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Bayard Rustin: an annotated bibliography of materials relating to Rustin as a Quaker and peace activist

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Abstract

Although Bayard Rustin was one of the most important leaders of the American civil rights movement from the advent of its modern period in the 1950s until well into the 1980s, his name was seldom mentioned; he received comparatively little press or media attention, and others' names were usually much more readily associated with the movement than his was. His was a behind-the-scenes role that, for all its importance, never garnered Rustin the public acclaim he deserved. Rustin's homosexuality and early communist affiliation probably meant that the importance of his contribution to the civil rights and peace movements would never be acknowledged. However, fairness demands that the extent of Rustin's work receive a fair public reception.

Keywords

Rustin, Quakerism, Peace Activism, Civil Rights Movement, Homosexuality.

Biography

Bayard Taylor Rustin was born on 17 March 1912 to Florence Rustin, one of eight children of Julia and Janifer Rustin of West Chester,

Pennsylvania. Florence's child had been born out of wedlock; the father was Archie Hopkins. Julia and Janifer decided to raise young Bayard as their son, the youngest of the large Rustin family. Julia Rustin had been raised a member of the Society of Friends, and even though she attended the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the denomination of her husband, she impressed on the children she raised certain Quaker principles: the equality of all human beings before God, the vital need for non-violence and the importance of dealing with everyone with love and respect (Anderson 1997:23).

Rustin was a gifted and successful student in the schools of West Chester, both academically and on his high school track and football teams. It was during this period of his life that Bayard began to demonstrate his gift for singing with a beautiful tenor voice. He attended Wilberforce University and Cheyney State Teachers College. In 1937 he moved to New York City (Anderson 1997:47). Rustin became a member of the Manhattan Monthly Meeting shortly after moving to New York; he was to remain a member for the rest of his life (Barbour *et al* 1995:301). He enrolled in the City College of New York, although he never received a degree. It was at this time that Rustin began to organise for the Young Communist League of the City College of New York. The communists' progressive stance on the issue of racial injustice appealed to him, although he began to be disillusioned with them after the Communist Party's abrupt about-face on the issue of segregation in the American military in the wake of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

He broke with the Young Communist League (Anderson 1997:56) and soon found himself seeking out A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and at that time the leading articulator of the rights of Afro-Americans (Anderson 1997:58-59). He soon headed the youth wing of a march on Washington that Randolph envisioned. Randolph called off the demonstration when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 8802 (Anderson 1997:60), forbidding racial discrimination in the employment of workers in defence industries. Randolph's calling off of the projected march

caused a temporary breach between him and Bayard Rustin, and Rustin transferred his organising efforts to the peace movement, first in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and later in the American Friends Service Committee, the Socialist Party and the War Resisters League (Anderson 1997:68, 75-76).

Although as a member of one of the government-recognised 'peace churches' he was entitled to do alternative service rather than serve in the armed services, Rustin found himself unable to accept this 'easy way out', given the fact that many young men who were not members of the recognised peace churches were receiving harsh prison sentences for refusing to serve. In 1944, Rustin was found guilty of violating the Selective Service Act and was sentenced to three years in a federal prison. In March 1944 Rustin was sent to the federal penitentiary in Ashland, Kentucky. He then set about to resist the pervasive segregation then the norm in prisons in the United States. Although faced with vicious racism from some of the prison guards and white prisoners, Rustin faced frequent cruelty with courage and completely non-violent resistance (Rustin 1947a:241-48).

On release from prison, Rustin got involved again with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which staged a "journey of reconciliation" through four Southern and border states in 1947 to test the application of the Supreme Court's recent ruling that discrimination in seating in interstate transportation was illegal (*Personalities and Projects* 1949).

Rustin's resistance to North Carolina's Jim Crow law against integration in transportation earned him twenty-eight days' hard labour on a chain gang, where he met with the usual racist taunts and tortures on the part of his prisoners (Rustin 1971:13-25). Between 1947 and 1952, Rustin travelled first to India and then to Africa under the aegis of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, exploring the non-violent dimensions of the Indian and Ghanaian independence movements (Rustin 1947b, Rustin 1952).

