

Freedom Summer

Book review

Art Myatt

a review of

Freedom Summer by Sally Belfrage (Viking, 1965)

The many aspects of the movement are presented in the often chaotic way they presented themselves to Sally Belfrage in the summer of 1964. Facts which could be dry and even boring if given in abstract take on life and meaning in the particular. They are sometimes present in connection with the personality of the person who spoke of them. Sometimes they are part of the history of a friend who survived them. Sometimes, facts come in to give meaning to the efforts of an Establishment man—a Greenwood deputy, an FBI agent, a representative of the justice department, a television reporter—to deny them. And sometimes, they are summed up in what was, for Sally Belfrage, one more step in the long walk of understanding.

This is not so much a book about as an expression of the civil rights movement; it does not stand between its readers and the Movement. *Freedom Summer* unmistakably comes from within the Movement; readers must view the Movement not through the book but in it. My impression is that she went South that summer with the personal goal of understanding the Movement in human terms. She succeeded in understanding much and she succeeded in writing it down. It is this rare achievement that makes the book valuable. She writes so directly feeling of something like personal contact. Thus, something of the understanding which can be created only by experience is available to us.

One main element of the book, apparently also a main element of Sally Belfrage's consciousness, is "how it feels". This appears in no crude way, but deftly. She does not generalize, "This is how it feels to be a civil rights worker." Generalization would communicate little of the complexity of the ambivalences. She writes of dropping to the floor as the room fills with tear gas. She writes of listening to Bob Moses announce, "The kids are dead." She writes of waiting in jail for news or voices or food of anything from outside. While dodging cars driven by Greenwood's whites or teaching in Greenwood's Freedom School, while hearing a white voice on the phone hate her or eating with the Negro family at whose house she stayed, she was consciously alive. She was as aware of herself as of the people with her. In the writing, self and scene and others have been blended without being mixed. Whether vague and shifting of simple and intense, emotions—hers and others—she faced with honesty, and she communicates them with no noticeable strain on her writing talents.

To a surface reader, it may appear that Sally Belfrage is an egotist who thinks the Movement important because she was there. In this instance as in others, appearance is not reality. Generally speaking, such people are more rare in the Movement outside it; society makes it comfortable for the Movement nowhere. But that is irrelevant. The fact is she writes of the Movement she knew, and of herself only insofar as she is directly related to it. The lengths to which this is true are incredible. By the end of the book, all we know of her life outside that summer is that she lives in California. That we know only because she sent a telegram to her Congressman and because she found in Greenwood an old family friend. We also know, rather indirectly, that she is of the middle class, if that is knowledge.

To finish, I suspect she would agree as I do with a statement from Victor Serge, "It is hard for me to disentangle my own person from the social processes, the ideas and activities in which it has shared, which matter more than it and give it value, I do not think of myself as at all an individualist: rather as a 'personalist,' in that I view human personality as a supreme value, only integrated in society and in history. The experience and thought of one man have no significance which deserves to last except in this sense." Serge said more but this is enough.

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