

Daisy bates: civil rights crusader from arkansas



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The book *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas* by Grif Stockley (2005) is an in-depth biography of an African American woman whose social work marks an important milestone in the history of the civil rights movement in the United States of America. Upon the reading of the book, it becomes clear that the author's purpose was not only to provide readers with a reliable source of Daisy Bates' biographical facts, but also to thoroughly reproduce the context in which she acted. In fact, the context is as important as the person discussed in the biography. Furthermore, Stockley's approach to writing this biography reveals his doing a great job to portray Bates as a complex personality and, therefore, humane, rather than mere emphasizing her service to the American society. Thus, it is the author's focus on the evolution of the civil rights movement at both state and federal level in the US, as well as on Daisy Bates' figure that was an integral part of this movement throughout her life, that compose the subject of the book. In it, Stockley neither diminishes Bates' role as a civil rights leader nor overstates it. Instead, he renders as much as possible the real picture of her life that serves as an example of the real commitment to asserting the rights of African Americans in the 20th century.

On no account, one could call the treatment of Bates' background by Stockley superficial, for he performed a thorough depiction of what her early years in her hometown were like and how it influenced her by analyzing historians' works, newspaper publications of that time, Bates' memoir, and even the census data. The town of Huttig, where Daisy was born in 1914, appears to illustrate the typical southern town where white supremacy reigned. From the eloquent silence of the local weekly newspaper

publications about the atrocities committed by whites to blacks every time the latter reacted against unfair treatment to Daisy's personal memories of her humiliation by the butcher at the meat market – “ Niggers have to wait 'til I wait on the white people” (Stockley 14-15) – it is evident that the black population had no legal voice to defend itself. And though, due to the lack of evidence, Stockley is skeptical about the story told by Daisy in her memoir about her biological mother being raped by three white men, killed, and thrown into a millpond, when Bates was an infant (17-18), it, however, by no means misrepresents the real state of affairs concerning the status of African Americans in the US South in the early 20th century.

Meeting her future husband, who was much older and better educated than Daisy, was a significant event in her life, because it was to the great extent his influence that determined the nature of her future occupation. Starting up their own newspaper State Press in Little Rock, Daisy's later involvement, and the very type of the newspaper gave them an opportunity to reach the minds of the public at large “ in a way that social background alone never would have, and Daisy had the freedom...and social skills to cultivate a wide variety of not just sources but resources in the community” (46). It was a real venture, because the paper covered the issues that no one dared to raise at that time. The fact that white offenders were not charged of their racial crimes is indicative of how the policy regarding African Americans was conducted in Arkansas, and the State Press widely criticized this policy. On the one hand, such criticism would inevitably result in making enemies. On the other hand, this furthered Daisy Bates' becoming the driving force within the state organization of the National Association of the Advancement of

Colored People, the largest civil rights organization in the US. Why Daisy, and not her husband? Resting his observations upon the numerous impressions of the people who knew Daisy Bates well or had the experience of dealing with her, throughout the book, Grif Stockley contrasts her pushy, impulsive, and categorical personality with that of her quiet but strongly supporting husband. However, it is due to these qualities that Bates was a persuasive speaker and got things done.

Undoubtedly, exactly the same qualities made her actively oppose the state government in the Central High School crises in Little Rock in the late 50s. The governor Orval Faubus resisted the implementation of the US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* aimed at ending school segregation. By taking up the position of the majority of the white electorate, he paved the way of his political career. The Board of Education of Little Rock School District did not have the intentions of the immediate enactment of the *Brown* decision either. It was this confrontation of the state and federal laws that provided Bates with the chance to actively intervene. In January 1956, twenty-seven black students, accompanied by Bates, were denied the registration for second-semester classes by the Little Rock Board of Education, which gave occasion to filing the class action suit in federal district court (82). What followed was the period of litigation fraught with the white supremacists' passing the measures that challenged the *Brown* decision, heating the racial hate, the harassment, and threats to the Bates family (91-111). On top of that, there was governor Faubus' decision to surround Central High school with the Arkansas National Guard and prevent the black children of Little Rock from entering in September 1957 (113).

On that memorable day of September 4, the attention of the national media was riveted on the Central High. Nine black children, whose families were persuaded by Bates to walk to the school, were turned away by the National Guard. Except Elizabeth Eckford, “[n]one of these students experienced the vicious intimidation” that came from the mob (128). The possibility of physical violence did not disappear, though. Another attempt of integration was made on September 23. Since Faubus stirred the mob well, the police escorted the children this time. It was the group of black reporters that was the first to arrive and incur a physical assault by the crowd. This, nevertheless, worked as a distraction and allowed for the police to whisk the children inside the school through a side entrance (143). Rendering the chronology of the events, Grif Stockley described the tension that held the members and the witnesses with great attention to detail. Along with citing different sources, he continuously refers to Bates memoir to convey her feelings and her vision of the situation and the people. At the same time, he is extremely critical of her role that she ascribed to herself in the memoir. All this makes him a credible biographer, because not only does he cast doubt on some facts, but he also suggests alternative evidence. For instance, he refutes the fact that it was Bates who “orchestrated the events” on September 4 and argues that it “appears to have been much more of a collaborative effort”, resting his argument upon the affidavits given to the FBI by the students and ministers (127).

Nevertheless, Daisy Bates was the link between public media and the nine high school students. Her outstanding ability to communicate with public made her an effective speaker – a skill that she used extensively when

assigned to speak at NAACP events across the state and the country. She was also a fundraising link between the Nine and the national office of NAACP. The Associated Press named her Woman of the Year in 1957 in education and one of the top ten newsmakers in 1957 (171). The reverse of the medal was the increasing harassment of her family and the Nine who now were enrolled in the Central High. White supremacy was still the case. And though the Nine managed to graduate, the pace at which school integration was implemented in the subsequent years was even slower than before. It was only in the 70s that African Americans got “political clout” during Lyndon Johnson’s presidency (281). Daisy Bates worked in his administration where she ran anti-poverty programs. Despite the deterioration of health, she was active until her death in 1999. Her life remains an example of the unwavering commitment to the belief “that she, at great personal cost and sacrifice, be accorded the dignity that all humans seek” (297).

Upon the completion of reading the book, I would absolutely recommend it to a family member, because it represents the particular combination of a trustworthy biography and a credible source of the civil rights movement. The author clearly demonstrated the gaping chasm between the Declaration of Independence, which is one of the most valuable documents of American history, and the reality of the United States of America in the 20th century. Considering that race issue is still the case in the 21st century, the book is urgent and informative for everyone who is able to think critically.