

The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice

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Longlisted for the National Book Award

A groundbreaking book—two decades in the works—that tells the story of how a brilliant writer-turned-activist, granddaughter of a mulatto slave, and the first lady of the United States, whose ancestry gave her membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution, forged an enduring friendship that changed each of their lives and helped to alter the course of race and racism in America.

Pauli Murray first saw Eleanor Roosevelt in 1933, at the height of the Depression, at a government-sponsored, two-hundred-acre camp for unemployed women where Murray was living, something the first lady had pushed her husband to set up in her effort to do what she could for working women and the poor. The first lady appeared one day unannounced, behind the wheel of her car, her secretary and a Secret Service agent her passengers. To Murray, then aged twenty-three, Roosevelt's self-assurance was a symbol of women's independence, a symbol that endured throughout Murray's life.

Five years later, Pauli Murray, a twenty-eight-year-old aspiring writer, wrote a letter to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt protesting racial segregation in the South. The president's staff forwarded Murray's letter to the federal Office of Education. The first lady wrote back.

Murray's letter was prompted by a speech the president had given at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, praising the school for its commitment to social progress. Pauli Murray had been denied admission to the Chapel Hill graduate school because of her race.

She wrote in her letter of 1938:

"Does it mean that Negro students in the South will be allowed to sit down with white students and study a problem which is fundamental and mutual to both groups? Does it mean that the University of North Carolina is ready to open its doors to Negro students . . . ? Or does it mean, that everything you said has no meaning for us as Negroes, that again we are to be set aside and passed over . . . ?"

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Murray: "I have read the copy of the letter you sent me and I understand perfectly, but great changes come slowly . . . The South is changing, but don't push too fast."

So began a friendship between Pauli Murray (poet, intellectual rebel, principal strategist in the fight to preserve Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, cofounder of the National Organization for Women, and the first African American female Episcopal priest) and Eleanor Roosevelt (first lady of the United States, later first chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women) that would last for a quarter of a century.

Drawing on letters, journals, diaries, published and unpublished manuscripts, and interviews,

Patricia Bell-Scott gives us the first close-up portrait of this evolving friendship and how it was sustained over time, what each gave to the other, and how their friendship changed the cause of American social justice.

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"It Is the Problem of My People"

The clatter of Pauli Murray's old typewriter bounced off the walls of her one-room Harlem apartment on December 6, 1938. Working at breakneck speed, she stopped only to look over a line in her letter or take a drag from her ever-present cigarette. Although she was only five-foot-two and weighed 105 pounds, she hammered the keys with the focus of a prizefighter. She had been forced to move three times because neighbors found the noise intolerable.

The catalyst for Murray's current agitation was Franklin Roosevelt's speech at the University of North Carolina the day before. It was his first address since the 1938 midterm elections and the fourth visit to the university by an incumbent president. The reports of his isolation at his vacation home in Warm Springs, Georgia, and the arrangements for radio broadcasts to Europe and Latin America had sparked international interest in his speech.

Thousands lined the motorcade path to UNC in the drenching rain, holding handmade signs and flags, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fifty-six-year-old president in his open car. When it became apparent that there would be no break in the downpour, organizers moved the festivities from Kenan Stadium to the brand-new Woollen Gymnasium. There, in an over-capacity crowd of ten thousand, a man fainted from the swelter. Many people went to other campus buildings to listen to the broadcast. Countless numbers stood outside the gym in the rain. Before FDR spoke, the university band played "Hail to the Chief," school officials awarded him an honorary doctor of laws degree, and an African American choir sang spirituals.

Under the glare of klieg lights, the warmth of his academic regalia, and the weight of his steel leg braces, the president made his way to the flag-draped platform. He paused often during his twenty-five-minute address for roaring applause, wiping his face with the handkerchief he slipped in and out of his pocket, gripping the lectern to maintain his balance. He praised the university for its "liberal teaching" and commitment to social progress. He declared his faith in youth and democracy. He urged Americans to embrace "the kind of change" necessary "to meet new social and economic needs."

Having listened to the broadcast the day before, Murray underlined passages in the speech from the New York Times front-page story "Roosevelt Urges Nation to Continue Liberalism." The "contradiction" between the president's rhetoric and her experience of the South made her boil. She would never forget the day a bus driver told her to "relieve" herself in "an open field" because the public toilets were for whites only. Insulted, she rode in agony for two hours, not knowing if there would be toilet facilities for blacks at the next stop.

Murray wondered if it mattered to the president that the "liberal institution" that had just granted him an honorary doctorate, and of which he claimed to be a "proud and happy" alumnus, barred black students from its hallowed halls and confined those blacks who came to hear him to a segregated section. Did he understand the psychological wounds or the economic costs of segregation? And how could he rationally or morally associate a whites-only admissions policy with liberalism or social progress? Having applied to UNC's graduate program in sociology a month before FDR's visit, Murray aimed to see just how liberal the school was.

