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An Appreciation

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Mirror to America, the title John Hope Franklin gave his autobiography, implied that one might recognize important themes of the nation's life-story in his own. Be that as it may, it is indisputable that in his life one can find the main themes and plot lines of the professional study of African American history, both its origins and its maturation, in the twentieth century.

Born two years before America's fateful entry into the First World War and coming of age during the Great Depression, Franklin emerged as a professional historian during a propitious, if brief, opening in America's racial regime. He was part of the best-educated generation of African Americans until that time—a few of them, like him, at the nation's most prestigious universities. Arguably, this was also the largest, most politically active cohort of African American intellectuals before the 1960s and 1970s. Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, E. Franklin Frazier, Abram Harris, Ralph Bunche, Sterling Brown, and others followed in the tradition pioneered by W. E. B. Du Bois; they saw intellectual work as a tool for race advancement. It is significant, then, that even though he matured in a McCarthy-scarred era of frightened academics, Franklin never renounced the dangerously dual commitment to intellectual rigor and the pursuit of racial justice that these "race-men" modeled.

Like them, Franklin believed that the "substance and direction" imparted by historical knowledge was a source of power and its transfer an obligation the older owed the younger generation; its legacy a precious tie binding the one to the other. That legacy was not meant to be preserved in museum wax, however, but to serve as a springboard for fresh investigations and challenges to the received wisdom. "Every generation has the opportunity to write its own history," he lectured an audience of young historians gathered at Purdue University in 1983, "and indeed is obliged to do so. Only in that way can it provide its contemporaries with the materials vital to understanding the present and to planning strategies for coping with the future" (Franklin 1986, p. 13).

The irony of that moment is that by that point in his long career, Franklin had come to be regarded by many in that audience as the embodiment of the profession's conservative Establishment. Then the John Manly Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago—itself something of a right-wing preserve at the time—and just recently the presiding officer of the American Historical Association,

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Franklin seemed to some to be allied with the forces the younger generation saw themselves arrayed against. It didn't help matters that he, like many others of a generation politically committed to the racial integration of American life and polity, had been skeptical of the Black Power-Black Studies movements that had drawn many of the younger historians into the profession and shaped *their* intellectual agendas. The irony, of course, was that Franklin's own career exemplified a successful melding of the social activism and professional rigor to which many in this youthful audience also aspired. From the height of the Civil Rights Movement through the reaction against it, he had not only kept faith in the power of historical truth to shape a nation's destiny but nurtured that same faith among the generations of younger historians who came after him. People who had never taken a class from him at Brooklyn or Chicago or Duke knew him as a gracious and generous mentor.

Contributing to the mutual misperception, no doubt, was the insidious tendency to cast the political commitments that informed the 1960s generation's sense of purpose as antithetical to the high standards of scholarship Franklin espoused. But as Franklin and his mentors knew very well, "the political," in its broadest sense, embraced all aspects of the power relations that oppress some and privilege others, that impoverish some and enrich others. As such, it lies at the heart of the issues and lived experiences historians seek to understand. It was not, then, a matter of reading history through a presentist lens but of mining the past for clues to the present. The utility of our history would be determined by its rigor, its thoroughness, and its courage—our willingness to let the chips fall where they may. By those criteria, intellectual work could also be political work; being responsive to the world we inhabited need not imply bias or self-serving distortion.

The first edition of *From Slavery to Freedom*, the book that made Franklin's reputation with a larger reading public, provides a model of such politically-informed scholarship. His synthesis of the African American experience drew on the work of elders and peers who formed an amazing interwar generation of African American scholarship. A cohort small enough to know each other and to draw upon each other's work, they were unselfconsciously interdisciplinary. Internationally oriented, they were keenly conscious of the larger, global frames of the African American experience, a sensibility reflected in Franklin's text. Thus if Franklin's discussion of Africa and Egypt could not satisfy the Afrocentrists in his audience in 1983, nonetheless it incorporated materials on people of African descent in the West Indies, Latin American, and Canada sufficient to reframe the African American experience, to take account of its interconnections with the broader hemisphere, and thereby anticipate the comparative analyses of slavery, emancipation, and Atlantic World studies that emerged decades later.

Franklin would outlast, if not outlive, many of his critics from the rambunctious 1960s only to be misread yet again in the 1990s when, as chair of a presidential commission charged with stimulating a national conversation about race, he found himself attacked from the political left as well as the right. While the right-wing attacks were fairly predictable, the charge that he wished to focus the commission's work on African American-Caucasian relations at the expense of America's other racial minorities clearly surprised and hurt him. In his autobiography, Franklin (2005) complained that such critics must have been ignorant of his ancestral roots in the intermixed African American and Native American communities of Oklahoma. Those who read or knew him deplored the distorted reading of a capacious intelligence keenly sensitive to broader human claims for justice and inclusion. Perhaps it is to be expected that the later editions of *From Slavery to Freedom* had included material on protest movements against South African apartheid in the 1980s and South Africa's liberation after Nelson Man-

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dela's triumphant release from prison in the 1990s. But a half-century earlier, the very first edition had broached the subject of African Americans' problematic role in America's imperialist expansion in Cuba and the Philippines as well as their protests against Italy's brutal invasion of Ethiopia. Whatever other faults Franklin might have had, narrowness of vision was not among them.

It is hardly the case, of course, that Franklin's work is above criticism. For all its openness to a more capacious perspective onto the African American experience, *From Slavery to Freedom* hews closely to the conventional national narrative, framed not only by political events but the initiatives of powerful Caucasian elites and heroic African Americans. This is especially evident—and through successive editions—in the discussion of Reconstruction, when the field of action for African Americans within and outside formal politics was suddenly and vastly expanded. Notably, here was an instance in which a potential intergenerational transfer—from Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* or Horace Mann Bond's economic and social studies of Alabama Reconstruction, for example—had clearly faltered.

Such criticisms cannot diminish Franklin's immense contribution to American and Southern historical scholarship, however, as well as to our understanding of the African American experience more generally. He was the first to apply the tools and learning of a professionally-trained historian to fashion a compelling historical narrative of that experience. He was the first to situate African American life firmly at the center of the nation's formation from its beginning until the moment in which he wrote, while also connecting that experience to the broad international currents that also shaped it. With a historian's tools he rendered irresistible a people's claim to simple justice and to citizenship. This was, then, an act as assuredly political as it was a magnificent act of scholarship.

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An Historian's Historian

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Like many people, I knew John Hope Franklin long before we ever met. During an age when the disjuncture between public personal and private persona is usually jarring, part of the honor of being in his presence was the seamlessness between the

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