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‘Spell Freedom’ Review: Literacy and Justice for All

The civil-rights activist Septima Clark once said she regretted that ‘young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education.’

By Naomi Schaefer Riley
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“We will have better schools only when all citizens register and vote.” That’s what Myles Horton told Septima Clark in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee, had gradually turned his institution from a training ground for labor organizing into one for civil-rights activism. Clark, a teacher from Charleston, S.C., had come to stay at Highlander to meet a group of leaders (white and black) working toward desegregation, voting rights and the abolition of Jim Crow. They ate together, sang and planned for a future in which the rights of blacks would at last be recognized. Getting opponents of segregation elected to school boards, city councils and state legislatures would take years and exacting toil. But at least they had started.

Spell Freedom: The Underground Schools That Built the Civil Rights Movement
By Elaine Weiss
Atria/One Signal Publishers
384 pages

The meeting of Clark, Horton and other leaders at Highlander in many ways launched the civil-rights movement, as the journalist Elaine Weiss recounts in her book “Spell Freedom.” Rosa Parks received her initial training in nonviolent resistance at Highlander. Ms. Weiss offers a compelling portrait of the individual characters and the constructive but sometimes rocky relationships among them.

Clark arrived at Highlander having become deeply frustrated with the lack of progress in her hometown—not only with the whites but with other blacks, who in her view had become complacent about their second-class status. Her mother and sister worried about Septima. They didn’t want her to become part of the NAACP, and neither did her fellow teachers. She understood their fears—association with Highlander and the work of teaching blacks the habits and skills of citizenship risked job loss and personal safety. But she couldn’t stay away.

Early in her career Clark had worked as a teacher on Johns Island, at that time an entirely rural area surrounded by rivers a few miles from Charleston. Its residents were sharecroppers, poor and isolated. Now she returned seeking leaders who would help with voting efforts. Esau Jenkins, one of Clark’s former students, also spent some time at Highlander. As Ms. Weiss explains, “Esau would tell Myles, over and over again, exactly what his island needed: a school for teaching adults reading and learning how to vote. A school that would prepare them to become proud citizens who wanted better things. That was the basic thing—not the only thing—but the key to everything else.”

These adult schools would eventually be replicated across the South and become known as the Citizenship Education Project. On Johns Island, Jenkins and Clark used a grocery store as a front and the back room for classes. They enlisted Bernice Robinson, a local hairdresser, to teach. She had brought a children’s reading primer with her the first day, but ultimately determined the material wouldn’t interest those who came and decided instead to ask the 14 students what they hoped to learn. They wanted to write their names, to be able to fill out a mail order, to read the Bible (not just recite what they had memorized), to read the newspaper and to write letters to family far away. So determined were they to read and write that the new students “were trying too hard, gripping too tightly, bearing down too heavily,” as Ms. Weiss writes, and “one after another, their pencils broke.”

From the beginning the students at the Citizenship Education Project schools wanted to learn much more than how to vote, but the leaders at Highlander (and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which eventually took over these schools when they became too numerous for Highlander to coordinate or fund) saw them as an efficient way to register voters. Ms. Weiss notes that Clark was "skeptical of the SCLC's . . . emphasis on flashy demonstrations over the slow and prosaic work of educating Black citizens to understand their rights." She expressed this concern to Martin Luther King Jr. himself. "Direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotion that," she told him, "most young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education."

The controversy over the citizenship schools, as Clark's academies would come to be known, was a microcosm of the tensions within the long effort to achieve full rights for black Americans, going all the way back to Emancipation. Should civil-rights leaders push for legislation and take matters to the courts, or should they mainly limit their energies to preparing the black population for the responsibilities of citizenship? Clark stressed the latter. Yet in "Spell Freedom," the story of citizenship schools is sometimes eclipsed by accounts of legislative battles and protests—descriptions that may be found in many other histories of the civil-rights movement.

Eventually demands for immediate action gave rise to black nationalism, which in many ways took over the civil-rights movement itself. As Ms. Weiss writes, Clark "could understand why many of the young people . . . were angry and distrustful of white people, after being beaten and tortured in prison, watching their friends and comrades murdered or maimed." But she told the radical civil-rights activist Stokely Carmichael that change was often slow and that violence wasn't going to accomplish the movement's goals: "Can't you find something else to tell these young men to do other than to have them going around with their fists clenched saying Black Power and intimidating black people?" she asked him. "Don't you think you could train them to something better than take sticks and knock out the windows of these merchants?"

According to Ms. Weiss, "Carmichael just laughed." Clark may have had the better argument, but it is Carmichael's legacy that lives on.

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