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Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era (Southern Dissent)

Gail S. Murray

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"An important new dimension to the study of civil rights and southern society. [The essays] chronicle the mostly untold story of southern white women--wives, mothers, club members--who possessed the moral courage to challenge Jim Crow traditions."--Jack Davis, University of Alabama, Birmingham

"Rich and insightful assessments of southern white women of privilege who chose to throw off the mantle of protection provided by race in order to address critical issues in southern society and politics."--Nancy Hewitt, Rutgers University

While playing the southern lady for the white political establishment, thousands of mostly middle-class, middle-aged, married white women become grassroots activists in America's civil rights movement, sometimes at the cost of friendships, status, economic security, and family support. The original essays in this collection tell who these women were, why they became committed to racial justice and equal opportunity, and how they organized to change southern society.

The women worked within a range of national and local institutions, both segregated and biracial. Their stories, largely unknown, span half of the 20th century from the New Deal to the early 1970s and took place across the South from Louisville to New Orleans. Some of them brought years of experience in church groups or welfare organizations to the movement; others became converts only when local crises forced them to examine the hypocrisy and privilege of their lives. Some couched their civil rights arguments in terms of their maternal identity and a belief that racial discrimination defiled the world in which they reared their children. Many shared a basic optimism about the willingness of white southerners to change. And many were well aware that their leisure to pursue reform activities often was made possible by the black women who managed their households, cooked their food, and tended their children.

Four essays profile specific women and their personal strategies for attacking prejudice and discrimination. The remaining essays focus on particular organizations, such as the YWCA, United Church Women, the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, and the Saturday Luncheon Club, a group whose name belied its subversive intentions. Using autobiography, oral history, news accounts, organization papers, and personal letters, the contributors show the importance of female support networks, the influence of African American mentors, and the social ostracism that resulted from defying white supremacy.

In the ongoing struggle for human dignity and a voice in American life, this book adds a new and necessary dimension to our understanding of both biracial activism and white anti-racism.

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