



Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power

Timothy B. Tyson

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This book tells the remarkable story of Robert F. Williams--one of the most influential black activists of the generation that toppled Jim Crow and forever altered the arc of American history. In the late 1950s, as president of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the NAACP, Williams and his followers used machine guns, dynamite, and Molotov cocktails to confront Klan terrorists. Advocating "armed self-reliance" by blacks, Williams challenged not only white supremacists but also Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights establishment. Forced to flee during the 1960s to Cuba--where he broadcast "Radio Free Dixie," a program of black politics and music that could be heard as far away as Los Angeles and New York City--and then China, Williams remained a controversial figure for the rest of his life.

Historians have customarily portrayed the civil rights movement as a nonviolent call on America's conscience--and the subsequent rise of Black Power as a violent repudiation of the civil rights dream. But *Radio Free Dixie* reveals that both movements grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. As Robert Williams's story demonstrates, independent black political action, black cultural pride, and armed self-reliance operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.

"Stunning. . . . Radio Free Dixie presents an engaging portrait of one man's continuous struggle to resist political and social oppression.--*Emerge*

"[A] radiant biography. . . . Tyson is that rarest of writers: a successful scholar who can actually tell a compelling story in clear, even handsome language.--*Village Voice Literary Supplement*

"Tyson's firecracker text crackles with brilliant and lasting images of black life . . . across the South in the '40s, '50s and '60s. . . . Tyson successfully portrays Williams as a troubled visionary, a strong, stubborn and imperfect man, one who greatly influenced what became the Black Power Movement and its young leaders.--*Publishers Weekly*

This book tells the riveting story of controversial black activist Robert F. Williams (1925-1996). In the late 1950s, as president of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP, Williams organized armed resistance to KKK terrorists--in the process challenging not only white supremacists but also Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights establishment. As *Radio Free Dixie* reveals, however, the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and were much closer than traditional portrayals suggest. In the civil rights-era South, independent black politics, black cultural pride, and "armed self-reliance" operated in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protests in the quest for African American freedom.

Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power Details

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Sandra Ross says

The more I read about North Carolina's extremely racist history, the more shocked I am (I grew up in North Carolina), the more appalled I am, and the more the burn of injustice and just plain moral wrong wells up inside me.

On the other hand, my appreciation for my parents grows more profound and deep (my dad was a North Carolina native, who was born and raised in Burlington, while my mom grew up in Greenville, SC) because they taught me, and modeled without exception as an example for me, to treat everyone with dignity, honor, and respect, no matter who they were, what their skin tone was, where they lived, how much or how little they had, and what they did to earn a living.

The story of Robert Williams, who was maligned by just about everyone on all sides, including the NAACP, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Panther party, and, until this book by Timothy Tyson, misrepresented and mischaracterized as something he was not (he was a smart man, a measured man, and actually avoided the polarized positions that seemed to be the norm, but he made mistakes and they, sadly, were what became his codified legacy) spotlights the depth of racism in North Carolina as it existed (and, I suspect, still does and probably has been given the green light to come out of hiding with the resurgence of extreme white nationalism throughout the country since President Trump's election in 2016) in the 20th Century.

Monroe, NC, Williams' birthplace, is at the center of much of Williams' story. Monroe is a suburb of Charlotte, and the birthplace of Jesse Helms (NC senator who was a dyed-in-the-wool racist) and his father, a Monroe police officer who terrorized and severely beat African-American citizens just for fun.

Monroe was a hotbed for Klan activity and racial tensions there boiled over frequently throughout the last century. Williams fought fire with fire, with the aim for the African-American citizens of Monroe to be able to defend their families and their homes from attacks by the Klan and other white nationalist factions that found a welcome mat for their vitriolic rhetoric and their harassment and, often, murder of African Americans.

Williams ended up spending a little more than a decade as an expatriated American because of a trumped up kidnapping charge in which he was not guilty of the crime.

