Feature Essay

Wilbert Jenkins

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss3/9
Feature Essay

Jenkins, Wilbert

Summer 2004


A scholar's service

Perspectives on a life's work

I am thrilled to review Beverly Jarrett's work Tributes to John Hope Franklin: Scholar, Mentor, Father, Friend. A work of this kind is long overdue. We owe its appearance to Beverly Jarrett who conceived of the idea and shepherded it to fruition. Dr. Franklin is one of the nation's premier scholars as well as a renowned teacher, educator, and social activist. He is the author of numerous books and articles pertaining to American history, United States Southern History, and African-American history. As a black pioneer in the academy, Dr. Franklin overcame tremendous obstacles on his way to success. He would become the first African-American to chair academic departments in historically white institutions. He chaired the history department at Brooklyn College in 1956 and the University of Chicago in 1967. To fully understand this feat, one needs only to observe the small number of African-Americans who have accomplished this over the last thirty-seven years. Moreover, Dr. Franklin holds the distinction of being the first individual of African descent to be elected as president of the Southern Historical Association (1969-1970), the Organization of American Historians (1974-1975), and the American Historical Association (1978-1979). Finally, President Bill Clinton paid him the ultimate compliment by tapping him as the Chairman of the President's Initiative on Race in the mid-1990's.

The main themes that emerge from the authors of this edited work suggest that Dr. Franklin was much more than a scholar. He was also a mentor, friend, father, public policy maker, humanitarian, and social activist. These themes thus manifest themselves among all of the wonderful pieces written by an array of
personalities including individuals such as Genna R McNeil, Darlene Clark-Hine, John W. Franklin, Loren Schweninger, Alfred A. Moss, Jr., Mary Frances Berry, David Levering Lewis, George M. Fredrickson, Robert L. Harris, Jr., Walter B. Hill, Jr., and Daryl Michl Scott.

Although many of the contributors praise Franklin for his outstanding contribution to the academy, they single out his 1949 work, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, as being his greatest contribution to scholarship. For example, on page two Mary Frances Berry writes, I admire all of his many books and articles, but *From Slavery to Freedom* undoubtedly has had a major impact on the teachings of African-American history. She continues, This book has established itself as the preeminent synthesis of the history of African-Americans. Equally significant, it has become a model for how a member of an immigrant group of color can write about the group's experience in ways acceptable to the group and consistent with the highest standards of historians at large. George M. Fredrickson similarly points this out and notes that *From Slavery to Freedom* is now in its eighth edition and has been translated into six foreign languages. He also comments most empathetically that there is no single piece of scholarship on the history of African-Americans that has ever seriously challenged the classic work.

In addition to Berry and Fredrickson, Walter Hill has also been profoundly influenced by Franklin's monumental work. While a young undergraduate student at the College of Wooster, Hill was first introduced to *From Slavery to Freedom* and he could not put the book down. After reading it, he believed that he had learned everything he needed to know about black people and history. Years later, when Hill became a history professor, the book became his bible. He wanted his students to be thoroughly familiar with black culture. On page thirty-five, he writes even with the specialization and compartmentalization of American history, the book remains a fountain of knowledge for all students to draw from. Finally, Eric Foner, states on page seventy-nine *From Slavery to Freedom* has been by-far the most influential, not least in establishment' colleges and universities to take African-American history seriously as an intellectual endeavor. I concur with these assessments of *From Slavery to Freedom*. I regard it as having had the biggest impact on the discipline of African-American history. Indeed, it is the single most important book in the field. Ultimately, the publication of this book alone would make Dr. Franklin a giant in the academy.
While some scholars produce several articles and books, they unfortunately sometimes fail to provide mentoring to their students. Dr. Franklin does not fall in this category, for he has taken time off from his busy schedule to mentor numerous students. This is also a recurring theme throughout Tributes to John Hope Franklin. Genna R McNeil writes poignantly about Dr. Franklin as her mentor not only while she was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, but also long after she had received her Ph.D. He devoted a great deal of time, effort, and energy to her and other graduate students and demanded that his students be focused and committed to research, writing, and teaching. Loren Schweninger writes about an experience that took place in Durham, North Carolina in the late 1990's just prior to the publication of Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation a work which was co-authored by the Franklin and himself. A hostess at a party asked Dr. Franklin if he had, on an earlier occasion, co-written anything with Schweninger. In a very light-hearted way Franklin responded, Only his dissertation. Schweninger is certainly on the mark when he writes on page sixty-six, Dr. Franklin could have written many additional books and articles had he not been so determined that his thirty-four graduate students would produce clearly written, solidly researched dissertations. Thus it is noticeable that in spite of Franklin's incredible productivity as a scholar, spanning several decades, people are even more important to him than mere scholarship. He is a very caring, giving, and unselfish human being. One of the most interesting tributes however, offers a glimpse into the positive effect that Franklin has had and continues to have on his own family, written by his son John W. Franklin. Through books in the family library, personal conversations with his dad, and travels both alone and with his parents, John learned about the United States, the African-American experience, European and Asian art, and African history and culture. He discovered that his superstar scholar father was a real person, cooking dinner and breakfast for the many visitors from across the country and world, and for his own family as well. Owing to his mentoring instincts, Franklin would agree, years later, to advise his son as he served as the chair of the Maryland Commission on African-American History and Culture. Indeed, Dr. Franklin is and has been a superb mentor to his students, colleagues, friends, and family.

A final theme that runs throughout Tributes to John Hope Franklin is that of viewing John Hope Franklin as an important political and social activist. Robert L. Harris, Jr., chronicles Franklin's long commitment to political and social equality. He specifically mentions Franklin's participation in the American
Council on Human Rights during the late 1940's and early 1950's, and his preparations of documents on the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment for the Brown v. the Board of Education Supreme Court case. His work as the chairman of President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race is also cited. In support of Harris, I would additionally add that Franklin also has recently joined a suit by victims of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. The lawsuit claims that both the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma were culpable in the riots. At the time of the riot, Dr. Franklin was a youth of six years and was growing up in Tulsa. Thus the fact that Franklin has joined the lawsuit is further confirmation of his commitment to racial justice. Ultimately, Darlene Clark Hine captures the essence of Franklin the Activist when she writes on page sixty-three, He embodies the scholar as social activist and inspired generations of us to never accept less than the full dignity guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and captured so well in the Declaration of Independence.

Beverly Jarrett's Tributes to John Hope Franklin is clearly overdue. I cannot think of a person more deserving of such wonderful attention that Dr. John Hope Franklin. There are, however, a few minor flaws. Perhaps the editor should have included essays from an undergraduate college student, a high-school student, a high-school teacher, and a layperson to assess the impact that Dr. Franklin has had on their lives more indirectly. This would have given the work even more balance. Yet despite these few gripes, Tributes to John Hope Franklin is an outstanding piece of scholarship. It is nicely organized and each essay is written in a clear and smooth fashion. The essays also compliment each other. In addition, the comprehensive bibliography of Franklin's published work, written by Susan King, adds to the overall quality of the work. It allows readers to grasp to some extent the great productivity of Dr. Franklin, the scholar. Scholars of the American South, United States history, African-American history, Black Studies, and general laypersons will appreciate it. It should grace the shelves of all public and private libraries. Tributes to John Hope Franklin is simply that good.

Dr. Wilbert Jenkins teaches at Temple University.