who we truly are, and what we need to do with our lives to give them meaning and purpose.

I was fortunate to grow up in a place and during a time when those lessons were easier to learn. But their value is never confined just to the past. As William Faulkner reminds us, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.”