The charges against him were dropped by North Carolina in 1976, allowing him to return to the United States, but he never again lived in Monroe, instead spending the last twenty-two years of his life in rural Michigan out of the spotlight.

This is a piece of history that none of us can afford to be ignorant about. I highly recommend this book.

Selina Gonzalez says

Although occasionally it dragged, and despite occasional confusion due to chronological jumping back and forth as Tyson chased down a theme or specific issue in Williams' life or the period, a very readable

biography. Very enlightening and insightful, and Tyson makes an excellent argument about Black Power being rooted in the same societal and cultural pressures that birthed the civil rights movement.

Steven says

I grew up about 60 miles south of Robert F. Williams hometown, but he was the age of my parents, and his part in history was before I was reading the newspaper for news. So all i know about him and his influence on the Black Power movement is from this book.

Reading history, particularly history that I haven't done a lot of research into, I ask the question "does this fit in what what I do know". I've done some reading on parts of Monroe, NC, (the then Mayor Ray Shute) and lot of reading, talking to folks, and recollecting about my own memories about segregation and prejudice in the south. I read nothing here that contradicts what I know. This suggests that it is probably accurate.

A couple of problems, one is mentioning that the 1950s Cuba was the place to go to for activities illegal in the USA, right after mentioning a prominent North Carolina TV commentator and future well known politicians visit there was rather unfair. Funny, but unfair. The book also is not about "Radio Free Dixie" and has little on William's exile years.

For those who don't know what segregation and Jim Crow were like, this book will allow you a peek into one town's life during those years.

Leroy Walker says

Probably of my favorite books for more reasons than I feel like going into. I read this book for an undergrad class. It's one of the few books I didn't sell once the class was over. A great read for history buffs or those interested in African American History.

Finn says

great biography of a truly impressive man, but more than that an illuminating history on the civil rights era in the South. the politics of the cold war and gender and sexuality are topics that if you asked me before i'd say, well yes of course they were important in shaping the history of black struggle in america, but really this book broke it down for me.

everyone knows about Emmet Till and more generally that in the south the most benign interaction between a black man and white woman could be construed as a violent aggression and cause for horrific white terrorism. but what didn't sink in for me until this book was that underneath every call for segregation was a constant paranoid fear of black men becoming intimate with white women. fear of a black planet indeed. within the same breath a black woman was considered fair game for white male aggressions. therefore black men like robert williams felt it their duty as men to protect their women and children in what he called armed self reliance. i imagine most historians would gloss over this, but Tyson doesn't shy away from delving into the complexities of black patriarchy in the south while also (as most historians definitely fail to do) interjecting countless stories of women in Monroe, NC fighting militantly and strategically against both white supremacy and white patriarchy.

also no where does Tyson simplify or romanticize any one camp from black nationalists in Harlem, to non

violence civil rights activists in the south, to communist Cuba. Williams worked with all of these groups of people as comrades and in solidarity towards common causes, but never signed on any dotted lines. it's clear Robert f. Williams was a highly pragmatic and committed warrior against white supremacy, who strikingly put his politics before any claim to fame, glory, or power.

this is an extremely thoughtful and well researched book that also - as an extra bonus - is a real page turner. since reading this book i'm found myself talking about Robert f Williams and what i'm learning from his life in meetings and chatting at parties. i definitely recommend it!

S. says

I'm not necessarily saying this book was the truth because one of my former professors at UW-Madison wrote it. I'm saying it, because it is. Robert F. Williams said eff your state-sanctioned violence, and if you come around my way with it, I'm blasting you.

Beth Bee says

Tyson writes as lyrically as a poet, and his combination of lyrical writing and a comprehensive description of the rise of Black Power and why many African Americans rejected Rev. Dr. King's non-violent direct action is well worth reading.

