

## Book Reviews

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*Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography.* By Benjamin Quarles. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. vii + 213 pp. Cloth, \$27.50; paper, \$12.95.)

Benjamin Quarles, born in 1904 and currently professor emeritus at Morgan State University, is one of two well-published grand old men (the other is John Hope Franklin) among black American historians. Originally from Boston, Quarles received his undergraduate training at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and his graduate degrees—Ph.D. in 1940—from the University of Wisconsin. Having specialized in African-American history in the period between the revolutionary war and the Civil War, Quarles is the author of several books, monographs, biographies, and surveys, which include *Frederick Douglass* (1948), *The Negro in the Civil War* (1953), *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961), *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962), *The Negro in the Making of America* (first published in 1964), *Black Abolitionists* (1969), and *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (1974).

Astonishingly, this impressive list is the output of a career spent at small undergraduate institutions with their concomitant heavy teaching and administrative loads and, I suspect, without benefit of research assistance. Despite Quarles's regular publication of books and articles, *Black Mosaic* is the first collection of his shorter pieces. One essay dates from the 1940s, four from the 1950s, none from the 1960s (when he published four books), four from the 1970s, and three from the 1980s. August Meier's introduction, to which I will return, was originally published in 1980 and revised for this collection.

The earlier essays are impeccable mono-

graphs, two of which represent the first publications by a black scholar in what we know today as the *Journal of American History*. Carefully based in primary sources, they display Quarles's strength as a narrative historian who is convinced that African Americans were actors of importance, not mere victims, in their country's past. Although the early essays tend to describe black actions against a white backdrop and to use the then-common collective phrase, "the Negro," the later essays reflect the revolution in Afro-American history. "A. Philip Randolph: Labor Leader at Large" (1982) is a fine example of Quarles's post-black-revolution willingness to put "the Negro" aside, to set black initiative in black as well as white contexts, and to see conflicts within the race. The historiographical essays, both from the 1970s, recall the genealogy of the newer interdisciplinary studies (women's studies out of Afro-American studies) and speak lines that are bound to reappear as we begin to discern the future of these programs in the twenty-first century: They will need to view American society through a "multiracial lens."

*Black Mosaic* immediately impresses historians with its dispassionate, objective historical writing, each essay uncannily appropriate for the time in which it was published. (Indeed, one example of Quarles's scholarship, "Frederick Douglass and the Woman's Rights Movement," *Journal of Negro History*, January 1940, which was very much ahead of its time in focusing on women's issues, is not included.) Each piece makes important points subtly and eloquently: how the abolitionist crusade was funded; that the creation of British anti-slavery sentiment owed much to African Americans; that blacks who supported the British during the revolutionary war were activated by

the same love of freedom that motivated the Founding Fathers; that black people have a critical sense of American history that allows "no easy escape into a national folklore, no matter how illustrious its origins or how alluring its accents"; that Afro-American history speaks to four different constituencies, of which white academics are only one. By the end of the book, the reader realizes that insights in Afro-American history that we now take for granted came first, often incredibly early, from Benjamin Quarles. This is true in particular of essays about African Americans in the era of the revolutionary war and in the two sensitive mid-1970s essays on Afro-American history.

Ostensibly the straightforward republication of Quarles's most important essays, *Black Mosaic* reveals a good deal more than the author's range of abilities. The splendid display of virtuosity is only one of this book's three representations and, I suspect, the only one that is intentional. These essays also intrigue the reader on a second level, on which Quarles's style evolves, synchronized not with fashions in historical writing (such as cliometrics) but with changes in American racial and academic politics. The tightly controlled early essays reveal a historian walking a tightrope above an audience that consists mainly of academic peers who are his adversaries in the historical profession.

This early Quarles chooses his topics and fashions his narrative carefully, taking a stance that will pass for balanced among colleagues with eagle eyes for what they denounce as advocacy. This writing is purged of anger, no matter how well warranted. Above all, the early essays seem to bend over backwards not to draw the color line: the black revolutionaries and abolitionists all have good white friends. On this level, the early essays are case studies in the appeasement of a historical profession dominated by men who were, at their very best, skeptical about black history.

