

HUMANITY, SCHOLARSHIP, AND PROUD RACE CITIZENSHIP: THE GIFTS OF JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

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John Hope Franklin died seven weeks after my mother, Dona Lolita Irvin, of the same cause: congestive heart disease. World renowned and universally mourned, he was two years older than my mother, she, a celebrity in her own right on a closely circumscribed, very local stage. They had just a little in common—both grew up in the Southwest in relatively privileged circumstances, steadied by the ballast that even relative privilege can provide. And he, with characteristic generosity, blurbed her first book. She adored him, but otherwise they lived widely separated lives. Yet in my emotion of grief, their deaths have merged. Giants in my life in very different ways, Franklin and Irvin, survivors of American apartheid, insisted on their personal uniqueness while situating themselves proudly as African Americans with much to contribute to the United States as black people and as individuals. Their stance demanded enormous intelligence and a constant expenditure of energy, not simply in the exercise of their vocation as authors.

In a segregated world, Franklin received accolades in abundance as the author of *From Slavery to Freedom*, first published in 1947 and still in print and flourishing. The handsome portrait on the John Hope Franklin Center website by Simmie Knox (who paints our society's eminences) situates him between a portrait of his beloved late wife, Aurelia, and his namesake orchid. Franklin holds a copy of *From Slavery to Freedom* so that its title may be read clearly.

For all of us of a certain age, *From Slavery to Freedom* spoke a different language from that of our schools. In myriad schools, "the Negro" did not belong in America. He (and he was a he) appeared in public quite briefly, and only in the guise of slavery, the feckless slave emancipated by the actions of other men—if not exactly the crouching naked figure freed by Abraham Lincoln, then imprisoned within that iconography. A fleeting, passive, ridiculous figure, this mid-20th-century image then disappeared from history.

Like so many others before and after me, I underwent a quintessential Negro-child experience in Oakland, California, in the supposedly liberal and enlightened San Francisco Bay Area. Thank heaven I had John Hope Franklin and my parents as counterweights at home, for my junior high school homeroom pictured Henry

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Ford's Americanization ceremony across the top of one entire wall. On the left, myriad white people in traditional peasant dress lined up to enter the melting pot. They emerged on the right in suits, ties, and hats as Americans. Nary a dark figure among them. With knowledge of the true nature of American history on my side, I confronted my homeroom teacher. She stamped me as a troublemaker, a label I have yet to outlive.

John Hope Franklin, bless him, delivered a different image and a larger story, which evolved over the decades with the evolution of history and of historiography. Were his greatness to have ended there, it would deserve my deepest gratitude.

As a scholar-citizen, Franklin very rightly deserves honors for the finest and most enduring history of African Americans. He also deserves recognition for a good deal else he has written. In addition to contributing a distinguished oeuvre in African American history, Franklin also thought and wrote across the color line to alter the meaning of American history, especially of southern history, as a whole. A southern historian from the outset, he wrote perceptively of white as well as black southerners and of all Americans. I'm thinking of his mid-20th-century works, notably *The Militant South: 1800–1861* (1956), *Land of the Free: A History of the United States* (1965), and *Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Antebellum North* (1976). *The Militant South* analyzed the myriad ways the South's economy, based on personal violence and maintained through local militia, distorted its public realm and civil sphere, militarizing the society from top to bottom and, it might be added, contributing to a homicide rate that remains astronomical today. How much richer history would have been if historians of all races had followed his lead in the 20th century and peered beyond their own allotments.

Much of Franklin's bibliography and citizenship contributes to a larger understanding of American society and the central place of black people within it. Here again, in word and deed, is sufficient cause for thanks, from his work on *Brown v. Board of Education*, his policy analyses, his citizenship-based scholarship, and his Sisyphean chairing of "One America," President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race. Were his greatness to have ended there, too, it would deserve our deepest gratitude.

Perhaps less noted are Franklin's works of biography, a concentration on the individual—on individual initiative and individual difference—that characterizes his thought. The same year he first published *From Slavery to Freedom* he also published *The Diary of James T. Ayers, Civil War Recruiter*. More familiar is his biography of his intellectual ancestor, George Washington Williams, which appeared in 1985 in a biographical series he edited with the University of Chicago Press. Then followed other personal studies: his edition of his father's autobiography, *My Life and an Era* (1997) and his own autobiography, *Mirror to America* (2005).

All these works evince a fighting spirit that John Hope Franklin never renounced. Gentleman that he was, this spirit never emerged abusively, but he also never let his own honors obscure the actual facts of American life and history. The generosity of his spirit tempted his colleagues into setting him apart from other black people who could be dismissed as angry. They were wrong to do so, for John Hope Franklin never lost sight of the fundamental character of American white supremacy, no matter how much certain fans of his wanted him to demur.

On one of the many occasions in which he was invited to speak and thereby flatter an institution proud of its progress, he jolted a preening audience into remembering the depth of white privilege in America. His topic was the U.S. Congress's first definition of national citizenship, the Naturalization Act of 1790, which drew a clear white color line. To undo so long and deep a history would require much more than short-range or easy remedies. When I thanked him for this much-needed dose of sobriety, he said, "The older I get, the madder I get."

My mother, like so many of her peers, performed that same balancing act between justified anger and personal warmth. Only her own circle read her books and saw the truth-telling gift she gave her country. But John Hope Franklin, a luminary on the world's stage, shared the beauty of individual humanity and proud race citizenship with millions.