

George Washington Carver: A Life

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George Washington Carver: A Life, by Christina Vella. Southern Biography Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. ix, 456 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$38.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Hal S. Chase is emeritus professor of history at DMACC–Urban Campus. His most notable contribution is his collaboration with 37 others to produce the 600-page, 20-chapter, richly illustrated and documented *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (2001).

George Washington Carver: A Life by Christina Vella is the first scholarly biography of Carver since Linda McMurray's *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol* in 1981. Both are indebted to Rackham Holt's *George Washington Carver: An American Biography* (1943; rev. ed., 1963). Vella's contribution is a narrative that strives to reveal the man inside the legendary, heroic, mystic, humble, non-materialistic, extraordinary scientist. Her quest for Carver's inner self reveals more than a little that is new, and her abundant quoting from Carver's letters provides insight into his thought. Vella's story follows the same chronological path as Holt and McMurray pursued, and her cast of characters is largely the same, but her perspective is new and goes far below the surface.

The significant others in Carver's life include Moses Carver, George's owner and father figure; the Milhollands of Winterset, Iowa, who steered Carver to Simpson College; Etta Budd, his art instructor there who pushed him to pursue a more practical career in botany at Iowa State; and James Wilson, his major professor there (and later U.S. secretary of agriculture), who encouraged Carver to accept Booker T. Washington's offer to teach at Tuskegee. Holt included Mrs. Warren Logan, the wife of Tuskegee's chief financial officer, in her cast, but McMurray did not. Vella makes her a major figure, if not the leading lady, in Carver's life. Neither Holt nor McMurray included Birdie Johnson Howard, but Vella says that her effusive letters to Carver "took a form he should have understood quite well—a covert and possibly unconscious sexual passion disguising itself as religious zeal, . . . the same character as his fervid attraction to [Jim] Hardwick" (254). Hardwick was a charismatic, athletic, young YMCA worker who did not appear in Holt's biography and who played only a cameo role in McMurray's. In Vella's *Life*, however, Carver "fell in love—there is no other word for it—with one special man who became in his letters, My Very Own, Handsome, Marvelous, Spiritual, Boy" (211). These words certainly document Carver's ardor, but his description of seeing Hardwick in the audience at the YMCA Conference in Blue Ridge, North Carolina, focuses on "the Christ in you, of course." Vella interprets such rhetoric as "a raging devotional fever," and Carver as writing "palpitating" letters to Hardwick with "twitching excitement." Yet she

concedes that "it is delicate and easily contorted, this question of whether Carver's love for Hardwick was an erotic attachment" (213), and she notes subsequently, "Not a syllable in Carver's letters suggests that the old professor put his hands anywhere but on Hardwick's head" (218).

Vella stands on firm ground when she describes Carver as full of fun and someone who had a bad stammer (except while singing), a high-pitched feminine voice, the ability "to play any instrument someone handed him" (116), and a belief in dreams and in a mystical, pantheistic God, with which he influenced Henry A. Wallace. She also describes his research and his relationships with people, plants, and every living thing as popularized by Glen Clark's 1935 pamphlet, "The Man Who Talks with the Flowers," which sold 200,000 copies.

Vella's chapters on Carver's relationship with Booker T. Washington are also strong and reinforce Louis Harlan's memorable capsulation of "The Wizard of Tuskegee" as a masterful manipulator with "an elaborate private life in which he changed roles with the skill of a magician" to acquire and maintain control, for "power was his game." Washington played his game with Carver, repeatedly breaking promises of a research laboratory and ultimately stripping Carver of three of his four responsibilities. Yet Vella characterizes Carver's response to Washington's death in 1915 as "the grief of a son who lost a demanding father without ever having succeeded in satisfying him" (157). Adella Logan's suicide several days before Washington's memorial service suggests that Carver's grief was for his dear friend and confidante rather than for the bane of his existence at Tuskegee.

Vella's claim in the epilogue that Carver was "an individual born with no advantages" (326) belies her repeated, quoted professions of Carver's faith in God and God's gifts. Moreover, she does not penetrate Carver's heart or mind about the pervasive, insidious, omnipresent, and corrosive force of white racism he experienced. Perhaps he was a saint who could only see God or Christ in his fellow humans as he did in Jim Hardwick. Perhaps he was a prophet who heard God speaking in the plants and flowers, especially his beloved amaryllis. Perhaps he was "nothing but a man," a human being, with a full range of human feelings, the greatest of which was "love," erotic and platonic.