This beautifully produced book is Gary Younge’s homage to Martin Luther King and to the movement whose spirit King captured in his great speech of 28th August 1963. The speech was delivered late in the day, as people were beginning to leave, and King departed from his prepared text – his famous ‘dream’ passage was added in a moment of inspiration. It is impossible to read the speech without feeling strong emotion. These are two great moments of American history.

The book brings together Young’s long-standing interest in the American South and his commitment to issues of social justice. In 2011, Young conducted two public interviews with Clarence Jones (born in 1931 and now in his 80s) who wrote the draft text of the speech and was King’s lawyer. Young also interviewed, over the course of 16 years, many civil rights leaders, activists and commentators, including Joan Baez, who sang at the march on Washington, Angela Davis, and others.

This is not a reference book or scholarly analysis and there are no footnotes. However, Younge has read widely, including Mike Marqusee’s Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties. This is journalism of a very high order, from the heart.


Martin Luther King Jr was born on 15th January 1929 and was assassinated on 4th April 1968. This book is not a biography of King, nor is it a history of the great movement against segregation which culminated in the march on Washington. It brings to life a number of the participants in this extraordinary moment of history. Young focuses on Bayard Rustin for example.

Rustin, who was born on 17th March 1912, was a member of the Communist Party before 1941 and was openly gay, both of which caused problems for King, who kept Rustin out of the limelight. In one of the few errors in this book, Rustin is given as 20 years younger than King on page 60, which would have made him barely a teenager at the time of the march. Rustin was a superb organiser, indeed the key organising figure behind the march. As Young shows, Rustin had to work hard to persuade King to support the march at all. Support came from younger activists in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC).

The moment on which Rustin was able to build was the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham Alabama in May 1963, when black children were bludgeoned, hosed and hounded in front of the cameras. Rustin declared: ‘Birmingham became the moment of truth. Birmingham meant that tokenism is finished’.

The American right tried to derail Rustin and the march. The notorious segregationist senator Strom Thurmond branded Rustin a ‘communist, draft-dodger and homosexual’. That simply served to rally and consolidate the black movement. It was down to Rustin that a quarter of a million people marched on 28th August 1963, many more than had been expected.

The inauguration of US President Barack Obama for a second term on 21st January 2013 fell on Martin Luther King Day. President Obama regularly reinforced his association with King’s Dream, borrowing from King’s inspired phrases. Young acknowledges that Obama’s victory was the culmination of a process in which in 1958, 53 per cent of voters said they would not vote for a black candidate. This fell to 16 per cent in 1984 and six per cent in 2003.

Young makes the vitally important point that African Americans as a group are significantly worse off than they were when Obama was first elected. Since 2009 the gap between whites and blacks has widened in terms of wealth and income. The overall rate of unemployment is unchanged, but black unemployment is up by seven per cent. The wealth gap between blacks and whites has doubled. The average white American now has six times more wealth than a black counterpart.

In a later passage, Young points out that unemployment among black people is almost triple that of whites; black male life expectancy in Washington DC is lower than male life expectancy in the Gaza strip. One in three black boys born in 2001 stand a lifetime risk of going to prison. And more black men were disenfranchised in 2004 because they were felons.

In 1983 when the bill to establish a federal holiday was introduced to Congress, President Ronald Reagan, when asked if King was a communist sympathiser said: ‘We’ll know in 35 years, won’t we’. He was referring to the eventual release of FBI surveillance tapes. King was a lifelong Democrat voter and probably a socialist. He was always first and foremost a preacher. He was doing God’s work.

Bill Bowring

Mac users

A new report from the Institute of Race Relations examines 93 post-Macpherson killings where evidence exists of a known or suspected racist motive, and concludes that in all but the most obvious cases, racism is being ‘filtered out’ of the investigation and prosecution in a way which directly contradicts the intentions of legislators: ‘The over-strict interpretation of the legal provisions for racial motivation may be inhibiting the (racial) charging of perpetrators and in fact removing the racial basis of a crime from the courtroom’.

Following the police and CPS failures around Stephen Lawrence’s death, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced the concept of sentence enhancement for ‘racially aggravated’ offences, a measure designed to demonstrate the Government’s refusal to tolerate racially motivated crime and its commitment to stamp it out. However a decade and a half on, the authors of the study find that ‘the racially motivated aspect of cases [is] often … filtered out by the police, the CPS and the judiciary, through … failure to understand the broader context within which racist attacks are carried out, an unwillingness to recognise racial motivation, the reclassifying of racist attacks as disputes, robberies or other forms of hostility and through the way sentencing enhancements are interpreted’.

The law is clearly failing victims of racist crimes. This report should be read – and acted on – by all criminal lawyers and everyone interested in racial justice. It can be downloaded from the Institute of Race Relations website, www.irr.org.uk.