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exacerbating murray's frustration with the president was his previous condemnation of lynching as "a vile form of collective murder" and his recent silence during a thirty-day Senate filibuster of the Wagner-Van Nuys bill that would have made lynching a federal offense. After the bill died, FDR proposed that a standing committee of Congress or the attorney general investigate "lynchings and incidents of mob violence."

The black press lashed out against his political maneuvering. The New York Amsterdam News condemned him for keeping "his tongue in his cheek!" The Chicago Defender called him "an artful dodger." The Louisiana Weekly, predicting that blacks would abandon the Democratic Party, declared, "You're too late, Mr. President, and what you say is NOTHING."

Murray understood that FDR's reticence on anti-lynching legislation was an attempt to placate conservative politicians from the South, where whites lynched blacks with impunity. Her introduction to politics had begun as a preschooler, reading newspaper headlines to her grandfather Robert Fitzgerald, a Union army veteran whose injury in the Civil War cost him his vision in his old age. Robert, originally from Pennsylvania, settled in North Carolina after the war to teach ex-slaves. He had also nurtured his granddaughter's intellect and her love of African American literature and history. That this year marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation made the president's inaction even more objectionable to Murray. Since 1863, more than three thousand blacks had been lynched, and at least seventy of these murders had taken place during FDR's presidency.

Murray's indignation was rooted in bone-chilling stories she had heard as a child of racial brutality and the Klansmen who circled her grandfather's property nightly on horseback, threatening to shut down his school for blacks. Ever brave, Robert had kept "his musket loaded" and the school door open. Murray had her own stories, too.

When she was six years old and on her way to fetch water from a community well, she and a neighbor came upon a group of blacks gathered around the body of young John Henry Corniggins, sprawled near a patch of thorny shrubs. Murray saw "his feet first, the white soles sticking out of the grass and caked with mud, then his scratched brown legs." His eyes were open. Blood seeped through a bullet hole in his shirt near his heart. John Henry lay motionless as large green flies wandered over his face and into his mouth. Nearby, a solitary "buzzard circled." Murray raced home, trembling in a cold sweat. The word among blacks was that a white man had assumed John Henry was stealing watermelons and shot him. No evidence of theft was found near the boy's body. No one was arrested for his murder.

Six years later, violence touched Murray's family when a white guard at Maryland's Hospital for the Negro Insane murdered her father. At the funeral, she could hardly believe that the "purple" bloated body in the gray casket was her once proud father. She was horrified by the sight of his mangled head, which had been "split open like a melon" during an autopsy "and sewed together loosely with jagged stitches crisscrossing the blood-clotted line of severance."

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the fight over anti-lynching legislation was but one of Franklin Roosevelt's worries. His attempt to purge Congress of his enemies had failed, and a coalition of anti-New Deal Republicans and Democrats had emerged. Despite the continuing economic depression, important legislation remained deadlocked. Frightening developments loomed on the world stage, as well. Under Adolf Hitler, Germany's aggression in Europe escalated with the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. During Kristallnacht, hundreds of synagogues were destroyed. Thousands of Jews were stripped of their citizenship, property, and business rights and sent to concentration camps.

As Murray pounded out her letter to the president, she recalled Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Camp Tera. Murray had been following reports about the first lady, listening to her radio broadcast, and reading her syndicated newspaper column, "My Day," since it had begun publication, on December 30, 1935. In it, ER chronicled get-togethers with family and friends, meetings with public figures, impressions of what she saw during her travels, and her opinions on a range of cultural and political matters. Writing the column six days a week and meeting her duties as first lady, which frequently went past midnight, required her to compose on the go. After one day-long visit to Camp Jane Addams (as Camp Tera had been renamed, in 1936, in honor of the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize), Tommy sat her typewriter on a rock near the Bear Mountain Bridge so that ER could dictate her copy and meet her deadline.

Southern segregation made ER uncomfortable, and she did not enjoy going to FDR's Warm Springs cottage, despite the delight he took in the place. She did not accompany the president to UNC, but two weeks earlier, she had attended the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, on her own. SCHW was an interracial gathering of liberals who met to discuss health, economics, housing, labor, race relations,

voting rights, opportunities for young people, and agricultural issues affecting the region. The conferees included a mix of labor, religious, youth, and civil rights activists, politicians, government administrators, journalists, educators, and representatives from organizations affiliated with the socialist and Communist movements.

