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*Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* by David R. Colburn

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In Stephen B. Oates’s biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Let the Trumpet Sound (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.) Official remarked, “St. Augustine. . .was the toughest nut I have ever seen in all my days of working in cities in direct-action campaigns.” King himself called the town the “most lawless” in which he had ever campaigned for civil rights (Oates, 301). How “America’s oldest city” won this distinction is the subject of David R. Colburn’s clearly written, well organized, and illuminating book. It was not the purpose of Colburn, a Professor of History at the University of Florida, to apportion degrees of shame to the individuals and organizations who participated in the evolution of racism in one of America’s most familiar tourist towns, nor to award badges of merit to those who fought the institutionalized and yet personally-maintained bigotry that so infested St. Augustine, yet he has performed this service while fulfilling his stated task of writing a local history of the civil rights movement. The book summarizes background information from 1877 to 1963, but its main focus is the events occurring from 1963 to the late 1960’s. In the conclusion and in less detail, he tracks the aftermath of the momentous confrontations of this era up to 1980.

Colburn’s account benefits not only from his ability to channel a multitude of print and archival records concerning St. Augustine (and reaching at times into Lyndon Johnson’s office and J. Edgar Hoover’s) into a coherent and compact narrative, but also from his long and close familiarity with the social and political terrain he investigates. Some of his oral histories were taped over a decade ago, and he operates from a Florida native’s astute awareness of the day-to-day life in this strange state where the further north you go the more southern you get. He makes use of interviews with both integrationist and segregationist leaders, and attempts briefly to analyze the not always simple motives of each. It would have strengthened an already good book had he been able to collect first-hand evidence from rank-and-file segregationists, though admittedly, it is not easy—particularly after the passage of time—to interview members of a mob.

Particularly in 1963 and 1964, St. Augustine was a focal point of civil rights activism. At first, local blacks and, then, “outside agitators” sought just and fair treatment in a town, whose leaders and major institutions fought sometimes with apathy and sometimes with rifles and clubs to deny black people their proper treatment as Americans and human beings. Why the fuss at St. Augustine when the conditions being attacked were constant throughout most of the South and much of the North? The site was handy as a symbol, since it was presumably America’s first and therefore oldest racist city. St. Augustine was also peculiarly vulnerable since it was relatively small though well-known, relied heavily on an easily disruptable tourist trade, and sought federal aid for its quadricentennial celebration.
St. Augustine traveled the civil rights path kicking and screaming and with its (white) heels dug in. Why was the town’s response worse than that of some other cities of the South? Colburn describes a maddening, widening, infernal circle of people and agencies who fought or impeded civil justice in St. Augustine: the local mayor and white politicians; the local police; the local white clergy; local business leaders (the chapter on them is skimpy but damning); local judges; Florida’s governors during the period; the F.B.I. (who bugged King’s rooms and supplied local agitators with S.C.L.C. strategy). Colburn clearly shows the most culpable group to have been St. Augustine’s white leadership, the “best people,” whose shameful insensitivity, rancor, and intransigence permitted violent whites from inside and outside the community to control white responses for too long.

Colburn presents the S.C.L.C. as a pragmatic, opportunistic, and ultimately morally right, if not always morally commendable, organization whose necessary intrusion into St. Augustine escalated the conflict. Inevitably, perhaps, they had to leave—abandon is perhaps too strong a term—local black activists to fight a war of attrition once the symbolic value of St. Augustine in achieving nationwide objectives had been exhausted. Martin Luther King, Jr. is viewed essentially as is the S.C.L.C.: brave and idealistic, but anxious to extricate himself once trench warfare remained to be fought. Judge Bryan J. Simpson, the federal judge for the Middle District of Florida emerges as the book’s surprising hero. He consistently forced segregationists to obey the laws that were finally being imposed to curb racial bigotry and brutality.

The reform achieved in St. Augustine—which Colburn insists is only partial and still resisted—was made possible by tenacious local activists aided at critical junctures by organized, outside forces and finally supported by a lone, but strong judge who insisted that the law of the land be obeyed. This is a precarious model for change. Martin Luther King, Jr. said of St. Augustine that “some communities, like this one, had to bear the cross” (210). He did not say for how long. Professor Colburn’s book suggests that it is still true that those who deny the carriers of the cross in our time, are ordinary people.

Jack B. Moore


Key West today subsists mainly on winter tourists and the durable renown of Ernest Hemingway. There are few visible traces of its once mighty cigar industry, or of the passionate endeavors of thousands of cigarmaker/revolutionists living there during the war for Cuban independence. Glenn Westfall’s book, which is aimed at a popular audience, helps recover this important part of Key West’s history and thus, will make tourists more aware of a past they might have overlooked. Published by the local historic preservation board, it represents a most welcome addition to the T-shirts and plastic flamingos marketed to visitors in this unique Florida city.

The text and photos focus on the period between 1868 (the beginning of the Ten Years War in Cuba) and the 1930s when Key West’s cigar industry finally collapsed. The book begins with two short chapters describing the early development of Cuba’s cigar industry and the political