In 1953 Rustin was arrested for 'public indecency' in Pasadena, California, while lecturing under the auspices of the American Association of University Women. It was the first time that Rustin's homosexuality had come to public attention, and at that time homosexual behaviour in all states was a criminal offence. Although the gay rights movement in the United States was still several years in the future, Rustin's conviction and his relatively open attitude about his homosexuality set the stage for him to become an elder gay icon in the decades to come (Chauncey and Kennedy 1987). As the years went on, gay rights became of a piece with his belief in the inherent dignity of Afro-Americans and other oppressed people (*Open Hands* 1987). As a consequence of his arrest, Rustin was released from his position on the staff of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

It was at this low point in his life that Bayard Rustin began a twelve-year stint as executive secretary of the War Resisters League (Anderson 1997:172). Rustin also contributed greatly to a compilation of pacifist strategy (American Friends Service Committee 1959).

In 1956 Rustin was approached by Lillian Smith, the celebrated Southern novelist who authored *Strange Fruit*, to provide Dr. Martin Luther King with some practical advice on how to apply Gandhian principles of nonviolence to the boycott of public transportation then taking shape in Montgomery, Alabama (Rustin 1956). On leave from the WRL, Rustin spent time in Montgomery and Birmingham, advising King, who had not yet completely embraced principles of non-violence in his struggle. By 1957, Rustin was busy playing a large role in the birth of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and in the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington that took place on 17 May 1957 to urge President Eisenhower to enforce the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling that the nation's schools be desegregated. Rustin was also instrumental in organising two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools in 1958 and 1959 (Anderson 1997:210).

Arguably the high point of Bayard Rustin's political career was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom which took place on 28 August 1963, the place of Dr. Martin Luther King's stirring 'I Have a Dream' speech. Rustin was by all accounts the March's chief architect (Lewis 1989). To devise a march of at least one-quarter of a million participants and to co-ordinate the various sometimes fractious civil rights organisations that played a part in it was a herculean feat of mobilisation.

By 1965 Rustin had come to believe that the period for militant street action had come to an end; the legal foundation for segregation had been irrevocably shattered (Rustin 1965). Now came the larger, more difficult task of forging an alliance of dispossessed groups in American society into a progressive force. Rustin saw this coalition encompassing Afro-Americans and other minorities, trade unions, liberals and religious groups (Rustin 1966). That Rustin's plan of action did not go further was, in the opinion of several political analysts, because of the war in Vietnam, whose enormous monetary, psychological and spiritual cost managed to subsume any progressive movement (Bussel 1993). Rustin's steadfast opposition to 'identity politics' also came under criticism by exponents of the developing Black Power movement (Rustin 1970). His critical stance toward affirmative action programmes and black studies departments in American universities was not a popular viewpoint among many of his fellow Afro-American intellectuals, and as at various other times of his life Rustin found himself to a certain extent isolated (Harrington 1966).

Another viewpoint which did not endear Bayard Rustin to many leftists or radical Black Power adherents was his consistent support of Israel. In the wake of the Holocaust, Rustin believed very strongly that the Jews needed their own state. While further believing that the state of Israel had been guilty of injustices against Palestinians, he nonetheless contended that the vituperative clamour on the part of Middle Eastern states to destroy Israel had provoked many of the excesses of the Israeli government (Rustin 1974).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Rustin worked as a delegate for the organisation Freedom House, monitoring elections and the status of human rights in countries like Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Haiti, Poland and Zimbabwe. In all his efforts Rustin evinced a lifelong, unwavering conviction in behalf of the value of democratic principles (Bloomstein 1988).

It was Rustin's human rights expedition, to Haiti in 1987, that drew the final curtain on his remarkable life. After his visit, under the aegis of Freedom House, to study prospects for democratic elections in that unhappy country (Anderson 1997:353), Rustin began to feel unwell. His symptoms were initially misdiagnosed as intestinal parasites, but on 21 August 1987, Rustin was admitted to Lenox Hill Hospital and diagnosed with a perforated appendix. He died of cardiac arrest on 24 August (Review of the News of the Week Ending August 30, 1987).

Although Bayard Rustin lived in the shadow of more charismatic civil rights leaders, he can lay real claim to have been an indispensable unsung force behind the movement toward equality for America's black citizens, and more largely for the rights of humans around the globe, in the twentieth century (*Los Angeles Times* 1987). Throughout his life, Rustin's Quakerism was a unifying force in his life and a strong plank in his personal philosophy, incorporating beliefs that were of central importance to him: that there is 'that of God' in every person, that all are entitled to a decent life and that a life of service to others is the way to happiness and true fulfillment (Weeks 1998b).

Annotated Bibliography

1. . . Books and articles by Rustin

'Report of Youth Field Worker Bayard Rustin: September 30 to November 28, 1941.' New York: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1941.

Rustin recounts activities he has undertaken in his capacity as Youth Field Worker for New York State in the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

'Imprisonment from the Inside.' *The Prison Journal* 27(1):241-248 (January 1947a).