Reading this helped me to understand by proxy the romanticization and castration of the African American Freedom Movement-- including Dr. King (see "Why We Can't Wait")-- by mainstream media, culture and pop history. Instead of understanding civil rights from an "I Have A (Day)Dream" standpoint this account tells of how amidst wars for freedom at home and abroad, against Fascism, Communism and Racism, and assassinations of proponents of NVDA and Civil Rights (Medger Evers as well as Rev. Dr. King), Williams called America out on its bullshit and advocated for the most American of ideas... using Second Amendment rights to get other rights guaranteed by the Constitution. I really love this book.

Daniel says

This book is an fantastic read about a particularly amazing person, and the horrific circumstances of the Jim Crow South. It takes as its thesis that the traits of the Black Power movement in the 70s existed indigenously within the black freedom struggle throughout the 50s and 60s, despite the popular narrative of Civil Rights history. The thesis is framed by a biography of Robert F Williams, a surprisingly uncompromising and militant black liberation leader whose chapter of the NAACP was one of the only chapters to embrace poor blacks, and organize for self defense against marauding Klansmen.

The popular narrative is that Black Power was an aberration, that the Civil Rights struggle was tainted by troublemakers, and that some of the worst injustices of the Jim Crow South included being forced to sit in the back of the bus. The reality is that the roots of Black Power were being practiced (not even pioneered) by Williams in the 50s and 60s as well, and that blacks witnessed or fell victim to vigilante brutalization encouraged and empowered by white supremacist law enforcement that maintained an order where blacks were subhuman.

Breathtaking descriptions of mob violence against peaceful demonstrations leading into car chases and fire fights are made all the more intense because the reader is forced to acknowledge that this isn't a movie: That shootouts with the Klan, or threats of the same were regular occurrences for Williams.

Given the popular narrative's carefully sculpted ignorance of the indigenous nature of black militancy in their liberation struggle, this book is required reading.

Chris says

This was an amazing book that captures the struggle of the people of Monroe, along with many others across the South, against state sanctioned racist terrorism and deadly violence. Robert Williams, as the leader of the Monroe NAACP, sought to defend his community by working with everyone to arm themselves and respond to KKK and racist marauders with gunfire when necessary. Advocating for self-defense or "armed self-reliance" was somewhat of a departure from the NAACP's main line and the growing nonviolent movement, but Williams held many of the same ideals of his counterparts (integration, ending racial injustice, access to jobs, etc.). I appreciated his flexibility with the different strategies and tactics available to him. In efforts to desegregate the local pool at the Monroe Country Club, Williams led a group of teens in nonviolent protest but kept weapons in his car in case they were attacked during the protest (which happened on several occasions as they were driving to and from the pool).

Tyson's writing really drew me into the stories and accounts of various leaders and members of the Black Freedom Movement. The book goes over debates between Williams and King on the efficacy of self-defense versus total non-violence (and how nonviolent tactics are ineffective without the threat and use of violence by the oppressor), how Black Power advocates were influenced by the struggle in Monroe, and how many activists changed their views on nonviolence as a result of the struggle. The only thing I wanted the book to touch on more was Williams' time in Cuba and China. I'd love to hear some of the old Radio Free Dixie tapes.

James says

Radio Free Dixie is one of those rare books that makes you rethink everything you thought you knew about a place and time, and makes you see history in a completely new light. I've seen this book referenced in tons of other books about black power in America, and for good reason, as it lays the foundation of many of the struggles blacks would face throughout the 50s and 60s. Tyson takes on many subjects apart from Williams himself, ones that I never really gave much thought to; from the deep divisions in the civil rights movement over the use of violence to achieve progress for blacks, to the white patriarchy's pathological fear of black men's sexual prowess and their lure over white women. The sections about the intersection of racism, sex, and gender roles were probably the most fascinating parts for me. Tyson also touches on WWII and its effect on black men who fought and died to defeat fascism in Europe, only to be treated as white America's untermensch on their return home. Tyson's arguments go a long way to prove that far from submitting passively to Jim Crow until MLK and the SNCC came to town, blacks in the South were from the mid 1940s on planting the seeds of open revolt against white supremacy. this book is impossible to put down, and one that will hopefully keep you thinking about it for months after finishing it like it did me