The essays from the 1970s and 1980s are by a more relaxed Quarles, who can take for granted a broad and favorably disposed audience whom the civil rights movement and the black revolution brought to Afro-American history. No longer saddled with the burden of proof that Afro-American history could be a worthwhile academic undertaking, Quarles in the

1970s descends from the tightrope, to the reader's great relief.

On a third level, the unintentional resonance between Quarles's early balancing act for suspicious academic historians and the approbation that August Meier displays in his introduction is also fascinating. Evidently unaware that Quarles had adopted strategies calculated to reassure an unfriendly audience, Meier approves of the "detachment and fairness toward whites" that distinguishes Quarles's writing as compared to that of older black historians such as Carter G. Woodson who wrote to encourage racial pride. As if for emphasis, Meier returns to the same theme a few pages later, praising the "evenhandedness and even empathy" that characterizes Quarles's treatment of white allies. Obviously August Meier, the author of several important books in Afro-American history, is no William Hessestine (Quarles's doubting dissertation adviser at Wisconsin in the 1930s). Yet the tenor of his introduction synchronizes uncannily with Quarles's pre-1970s intellectual strategy. The reader of *Black Mosaic* both witnesses Quarles's act, tailor-made to gain acceptance from an academic audience, and hears that audience's confirming applause. Meier has less to say about Quarles's later essays, perhaps because the two historians diverge in their appreciation of the ways in which political action, especially black nationalism, affected the writing of Afro-American history.

While Meier praises Quarles for avoiding the excesses of the black nationalist historians of the 1970s (whom he identifies as Vincent Harding and Sterling Stuckey), Quarles embraces black nationalist historians (although not by name), giving them credit for letting him say more openly what had been on his mind all along. The essays of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly "Black History's Diversified Clientele" (1971) and "A. Philip Randolph: Labor Leader at Large" (1982), show a Quarles who appreciates black nationalist history, recognizes an audience beyond the academy, and lets some sharp opinions emerge. What a relief that the civil rights and black studies movements freed this fine historian to speak his mind and point his finger.

This is not to say that Benjamin Quarles finally unmasks himself as an angry old man. Quite to the contrary, his writing remains cool

throughout, with the historian casting blame judiciously. In fact, considering the current vogue for subjective approaches and autobiographical disclosure, *Black Mosaic* appears peculiarly remote. Quarles did not write his own introduction (prevented, most likely, by ill health), and no new introductions set up the four sections or twelve essays that are included. This book completely lacks the first-person singular or any personal reconsideration of its scholarship.

Is this distance the necessary outcome of the conditions under which Quarles studied and wrote? For much of his professional life, after all, the majority of his academic peers held his field in contempt. With so small a cohort of productive senior black historians, one is tempted to draw more generalizations about Quarles's experiences and strategies than may be supported. Here a similar book published about the same time can be useful. A comparison with John Hope Franklin's *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988* (1989) indicates the correspondences and divergences of approach of two academic Afro-American historians born before World War I. Quarles is eleven years older than Franklin, but their first books appeared within a year of each other in the late 1940s. Both historians have won praise for objectivity, which probably reflects the same pressures from the guardians of the profession. Yet Franklin has consistently been less detached and more ready to cast blame and voice anger. Due to his age and health, Quarles is no longer steadily upon the scene, while Franklin, still in robust health, can still publish. Franklin wrote his own new introductions to the essays republished in *Race and History*. The contrast between the two historians goes deeper, however, to the degree to which Franklin (defying the dictum that historians should remain in the archives and the classroom) embraced political writing and Quarles (the impeccable historian) resisted it. Sensitive students of African-American intellectual history will read *Black Mosaic* with profit, and, with *Race and History* as a counterpoint, will recognize that even in a field of two, there is room for diversity.

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