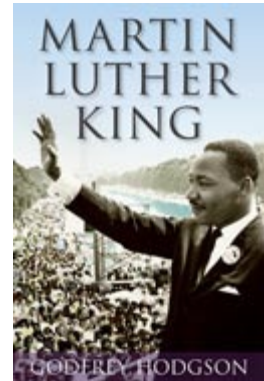


Martin Luther King
Godfrey Hodgson
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=2779407>
The University of Michigan Press, 2010

Q&A with Godfrey Hodgson, author of *Martin Luther King*

Martin Luther King is as relevant today as he was when he led civil rights campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. He was the major agent and prophet of political change in this country, and the election of President Barack Obama is his direct legacy.

Now from Britain's most experienced political observer of the United States comes a new, accessible biography of King and his works. The story is dramatic, and Godfrey Hodgson presents it with verve, clarity, and acute insight, relying on his own journalistic coverage of the many events described as well as the work of other biographers and King researchers. *Martin Luther King* traces the iconic civil rights leader's career from his birth in Atlanta in 1929, through the campaigns that made possible the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, to his assassination in Memphis in 1968. Hodgson sheds light on every aspect of an extraordinary life: the Black Baptist culture in which King grew up, his theology and political philosophy, his physical and moral courage, his insistence on the injustice of inequality, his campaigning energy, his repeated sexual infidelities.



Godfrey Hodgson has worked in Britain and America as a newspaper and magazine journalist; as a television reporter, documentary maker, and anchor; as a university teacher and lecturer; and as the author of a dozen well-received books about U.S. politics and recent history, including *America in Our Time*, a history of the United States in the 1960s; *More Equal than Others*, on politics and society in twentieth-century America; and most recently, a biography of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Gentleman from New York*. Hodgson met Martin Luther King Jr. on a number of occasions between 1956 and 1967. He recently retired as director of the Reuters Foundation Programme at Oxford University and is a visiting journalism professor at City University in London.

The University of Michigan Press: You're a journalist in Britain, but your best-known works are about modern American history. How did this become your most visible area of study?

Godfrey Hodgson: After I graduated from Oxford, I won a scholarship to do a Master's in history at Penn. Just before the Easter break in 1956, a friend came up to me on campus and said he had been invited to stay in Montgomery by an Oxford friend, John Anderson, an African American Fulbright scholar. My friend asked me if I would share the driving, and I agreed. The first Sunday in Montgomery, we went to church with John, and Dr. King was the preacher. We met and talked. King had just come to national attention because of the bus boycott and because his house had just been firebombed.

From 1956 to 1959 I worked as a junior reporter for *The Times* in London. On the first day of 1960 I went to work for *The Observer*, and in 1962 my editor, David Astor, sent me to Washington as his

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correspondent there, and I stayed there until 1965, when I went into TV. In 1968, by this time working for the London *Sunday Times*, I led a team of reporters to cover the 1968 presidential election. We wrote a book, *An American Melodrama*, which was a best seller, and I was asked to write my own book. It was published in 1976 as *In Our Time*. Ever since, I have been a specialist in American politics and history, first as a journalist, and more recently at Oxford. I have written more than a dozen books on those subjects for U.S. publishers.

UMP: Did Martin Luther King, Jr. mold the times he lived in, or was he in fact a product of those times?

GH: Like most great men, Dr. King both was shaped by his time, and shaped it. He was “a prince of the captivity”, the son of a powerful and influential Atlanta pastor, but he was limited by the constraints that restricted opportunities for all African Americans in his generation. He was shaped by his father’s ambitions for him, by the traditions of the black Baptist churches, and by his theological education, first at theological seminary, then at Boston University. These gave him his political commitment to equality, his liberal Protestant theology, and his rich linguistic culture, formed by the rhetoric of Jefferson and Lincoln, the preaching traditions of his church, and the language of the Bible. He was also the product of the civil rights movement itself.

Equally, he greatly influenced the development of the civil rights movement. The Montgomery bus boycott brought it to national attention. By founding the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) he brought isolated leaders together into a national movement. His “I Have a Dream” speech made him the most powerful African American leader. It was his ultimately successful campaigns in Birmingham later in 1963 and in Selma in 1965 that compelled first President Kennedy and then President Johnson to come off the fence. Kennedy committed himself (not before time!) to a civil rights bill, and Johnson passed it.

Finally, Dr. King’s death established him as a martyred leader whose prestige and reputation could not be denied. However, his impact was ambiguous in this sense: he may have committed the Democratic Party to civil right and racial equality, but he also caused large numbers of southern Democrats to defect to the Republicans. This tilted the Republican Party towards conservative principles, and (because of the voting rights act of 1965) left the Democrats a “liberal” part, no longer the Roosevelt coalition of conservative southerners and northern labor and intellectuals.

UMP: Do you believe Dr. King would have similar impact today? Why or why not?

GH: Because he was a man of great force of personality, Dr. King would have had an impact whenever and wherever he lived. But his influence today would have had to be exercised in a very different way, in part because of his very success. He would have to be either a politician, or a media figure, or a churchman of a very different kind to have comparable impact in the America of today.

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UMP: What would you consider the turning point, or most important moment, of Dr. King's career, and why?

GH: I would have to say that to the extent that his career was successful, the critical moment was the speech at the March on Washington.

UMP: What do you consider his lasting historical legacy to be for the United States and the world as a whole?

GH: He has had many specific legacies. They are summed up in the fact that, since his life, work and death, it is no longer intellectually or politically respectable to defend racial segregation or racial injustice.

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