

# Birmingham tragedies

by [Peter Kerry Powers](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

*Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama--The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution.* By Diane McWhorter. Simon & Schuster, 706 pp., \$35.00.

Histories of the civil rights movement often become psychodramas, tracing the tribulations of the movement's iconic black leadership in the face of an undifferentiated mass of white oppression. In her powerful new book, Diane McWhorter largely bypasses such heroics and gives us instead the racial biography of a place.

In 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, seared itself painfully on the national psyche through a series of violent images. A German shepherd snapping at the belly of a teenager. The Birmingham Fire Department blasting a huddled mass of children with a column of water. The haunting smiles of the four girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. McWhorter, a native of Birmingham who writes regularly on issues of race for the *New York Times*, connects these images to the details of everyday life. She humanizes Birmingham, showing it inhabited by people like ourselves, and creating a history with which we can identify.

McWhorter's most important contribution is her revelation of the economic interests that shaped events. Among civil rights activists, internecine conflicts sprang from class divisions between the upper-crust Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) ministers and the home-grown leaders of Birmingham's black working class. The upper-crust from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Atlanta dithered nervously over half-measures. Their attempts to identify with the working class seemed staged for the evening news as, for instance, they attended marches wearing newly bought overalls over freshly pressed dress shirts.

The SCLC leadership dubbed Fred Shuttlesworth the "Wild Man from Birmingham" because his confrontational tactics struck them as ill-considered and his bull-roarer Baptist style as unrefined. Nevertheless, the press of Shuttlesworth's populism set the agenda for the Birmingham movement and ultimately became the model of black protest throughout the south.

McWhorter demonstrates that segregation sprang from sources other than redneck southernism. The longstanding racism of the trade union movement and the economic interests of northern industry coalesced to maintain Birmingham's Jim Crow tradition. Perversely, U.S. Steel inflamed the populism of its insecure white employees, thus encouraging the rebirth of the Klan in the 1940s. The southern arm of this northern corporation held out longest for legal segregation in Birmingham in the 1960s. Similarly, McWhorter delineates the Klan's function as a quasi-official working-class arm of Bull Connor's reign of terror. That reign itself depended heavily on the supposedly genteel political traditions of the white ruling class, a dependence that stretched as far as the capitol in Montgomery.

Birmingham's white religious establishment was remarkable mostly for its complicity in this web of destruction. Its religious leaders are best known through King's scathing denunciations of them in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," the most enduring literary and religious document of the movement. McWhorter doesn't blunt the edge of those denunciations. The people working hardest for segregation in Birmingham were often stalwart members of respectable congregations--people who sat, at least metaphorically, in the pew beside Klan terrorists. White Christians are so clearly complicit in the tragedies of Birmingham that one can easily characterize the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist as the act of one set of Christians against another.

McWhorter does occasionally stumble in *Carry Me Home*. The staggering blizzard of information she presents sometimes overwhelms interpretation. At various times, McWhorter declares that four different groups or persons were the "real power" behind segregation in Birmingham. While their interdependence is clear enough, she never completely clarifies the power relations between the many different white groups defending segregation.

More annoying is McWhorter's persistent debunking of Martin Luther King Jr.--a popular trend in recent histories of the civil rights movement. King appears passive, fearful, sometimes vain, but never heroic or even courageous. The reasons for this portrait are a bit unclear. At times McWhorter champions Shuttlesworth, her fellow Birminghamian, over the snooty Atlantans. At other times her depiction of King feels like little more than a demonstration that she has the moxie to show that the black emperor has no clothes on. This picture ends up feeling unfair and untrue. Surely

one can point out Shuttlesworth's central importance and admit King's faults without reducing King to a function of class privilege and historical accident.

But beyond these limitations, McWhorter has done a great service for those interested in the moral history of the nation. She delivers on the imperatives of her epigraph from George Santayana: "A landscape to be seen has to be composed, and to be loved has to be moralized."