



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
**MARTIN
LUTHER
KING, JR.**

EDITED BY CLAYBORNE CARSON

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It gives me great pleasure to finally see my husband's words in autobiographical form. During the Civil Rights Movement a number of publishers and news organizations showed remarkable courage in bringing Martin's views to the public. Without these media outlets, the bits and pieces of which this autobiography is made would have been lost to posterity. Hence, my gratitude goes to HarperCollins, William Morrow, Pocket Books, Henry Holt, Pitman, University of California Press, Harper & Row, Random House, New American Library, Kennedy Presidential Library, *Albany Herald*, *Atlanta Journal*, *Christian Century*, *Ebony*, *Hindustan Times*, *Jet*, *Look*, *Massachusetts Review*, *McCall's*, *Montgomery Adviser*, *Nashville Tennessean*, *The Nation*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Progressive*, *Redbook*, *Saturday Review*, *Southern Courier*, *TIME*, ABC, BBC, CBC, *The Merv Griffin Show*, NBC, and WAII-TV, as well as others too numerous to mention.

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—Coretta Scott King, September 1998

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

I first saw Martin Luther King, Jr., from a distance. He was up on the platform in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the concluding speaker at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I was below in the vast crowd of listeners around the reflecting pool, a nineteen-year-old college student attending my first civil rights demonstration. He would become a Man of the Year, a Nobel Prize laureate, and a national icon. I would become a foot soldier in the movement he symbolized and would walk through doors of opportunity made possible by that movement.

More than two decades later, after I became a historian at Stanford University, Mrs. Coretta Scott King unexpectedly called me to offer the opportunity to edit the papers of her late husband. Since accepting her offer to become director of the King Papers Project, I have immersed myself in the documents recording his life and have gradually come to know a man I never met. The study of King has become the central focus of my scholarly life, and this project is the culmination of my career as a documentary editor. The March on Washington started me on the path to *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* This book is a product of King's intellectual legacy, just as I am a beneficiary of his social justice legacy.

The following narrative of King's life is based entirely on his own words. These are his thoughts about the events in his life as he expressed them at different times in various ways. Although he never wrote a comprehensive autobiography, King published three major books as well as numerous articles and essays focusing on specific periods of his life. In addition, many of his speeches, sermons, letters, and unpublished manuscripts provide revealing information. Taken together, these materials provide the basis for this approximation of the autobiography that King might have written had his life not suddenly ended.

For the most part, this book consists of autobiographical writings that were published during King's lifetime and were personally edited by him. In many instances King was assisted by others, since he made considerable use of collaborators. Nevertheless, King's papers provide ample evidence of his active involvement in the editorial processes that resulted in his most significant publications. Indeed, the preparation for this autobiography involved examining

preliminary drafts (several handwritten) of King's published writings in order to determine his authorial intentions. I have included passages from such drafts when they contain revealing or clarifying information that does not appear in the published version.

Although King's published autobiographical writings provide the basic structure of this book, they constitute an incomplete narrative. In order to fill out the narrative and to include King's accounts of events that are not discussed in his published writings, I have incorporated passages from hundreds of documents and recordings, including many statements that were not intended for publication or even intended as autobiography. These passages augment the published accounts and serve as transitions between more extended narratives. In some instances, I have made editorial changes, which are explained below, in order to construct a narrative that is readable and comprehensible. This exercise of editorial craft is intended to provide readers with a readily accessible assemblage of King's writings and recorded statements that would otherwise be available only to a handful of King scholars.

I trust that readers will recognize and appreciate the fact that this narrative can never approach the coherence and comprehensiveness that would have been possible if King had been able to write a complete account of his life. Thus, this narrative understates the importance in King's life of his family. Although King often acknowledged the centrality of his wife, Coretta Scott King, in his public and private life, his extant papers rarely noted the degree to which she participated in protest activities and other public events. Similarly, King's close ties to his parents, his children, his sister Christine King Farris, and his brother A. D. King are insufficiently reflected in his papers, despite the fact that these relatives played crucial roles in his life.

The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., is, therefore, largely a religious and political autobiography rather than an exploration of a private life. It is necessarily limited to those aspects of King's life that he chose to reveal in his papers, but King was never garrulous about his private life and was unlikely to have chosen his autobiography as an opportunity to reveal intimate details of his life. In his personal papers, however, King sometimes overcame his reticence to expose his private feelings to public view. He left behind documents that offer information that has never previously been published and that collectively defines his character. Although King may have selected or utilized these materials differently than I have, he (or researchers and co-authors working with him) would certainly have recognized them as essential starting points for understanding his life.

This book is an extension of my charge from the King estate to assemble and

edit King's papers. I have benefited from the long-term, collective effort of dozens of staff members and student researchers who assisted in the search for autobiographical passages amidst the several hundred thousand King-related documents that the King Papers Project has identified (see Acknowledgments section). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, is one by-product of the project's continuing effort to publish a definitive, annotated fourteen-volume scholarly edition of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

The fact that *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, has been compiled and edited after King's death warrants an explanation of how it was constructed. Although many autobiographies are written with some editorial assistance—from minor copyediting to extensive rewriting of raw information (often tape-recorded recollections) supplied by the subject—readers are rarely made aware of the significance of such assistance. The role of Alex Haley in the production of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a well-known demonstration of the value of behind-the-scenes editorial assistance for a subject who lacks the time or the ability to write an autobiographical narrative that is compelling and of literary value. Autobiographical editing succeeds when the resulting narrative convinces readers that it accurately represents the thoughts of the subject.

The authenticity of this autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., derives from the fact that I have followed a consistent methodology to preserve the integrity of King's statements and writing while also merging these texts into a single narrative. Although great care has been taken to insure that this account of King's life is based on his own words, it is also the result of many challenging editorial judgments. Among these was the decision to construct a narrative that traced King's life to its end by combining source texts of many different periods in his life. The comprehensiveness of this narrative implies that King wrote it, with considerable editorial and research assistance, at the very end of his life. Although many of the source texts present King's attitudes and perspectives at earlier points in his life, King's viewpoints on major issues remained quite stable during his adult years; I feel justified in believing that King's final recounting of his beliefs would not have differed in any significant way from his earlier recollections.

The materials used to construct this narrative are the types of documentary materials that King (or those assisting him) would undoubtedly have consulted while preparing an autobiography. These source texts, which constitute the raw materials for this work, include sections and passages taken from the following