

George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol

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Dudley Reid introduced his son to the linotype machine while the lad was still in high school, giving him a skill that helped pay tuition and living expenses in the years ahead. Later at Grinnell and Iowa City, young Reid packed his days with course work and his evenings with typesetting for local newspapers. Thus through his eyes we catch contrasting glimpses of two different worlds: the quiet order of the college classroom and the rush-to-deadline pace of a newspaper pressroom. We learn much about the operation of the dailies and weeklies that proliferated in Iowa earlier in the twentieth century and something of their role in the cultural life of the state's small towns in that era. We also meet dozens of the people with whom Reid worked and studied in these years—pressmen and editors, as well as professors and college administrators. The author's delightful characterizations of these talented and—mostly—generous people reveal a good deal about the quality of life in the pre-Depression years and the way in which an Iowa youth matured in that era. Although Reid occasionally overstates the degree to which things have changed since then, *Finally It's Friday* is a superb combination of autobiography and social history that will appeal to both general readers and professional scholars.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

WILLIAM SILAG

George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol, by Linda O. McMurry. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. pp. x, 367. Photographs, notes, index. \$25.00.

George Washington Carver began life with formidable disadvantages—slave status, unknown paternity, frail constitution, kidnapped as an infant, and orphaned early. When he died in 1943, however, Carver enjoyed international acclaim for his scientific achievements. In this cradle-to-grave biography Linda O. McMurry, associate professor of history at North Carolina State University, examines the factors that eventually rendered Carver the most widely known black in America. McMurry analyzes the relationship between Carver the scientist and Carver the symbol; she finds the latter more significant. *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol* accords much attention to the cultural, social, and economic context that molded Carver and to the Zeitgeist that shaped his image. Nevertheless, macrocosmic considerations do not obscure Carver the man in this volume.

McMurray adroitly identifies the paradox and incongruity of

Carver's elusive persona. Although a black environment, Tuskegee Institute, served as Carver's primary base for forty-six years, whites figure prominently in the few close relationships his circumscribed social life allowed. McMurry suggests white foster parents, a peripatetic youth passed in a series of predominantly white communities, and important friendships formed as a student and teacher at Iowa State College produced ambiguous racial attitudes, combining indifference, deference, and discontent. Furthermore, daily contact failed to provide the satisfactions of either public adulation or intense personal relationships maintained by correspondence. Even Carver's sexual identity remained blurred. Gentle scuffling with and the 'therapeutic' massaging of male students, interests in cooking and sewing, and a gentle religiosity spawned rumors of homosexuality. Unfortunately at a few junctures, McMurry titillates the reader amidst suspended conclusions. After speculating about the possibility Carver was castrated, for example, she blandly observes, "There are, however, numerous other ways to explain his failure to marry" (p. 76).

McMurry's depiction of the Carver-Booker T. Washington relationship also merits a caveat. She attributes the tension between the two as rooted in conflict over Carver's role at Tuskegee Institute. According to McMurry, Washington gave little priority to pure research and thus assigned Carver a myriad of time-consuming responsibilities: administration of a new agricultural department, supervision of two school farms, teaching, extension work, assisting the purchasing agent, inspecting sanitary facilities, and other miscellaneous tasks. Thus, asserts McMurry, Carver's resentment over fiscal and schedule impediments to research triggered his stormy exchanges with Washington. She fails, however, to adequately explore the possibility of ideological reasons for friction between the two men. Indeed, McMurry contends Washington and Carver shared a common social philosophy based on racial accommodation. Yet revisionist scholarship reveals significant nuances and inconsistencies in Washington's approach to race relations. McMurry displays little appreciation of the work of Louis Harlan and other revisionists who have discovered new complexities in Washington's life.

Nevertheless, McMurry exhibits considerable skill in chronicling Carver's career as a scientist and in evaluating its relative importance. Seeking to preserve the small family farm, Carver placed more emphasis on teaching poor southerners to employ available resources than on developing commercially successful products. New uses for

sweet potatoes, peanuts, and soybeans; development of clay paints; strategems for the application of organic fertilization; and nutritional advances were significant accomplishments, but Carver acquired, writes McMurry, a renown disproportionate to his deeds. The Carver myth grew to extravagant proportions. Many came to believe "the Peanut Man" by himself saved the South from cotton dependency. In reality little of Carver's work merits the designation "original," and southern peanut production began to increase dramatically a full decade before his bulletin on peanuts. Carver's modest list of publications included only farmers' bulletins and mycological articles. McMurry demonstrates that "Carver's chemistry did not measure up to modern standards of research and that his products did not become commercially successful" (p. 306).

George Washington Carver's penultimate chapter shrewdly observes the transformation of a scientist into a symbol. Various groups found the Carver image a valuable means of promoting diverse, and sometimes conflicting, causes. After Washington's death in 1915, for example, the Tuskegee administration recognized the need for someone to replace the late principal as an attraction for philanthropic contributions; thus, the Institute's publications granted greater prominence to Carver's work. Likewise, the peanut industry encouraged the Carver myth to augment its own profits. Availability prompted New South propagandists to cast Carver as their deliverer from the bondage of King Cotton. In addition, the devout scientist reassured a nation anxious over the dichotomy between faith and technology. Enthusiasts of American opportunity depicted Carver as the embodiment of the Horatio Alger ethos. But to blacks and white liberals Carver served as a symbol of Afro-America's latent potential.

McMurry's analysis of Carver as a symbol rests on extensive research as does the entire monograph. Interviews with Carver's contemporaries, Carver's correspondence, Tuskegee records, unpublished Carver biographies by former students, contemporary publications, and secondary literature provide empirical documentation. Fortunately, McMurry found much of the germane data on microfilm at Tuskegee. In general McMurry employs her materials to fashion a lucid, intelligent, and interesting portrait of a major figure too long the captive of hagiography. While this volume may not constitute the definitive Carver biography, it does reflect the state of the art.

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