Operation Calcutta. New York, Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1947b.

'A Call to a Seven-day Fast for Peace.' New York, Peacemakers Fast Committee, 1950.

Rustin was one of eight signatories (among them A. J. Muste and Dorothy Day) in this call for a week-long fast in Washington, D. C. in protest against the decision of the U. S. government to proceed with the development of the hydrogen bomb.

'African Revolution.' *Fellowship* 18(10):1-6 (December 1952).

'Report on Montgomery, Alabama.' New York: War Resisters League, 1956.

Speak Truth to Power: a Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence. Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1959.

Rustin's name does not appear in the section entitled 'A Note to the Reader' where the names of the members of the compiling committee are listed, though he had a major part in the formation of this booklet. He asked that his name be left off, because he had been arrested on a 'morals' charge in Pasadena in 1953 and did not wish the reputability of the document to be lessened by the inclusion of his name.

The philosophy to be found in *Speak Truth to Power* is summed up on page 25: 'We have gone wrong here in America. We close our eyes to the meaning of the subjection of the human spirit to violence'.

'From protest to politics: the future of the civil rights movement.'
Commentary 39(2):25-31 (February 1965).

'Black power' and Coalition Politics. New York: Distributed by the A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1966.

'A silent tragedy.' *Fellowship* 34(5):6 (June-July 1968).

Rustin points out that many of the politicians who proclaimed Dr Martin Luther King's murder a tragedy still did not make attempts to bring about the racially integrated and colourblind society that Dr King envisioned.

'The Failure of Black Separatism.' *Harper's Magazine* 240:25-34 (January 1970).

Down the Line. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.

This work is a compilation of writings Rustin penned from the 1940s through the early 1970s; drawn from articles Rustin wrote for various periodicals and also taken from his monographic works, they emphasise the breadth and depth of Rustin's thought as a political analyst. Undergirding all of Rustin's attention to various contemporary political events is his belief that it is essential that American blacks align themselves in a movement that encompasses many other groups and moves toward economic advancement for all in a capitalist society.

'How American Blacks view Israel.' *Viewpoint* (National Council of Young Israel (U. S.)). (59):2, 9 (May 1974).

Rustin reflects on the incongruity of black nationalists' support of the Arab states' determination to destroy Israel. He points to the long history of Arab enslavement of blacks that preceded the European institution of

slavery. He asserts that Israel is the only democratic state in the Middle East, one that might serve as an example to surrounding Arab countries. While Rustin acknowledges the plight of the Palestinians, he maintains that until the states of the Middle East drop their insistence that Israel be destroyed, peace cannot come to the troubled region and the sufferings of the Palestinians will not be capable of resolution.

with Charles Bloomstein, et al. *South Africa: Is Peaceful Change Possible?* New York: New York Friends Group, 1984.

The authors make several suggestions regarding bringing about democracy in South Africa without bloodshed: moral and material support to South African organisations like trade unions, churches and church groups seeking to end apartheid; support for campaigns for disinvestment and boycotts as well as the Solarz Bill; the end of the so-called 'constructive engagement' policy of the federal government toward South Africa; expansion of various programmes, both public and private, offering educational opportunities and training to non-white South Africans.

II. Literature about Rustin.

Anderson, J. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen: a Biography*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

Anderson, a reporter for *The New Yorker*, chronicles Rustin's life, giving emphasis to his lifelong reliance on non-violent civil disobedience to oppressive laws and governments. While the Quaker part of Rustin's life is not dwelt on in any detail, Anderson does go to some effort to trace Rustin's Quaker upbringing to his later activities in behalf of civil rights, peace and disarmament.

Barbour, H.; Densmore, C.; Moger, E.H.; Sorel, N.C.; Van Wagner, A.D.; Worrall, A.J., eds. *Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of Friends in New York Yearly Meetings*. Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

The chapter, pages 276-320, outlines some of the peace and social concerns activities of the New York Yearly Meeting; in many of these activities Bayard Rustin played a large role, especially in civil rights and the drawing of attention to human rights abuses throughout the world.

Bloomstein, C. 'Bayard Rustin.' *Dissent* 35(1):114 (Winter 1988).

Political scientist Bloomstein sketches Rustin's career as an activist in this memorial tribute, linking him to progressive politics throughout his life.

Bussel, M.R. *Hard Traveling: Powers Hapgood, Harvey Swados, Bayard Rustin and the Fate of Independent Radicalism in Twentieth Century America*. Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1993.

Cary, S. G. 'An infinite ocean of light.' *Friends Journal* 37(3):25-29 (March 1991).