Grace says

This book was incredible because it tells the story of a much un-written about black revolutionary who was far beyond his time in terms of his global and political outlook. Robert Williams was an outstanding human being who challenged everything that wasn't just in his world and never compromised -- which in my opinion was a great achievement. It's not a surprise that we don't learn about Robert Williams along side Martin Luther King and Malcolm X when we learn about Civil Rights -- we also don't hear about Ella Baker and Ida B. Wells, but all of them were as influential in the Civil Rights movement and even more importantly in the fight for justice for African Americans from a nation that fought until the bitter end (is still fighting) to keep black people oppressed.

I think that the author could have been a better writer, I think he could have been more succinct in some places and expanded in others, but on the whole it was a fascinating (and often unbelievable disheartening) story. One that should make the US embarrassed for their own history.

Martha says

An impressively ambitious, often successful look at the man who offered immense inspiration to the black nationalist and black power movements of the late 1960s. Tyson goes well beyond straightforward biography to look at the roles of class and gender in Williams' quest for respect and equality, and effectively, convincingly makes a case for the deep roots of the beliefs that would eventually become known as "black power."

While I would have liked a clearly chronology at times and more details about Williams' constant travel (both domestically and internationally), Radio Free Dixie remains both compelling and important.

Craig Werner says

Crucial book for anyone who wants to read past the convenient and reassuring myths of the Civil Rights Movement as a moment of interracial friendship and non-violence. Nice story. Unfortunately, as Tyson makes clear, it doesn't have a whole lot to do with reality. Shifting the camera from Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks (and, for that matter, Malcolm X), Tyson illuminates the story of Robert F. Williams, one of the very few working class individuals to lead a chapter of the NAACP (in Monroe, North Carolina). Deeply grounded in the traditions of the black South, but with substantial experience in Detroit, New York and California, Williams articulated a theory of "armed self reliance" that insisted on the need for black people to defend themselves when threatened by white supremacist violence. The fact is that King and every other leader was defended by people who knew how to use guns; King himself acknowledged that if white supremacists attacked his family, he would feel justified in responding with force. The difference was that Williams made his position clear and didn't back down when the NAACP told him to cool it. Eventually, that forced him and his family--Mabel Williams is a fascinating and important figure in the story--into exile, first in Canada, but soon thereafter in Cuba, North Vietnam and China at a time when very few westerners had any direct contact with Mao or the other Chinese leaders. Writing in a power story-teller's voice, Tyson does a brilliant job establishing Williams as a figure who deserves--demands, really--much more attention than he's received. The take-home message is that the distinction between "Civil Rights" and "Black Power" is to a significant degree an illusion. I prefer to refer to both as phases of an ongoing African American Freedom

Movement, in large part because of what I learned from Tyson's book.

Joe Hall says

This is another essential text in the library of a black home.

Heather Burmeister says

Tyson really spends time on Robert's early life, setting the stage for what became his political philosophy. There are interesting connections between Williams and Sen. Jesse Helms and Jesse's father, Jesse Helms Sr., which made Jesse Helms make more sense to me. I had really only thought of Jesse Helms in terms of "that racist homophobic bigot who rallied against the NEA in the 1980s and 1990s", and Tyson puts him in context. I was disappointed that not much was spent on the details of Robert's life outside of the United States. I mean, outside of the obvious connections between him and Fidel and Mao and the Cold War, there wasn't much incite into the details. Okay, well there was one interesting bit about Castro's visit to Harlem, but I really wanted to know more about the radio program and the radio programs impact on the American South. Sure there was an overall impact on the movement toward Black Power, but that would have happened without Robert F. Williams...perhaps the best analysis in this book was regarding violence versus non-violence and how Williams was demonized for espousing the same thing that every other black leader was espousing at this same time, and that was that non-violence was the best way to change, but that when black people were attacked or threatened with violence then by all means they ought to defend themselves. In the South the defense was often the use of a gun.