ER was the most celebrated attendee, and her presence drew the national press. Of her whirlwind schedule, a New York Times reporter noted, "Mrs. Roosevelt arrived at 5 o'clock this morning . . . and rested until 8 o'clock and thereafter in rapid succession held a press conference, visited several institutions, spoke informally to an afternoon session meeting on youth problems and tonight gave an address on 'Democracy in Education.' " Seven thousand people, nearly half of them black, jammed into the city auditorium to hear her speak about the importance of "universal education" and the contribution each citizen makes to the nation, "regardless of nationality or race." She fielded questions for the better part of an hour.

The first lady's participation at the SCHW was historic. However, her skillful circumvention of a local ordinance requiring segregated seating was what interested Murray most. When city officials learned that conferees were mingling freely during sessions, without regard to race, the police came and directed everyone to obey local law. Having walked into a session late, ER sat down in the black section near her friend Mary McLeod Bethune, who was now director of the Negro Affairs Division in the National Youth Administration. When the police ordered ER to move, she had her chair placed between the white and black delegations. And it was there she sat, symbolically outside of racial strictures, for the remainder of the conference.

The first lady's deft reaction warmed the hearts of conferees, angered segregationists, and thrilled the black press. The influential Afro-American newspaper, of which Murray was a devoted reader, underscored the significance of ER's aisle-straddling tactic by proclaiming, "Sometimes actions speak louder than words."

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after camp terna, Murray got a job with the Works Progress Administration, initially as a remedial reading teacher, then with the Workers' Education Project. Now that the WPA was in jeopardy, she planned to return to North Carolina, where she could do graduate work at UNC and look after her adoptive mother, Aunt Pauline. The thought of living in the South again filled Murray with dread. On the other hand, it seemed worth the sacrifice to further her education and be with family.

In no mood for armchair liberalism, Murray counted herself among a group of young radicals incensed by FDR's "coziness with white supremacy in the South." She reasoned that if UNC were half the institution the president said it was, its administration would find a way to accommodate her. Murray knew of only one way to challenge his roundly praised address. She typed a bold missive, spelling out what the South was like for blacks, daring him to take a stand as a fellow Christian for democracy and the liberal principles he espoused.

December 6, 1938

Dear President Roosevelt:

I pray that this letter will get past your secretaries and reach your personal consideration.

Have you time to listen to the problem of one of your millions of fellow-citizens, which will illustrate most clearly one of the problems of democracy in America. I speak not only for myself but for 12,000,000 other citizens.

Briefly, the facts are these:

I am a Negro, the most oppressed, most misunderstood and most neglected section of your population.

I am also a WPA worker, another insecure and often misrepresented group of citizens. I teach on the Workers' Education Project of New York City, a field which has received the constant and devoted support of your wife, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

My main interest, the tradition of my family for three generations, is education, which, I believe, is the basic requirement for the maintenance and extension of democracy.

At present, in order to do a competent teaching job, a job comparable to the work of established educational institutions, like all other professional WPA workers, I feel the need of more training. To understand the knotty economic and social problems of our country and to interpret these problems clearly and simply to workers makes it imperative that we continue our studies. Our wage standards are such that we are unable to further our education. Those of us who do not have degrees are unable to get them because of the general WPA arrangements. Those of us who have degrees, and yet feel an inadequacy of information and formal training, find it impossible to go further and obtain our Master's Degree.

Sometime ago I applied to the University of North Carolina for admission to their graduate school. They sent me an application blank, on the bottom of which was asked, "Race and Religion." (For your information, I am a confirmed Protestant Episcopalian.) As you know, no Negro has ever been admitted to the University of North Carolina. You may wonder then, why I, a Negro knowing this fact, did make application.

My grandfather, a Union Army soldier, gave his eye for the liberation of his race. As soon as the war was over, he went to North Carolina under the Freedmen's Bureau to establish schools and educate the newly freed Negroes. From that time on my entire family has been engaged in educational work in that state. My own father was a principal of one of the Baltimore City schools and my sisters and brothers are also teachers. You passed through Durham, where my family lived and worked, and where my aunt now a woman of sixty-eight years, still plods back and forth to her school training future citizens of America.

This aunt has been teaching since she was fifteen years old, and for more than thirty years in the Durham Public Schools, and yet if she were to become disabled tomorrow, there is no school pension system which would take care of her, neither does she qualify for the Old Age Pension system which excludes teachers.

12,000,000 of your citizens have to endure insults, injustices, and such degradation of spirit that you would believe impossible as a human being and a Christian. We are forced to ride in prescribed places in the busses and street cars of those very cities you passed through in our beloved Southland. When your party reached the station at Durham yesterday, you must have noticed a sign which said "White," and then a fence, then another sign which said "Colored." Can you, for one moment, put yourself in our place and imagine the feelings of resentment, the protest, the indignation, the outrage that would rise within you to realize that you, a human being, with the keen sensitivities of other human beings were being set off in a corner, marked apart from your fellow human beings?

Other Books

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