The author, retiring after twelve years as clerk of the American Friends Service Committee Board and Corporation, reflects on his career as a peacemaker, and relates his recollection of Bayard Rustin at a get-together at Haverford College to hammer out the pamphlet *Speak Truth to Power*. After contributing probably more than any of the other participants, Rustin asked that his name be left off the pamphlet's title page. He was concerned that his homosexuality might diminish the pamphlet's authority. Ever after Cary has been unable to 'assign a moral dimension to people's sexual orientation'.

Chauncey, G., Jr. and Kennedy, L.. 'Time on two crosses: an interview with Bayard Rustin.' *The Village Voice* 32(26):27-29 (30 June 1987).

The reporters query Rustin on the complication of being a gay man in national prominence as a civil rights activist. Rustin discusses the tribulations of being homosexual and a leading light in the civil rights movement at a time when being gay, open or not, was a distinct liability. He also talks about the debt gay people owe to the civil rights movement. Part of a special issue entitled *Gay Life 1987: State of Emergency*.

Clark, B. P. 'Remembering Bayard.' *Friends Journal* 40(5):5-6 (May 1994).

The author, a conscientious objector during World War II, relates a story of how Bayard Rustin sang to some German prisoners of war after they had been insulted by an American woman as they ate their dinner aboard a railway dining car. Rustin's Quakerly rôle as a peacemaker was never so concrete.

Fellowship 'Bayard Rustin leaves F.O.R. staff.' 19(3):19-20 (May 1953).

A news item about Rustin's leaving the F.O.R. 'for urgent personal reasons', making oblique reference to his arrest on a morals charge in Pasadena, California.

Fellowship 'Pacifists, Africans enter Sahara test area this month.' 25(23): (December 1959).

Rustin took part in a twelve-person demonstration against French testing of nuclear weapons in the Sahara Desert. He was sent by the American Committee on Nonviolent Action.

Fellowship. 'After twenty years.what?: Bayard Rustin.' 29(1):14-15 (March 1963).

A brief biography of Rustin, detailing some of his activities as pacifist and civil rights organiser.

Kenworthy, L. S. 'Bayard Rustin: crusader for racial and social justice.' In: Kenworthy, L.S., ed., *Living in the Light: Some Quaker Pioneers of the 20th Century*. Kennett Square, PA: Friends General Conference. Vol.1:190-204.

Kenworthy chronicles the major events of the life of Bayard Rustin, in a life dedicated to the advancement of human dignity, befitting Quaker ideals.

Lewis, J. 'Bayard Rustin: architect of the 1963 March on Washington.' *Black Collegian* 19(3):70, 118 (January-February 1989).

Congressman Lewis recalls his participation in the March and Bayard Rustin's instrumental role as its organiser. He was the builder of a 'beloved community of peace and justice'.

Los Angeles Times 'Rustin: commitment was firm.' (26 August 1987).

This editorial-*cum*-obituary summarises Rustin's lifelong commitment to the causes of equality of all people, non-violence and social justice.

Open Hands 'An interview with Bayard Rustin.' 2(4):3-7 (Spring 1987).

Personalities and Projects: Social Welfare in Terms of Significant People. New York, Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1949.

This short book contains an outline of Rustin's career to that time, emphasising his arrests in connection with the challenging of Jim Crow laws and his commitment to non-violent resistance.

Weeks, S. 'Bayard Rustin-Radical pacifist Quaker.' *Friends Journal* 44(11):28-31 (November 1998a).

Weeks intersperses his personal recollections of Rustin with a review of Anderson 1997. Weeks worked for the

American Friends Service Committee during the '50s until his departure from the United States in 1968, and he counted Bayard Rustin a personal friend through this period. The two used to meet at the home of Robert Gilmore, a fellow Quaker and director of New York's first American Friends Service Committee office, to plan strategies of direct action in behalf of peace and racial justice. Weeks admires Anderson's biography in this review, but he thinks that more emphasis on Rustin's Quakerism and how it influenced his career as an activist might have been added.

Weeks, S. 'Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement.' *Friends Journal* 44(11):31 (November 1998b).

Weeks reviews the biography of Rustin written by James Haskins in 1997 directed toward young people. The reviewer maintains that because the author wished to write biographies of 'black heroes' to serve as rôle models for black youth, the book tends to be polemical and to underemphasise Rustin's commitment to equality and brotherhood.

III. Other References

Harrington, S. 'The prodigal sons: will they come home?' *The Village Voice* 11(52):1, 30-32 (13 October 1966).

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