

John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Reviewed By Derek Shidler

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Bayard Rustin's long and tumultuous life was shrouded in successes and setbacks. John D'Emilio's book, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, explores these two issues. D'Emilio's explains how leading activists such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X overshadowed Rustin, making Rustin a lost prophet. Rustin's successes seemed small, but the combination of his remarkable gifts and talents, along with the brave supporters of America's radical movements, enabled Rustin to leave his mark on the American pacifist tradition, campaigns for economic justice and international peace, and the Civil Rights Movement. However, Rustin's homosexuality and paradoxical silence on the Vietnam War tarnished his career.

Rustin's successes stemmed from his early childhood as a Quaker with a mother who instilled peace and equality in the community. When Rustin became an active member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), he quickly became renowned as a remarkable orator. Dave McReynolds, a UCLA student, attended one of Rustin's lectures in the late 1940s and said, "You would see people with tears coming out of their eyes. He could respond to a group or get in touch with them because he was a likeable creative person."³⁷⁴ Rustin's ability to influence and accumulate admirers was inspiring. Nevertheless, Rustin's ideas, modeled after those of Gandhi, and his superb speaking skills followed him to prison from 1944 to 1946. However, unwilling to fight, Rustin and many other nonviolent activists refused to serve their country in World War II. Those who declined the draft were sentenced to prison. While Rustin's imprisonment initially seemed to have been a setback, it proved to be a stepping stone to his success. Rustin's pacifist ideas helped push for desegregation in Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary. Rustin acquired a number of followers within Lewisburg, and some of these supporters would provide assistance for future protests. During these two years, correctional officers kept an attentive eye on Rustin. Rustin began to lead strikes during which black inmates refused to leave their cells for work assignment, recreation, and meals. Most of Rustin's protests within the jail received recognition from people within and outside the walls of the penitentiary.

Several years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott and a few years after Rustin's release from prison, Rustin and George Houser devised a plan

³⁷⁴ John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 126.

to abolish the racial segregation on the public transit system. The Journey of Reconciliation, Rustin and Houser called it, included an array of groups like CORE, FOR, NAACP, WRL, and veteran COs. After twelve arrests, due to the Journey of Reconciliation, thousands of black and white Southerners engaged in discussion about the Jim Crow laws. Rustin and Houser's attempt to bring desegregation to the public sphere worked. The *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper reported, their movement "knocked several props from beneath the already tottering Jim Crow structure."³⁷⁵ Also, the Journey of Reconciliation achieved a high profile in black press, seeping the model of nonviolent action further into the consciousness of African Americans.

However, seventy-five years of setbacks seemed to outweigh Rustin's successes. During a time in American history when segregation and inequality towards blacks was prevalent, Rustin also endured criticisms for being a homosexual. D'Emilio explains that Rustin's first problem with his sexuality was in Lewisburg Penitentiary. One officer observed Rustin with another inmate, saying, "sitting with different other inmates, his arms around them, rubbing their legs and other parts of their bodies, while rubbing his cheek against theirs."³⁷⁶ Another officer observed Rustin "walking around the yard with his arms around several different inmates, in a very loving and personal manner."³⁷⁷ On August 18, 1945 two inmates described to Captain Huntington an incident in which Rustin was caught performing oral sex on another inmate behind a curtain on the stage of the prison auditorium. Rustin's denial and eventual admission of the ordeal created conflict within his prison movements. The once admired pacifist was now shrouded in suspicion and disgust. After learning about Rustin's betrayal, Abraham Muste, leader of the FOR, sent him a harsh letter, saying, "You have been guilty of gross misconduct, specially reprehensible in a person making claims to leadership."³⁷⁸ After his release in June 1946, once again Rustin found himself in trouble because of his sexuality. Davis Platt, his lover for several years, kicked Rustin out of the house because Rustin's sexual escapades became unbearable. A few years later, in January of 1953, after a lecture at the American Association of University Women at the Pasadena Athletic Club, police caught Rustin performing oral sex on two young men in a parked car. Once again, Rustin was imprisoned and his creditability was severely damaged. Near the end of Rustin's life he "lost" his voice precisely when the most potent anti-war movement in modern American history crested. Rustin's conspicuous record as a pacifist puzzled activists since Rustin did not play a major role in the Vietnam-era antiwar movement.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 140.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 95

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 102

At the outset of his book D'Emilio stresses that Rustin's ideas and movements were relative obscure in the popular memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, Rustin paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. His pacifist ideas may have been radical to the public eye, but the combination of Rustin's remarkable gifts and talents crept into future civil rights activists. Rustin left a profound mark on the Civil Rights Movement with his lectures, penitentiary movements, bus boycotts, and assistance in the development of Martin Luther King's movement. E'Dmilio agrees, noting that "Rustin was as responsible as anyone else for the insinuation of nonviolence into the very heart of what became the most powerful social movement in twentieth-century America."³⁷⁹ Rustin's career of pacifism and conservatism help define the Civil Rights Movement.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 237.