

# TRIBUTES TO JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

doi:10.1017/S1742058X10000068

## ***An Exemplary Man and Historian***

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Since meeting him three decades ago, John Hope Franklin has served as my best model for what a professional historian should be. Even as a graduate student, his writings were my beacon—a standard of scholarly excellence and social relevance to which I could aspire. Having never taken a course in African American history before entering graduate school, his authoritative text, *From Slavery to Freedom*, provided an overview of what I wanted to study as well as a challenging reminder of how much I still needed to learn. W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and Martin Luther King, Jr., had helped to remove the racial barriers that had once restricted the opportunities of Black scholars, but for my generation of Black students who entered graduate school in the late 1960s and 1970s, Franklin's writings demonstrated that we could use our training to produce scholarship that not only advanced our understanding of our racial past but also exhibited the highest standards of the historical profession.

Like other aspiring Black scholars, I was eager to meet our Black intellectual forebearers—at least those who were still living when I became an historian. I never had a Black teacher during my years as an undergraduate and graduate student at UCLA, but I was fortunate that the eminent anthropologist St. Clair Drake, co-author of the landmark urban study *Black Metropolis*, was still a magnificent presence at Stanford when I arrived on that campus as an acting assistant professor in 1974. As head of Stanford's African and African American Studies Program, Drake welcomed me into the university's small but vibrant Black community. But my contacts with the tiny cadre of famous Black historians came mostly in the form of brief glimpses of Franklin or Benjamin Quarles or Lerone Bennett at the annual meetings of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History or of other historical associations.

It was not until 1984 that I was able to say more than a few words to Franklin. The occasion was one of the lectures he delivered after receiving the Jefferson Medal, one of his many major awards. Following his speech, I was able to introduce myself and was pleasantly surprised when he seemed to know about my book on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that had been published a few years earlier. His engaging cordiality quickly broke through his appearance of

formality—he was always impeccably dressed for public occasions. His magnetic personality drew people of all races to him, and my wife Susan, who was with me, was one of those drawn into his circle of admirers. I began to sense that she also saw him as a role model—not so much as an historian but as an exemplary man whose manners and manner provided a standard for all husbands.

It must have been not long after that meeting that Franklin mentioned my name to Mrs. Coretta Scott King as a possible candidate for the editorship of her late husband's papers. I did not learn until later that he was serving on the advisory board of the King Papers Project. Because I had only briefly met Mrs. King once during a research trip to Atlanta, his recommendation may have been crucial in convincing her to call me unexpectedly in January 1985. Following several months of discussions about the feasibility of editing *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* while still remaining based at Stanford, I finally accepted her offer, only to learn soon afterward that Mrs. King wanted me to move to Atlanta. During the subsequent tense months of negotiation, I had many extended telephone conversations with John Hope, who served as a calm voice of reason in a situation that required his patient attempts to cool passions on both sides with reminders of our larger common purpose.

As an Advisory Board member, John Hope would become a steady presence in the discussions about the initial King volumes. His carefully considered words carried special weight in 1990 when we confronted the issue of how to make public our discovery of plagiaries in King's dissertation and graduate student papers. He offered sage suggestions about how to disclose our finding in a way consistent with scholarly integrity while at the same time making clear that my King Project colleagues and I were not seeking to damage King's legacy. Although this was a period of great strain in my relations with the King family, the experience taught me much about the personal qualities that made John Hope such a widely-respected as well as widely-admired figure.

Our friendship grew closer during the last two decades of his life. His travels occasionally brought him to Stanford, where he usually found time in his busy schedule to meet with my colleagues and students. On several occasions my entire staff accompanied him to dinner—events that became highlights of their careers and, as an intended byproduct, enhanced their regard for me as a great man's friend. On those occasions when I visited him at his home in Durham, I was able to see the domestic side of his personality, especially the consideration and kindness with which he treated his wife Aurelia and her invalid mother. After each visit, I sensed that Susan came away with an ever-clearer notion of the ideal man.

John Hope took pride in his collection of African American art, but everyone who knew him came to see his interest in orchids as a window into his soul. While staying at his home, we witnessed the care he lavished on the orchids in his backyard greenhouse. The seriousness of his commitment to this hobby was evident in the fact that his name was given to the unique strain of orchids he had bred. The hobby displayed his remarkable qualities of patience, tenderness, deliberateness, meticulous attention to detail, and appreciation of excellence in its many forms—qualities he also lavished on his many graduate students who spoke adoringly about him. Although we rarely talked about historical subjects, he was a crucially important mentor as I made my way in the historical profession. As I look back, I was impressed not only by the many honors he received during his distinguished career; even more, it was his admirable qualities as a person that will live forever in my memory.

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