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James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement

Tim Dodge
Auburn University

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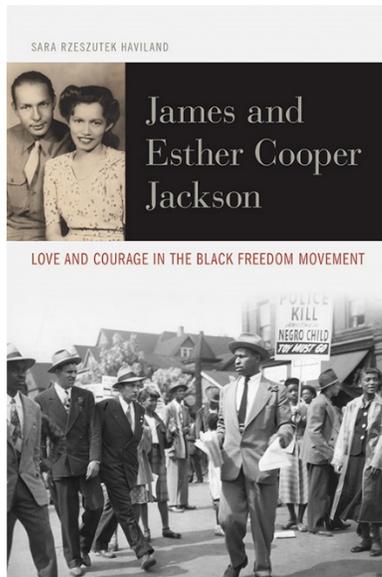
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public education in southern United States as well as all of the United States.

Melinda F. Matthews
University of Louisiana at Monroe

James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement. Sara Rzeszutek Haviland. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8131-6625. 359 p. \$45.00.



This is both an inspiring and a disturbing book. It is inspiring in terms of the heroic efforts and sacrifices made by James Jackson (1914-2007) and Esther Cooper Jackson (1917-) on behalf of the black freedom movement; it is disturbing in terms of the severe harassment they endured from the federal government due to their leftwing activism and, in Jack's case, lifelong affiliation with the Communist Party (CPUSA). The book is also inspiring as a story of two people who, over the course of a 66-year marriage, succeeded in working both together and separately to combine their love of family with their activism, to advance the cause of African American civil rights. The story of "Jack" Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson is also important in that they were a part of the civil rights movement that has largely remained hidden: the leftwing African American activists who got their start in the 1930s and 1940s and who were, in many ways, eclipsed by the better known liberal civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s and the more militant black nationalists active in the 1960s and 1970s.

Jack and Esther both came from well-to-do African American families in Virginia and were college educated. Their passion for civil rights and for leftwing politics was instilled early as they observed the poverty and harsh conditions suffered by African Americans living under southern segregation. Both came of age during the Great Depression when the certainties of capitalism were in doubt and leftwing organizations including the Communist Party

were seen as offering viable alternative approaches. The Popular Front was a Communist-affiliated coalition of leftist and some centrist groups and during the 1930s and 1940s appealed to a number of mostly younger activists such as Jack and Esther. A major appeal of the Popular Front and the actual Communist Party itself was a truly progressive approach to civil rights for African Americans. Jack and Esther saw more mainstream liberal groups such as the NAACP as too tame and also as lacking a class-based approach to the advancement of civil rights. The Popular Front also appealed to Jack and Esther as an interracial coalition for advancing the cause of civil rights.

Sara Rzeszutek Haviland (Assistant Professor of History at St. Francis College) does a convincing job of linking the various avenues of activism engaged in by the couple from the 1930s onward to their approach to family life. Both were heavily involved in working for the Southern Negro Youth Congress in the early years of their marriage. The Cooper Jacksons took a completely egalitarian approach to gender roles as well. They made connections between racism and anticommunism with the destruction of family life and the black freedom movement. Their marriage was at times put under serious stress such as when Jack served three years in Burma during World War II and when Jack went underground during the years 1951-1955 during the height of Cold War anticommunist hysteria. This is where the book becomes particularly disturbing.

No matter where one's political sympathies lie, the truly nasty harassment suffered by Esther Cooper Jackson and her and Jack's two young daughters at the hands of the F.B.I. is simply appalling. As the Cold War grew in intensity in the immediate postwar years, southern racists successfully linked communism to civil rights activism in the minds of much of the American public. True communists such as Jack faced possible prison sentences under provisions of the Smith Act even if they had no intentions of violently overthrowing the federal government. The Smith Act (otherwise known as the Alien Registration Act) passed in 1940 also required all adult non-U.S. citizen residents to register with the government. Jack was (inaccurately) indicted for "conspiracy to teach or advocate the violent overthrow of the government" in 1951 (p. 124). Not wanting to risk a trial and likely conviction and lengthy prison sentence, he went into hiding. In an attempt to break Esther's will and get her to reveal Jack's whereabouts (of which she had no knowledge during this time), the F.B. I. engaged in truly mean spirited tactics such as destroying one's ability to get or keep a job and, in Esther's case, also by inaccurately alleging that she had an extra source of income thus forcing her to temporarily withdraw her four-year old daughter, Kathy, from nursery school. Fortunately, Esther was able to work with the Families Committee of Smith Act Victims to put pressure on the New York Welfare Department and was, ultimately, able to reinstate Kathy in nursery school so that she, Esther, could get a job to support herself and her two daughters. Haviland relates other heavy handed techniques of harassment employed against family members of other accused Communists including one where a woman was unable to either register or sell her car which also,

suspiciously, had its tires flattened by spikes driven into them. Ultimately, Jack turned himself in and then he and his family endured nearly two years of trials before he was acquitted of conspiracy to violently overthrow the government.

Haviland also devotes some chapters to describing how Jack and Esther continued with their activism as the Civil Rights Movement gained steam over the next couple of decades even as their earlier work through the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Popular Front, etc. was largely forgotten and overshadowed. Jack ultimately was able to make a living and remain active as editor of the Communist Party newspaper, *The Worker*, while Esther found greater success as editor of the influential magazine, *Freedomways*. Haviland points out that while influential, Esther's work with *Freedomways* brought her a lot of controversy and some headaches in addition to providing an important forum for discussing the burgeoning black arts movement and the cause of civil rights.

James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement is not an easy read but it makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the history of the civil rights movement. It illuminates a rarely discussed aspect of civil rights history: the involvement of and contributions of African American leftists who helped lay much of the groundwork and provided some of the theoretical framework of the civil rights movement in the two decades prior to the mid-1950s emergence of civil rights as a truly national concern. As befits a scholarly work, the book provides numerous endnotes for each chapter as well as a helpful selected bibliography of primary and secondary sources. This title is recommended for academic libraries and large public libraries collecting in the history of the civil rights movement, African American history, modern American history, and in American politics.

Tim Dodge
Auburn University