

One New Book for the Preacher

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MIRROR TO AMERICA: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN
by John Hope Franklin. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. 401 pages.

Let me begin with an admission of my personal gratitude for the appearance of *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin*. I am honored to call Professor Franklin a dear friend and neighbor. We met in the early 1980's soon after we both moved to Durham. He had come from the University of Chicago to teach American history at Duke University, and I had accepted the call to the First Presbyterian Church. Our meeting took place as we joined with others in working to oppose what President Dwight Eisenhower had earlier called the "military industrial complex" and the bellicose foreign policy that has been dominant recently in the United States. Fortunately, our friendship has been much more rewarding than were our efforts to change foreign policy.

Several years ago, Franklin and I were discussing his latest book about his father, Buck Franklin. I mentioned that I hoped he would write his autobiography soon. He said that it was his intention to do so after he finished a couple of other books he had in mind. I must have expressed some concern as his ninetieth birthday approached, but he assured me that he had a plan. We are all the richer because of the appearance of this autobiography. The cover describes the contents of the book: "The twentieth-century fight for civil rights told in the first-person singular by a preeminent American historian."

Franklin is an outstanding historian whose classic work, *From Slavery to Freedom*, has sold over 3.5 million copies, gone through eight editions, has been translated into six languages, and remains the best account available of the African American experience in America. His autobiography makes it clear that his life has been a struggle to make his voice heard in a culture whose racial barriers have been constant impediments to people of color. With courage, commitment, discipline, and hope (he was well named!) Franklin has persevered.

You can not read this book or listen to Franklin tell about the many times he has experienced bigotry, exclusion, and threats of violence simply because of his race without feeling the pain. It is so important for those of us who have benefited from "white privilege" to hear these stories. It is remarkable that these experiences have not embittered Franklin but rather have made him all the more determined to make a difference in removing racial barriers. In many ways, the task is more difficult now because many of the legal barriers have been removed and those that remain are more subtle and more devious.

Franklin's contributions are too numerous to acknowledge, as he has been an outstanding professor, author, and teacher. In addition, he finds time for family, friends, and students. As his ninety-second birthday approaches, you can still find him receiving manuscripts to evaluate, holding interviews, traveling to give lectures and attend book signings, tending his orchids, entertaining friends, and fishing. He

describes his disciplined life:

During my life it has been necessary to work not only as hard as my energies would permit, but to do it as regularly and as consistently as humanly possible. This involved the strictest discipline in the maximum use of my time and energy. I worked two jobs in college and graduate school that made inordinate demands on my time, but there was no alternative to the regimen that circumstances demanded. And those circumstances included a refusal to check my catholic interests that have always prompted me to participate in activities beyond scholarship. (9)

The title of the book is so appropriate: *Mirror to America*. Good “preacher” that he is, Franklin always has a text: “Now we see through a mirror dimly” (I Corinthians 13:12). The title of the book’s epilogue is “Through a Looking Glass.” This autobiography is a mirror into which we are invited to view ourselves and our nation. The picture we see is not pretty. The damage done and which continues to be done by racism is costly in human suffering and the lost human potential from gifted children of God who were born black. Franklin makes a particularly poignant plea for us to work together to reclaim the lives of many young African American males whose difficult struggles are symptoms of the continued destructive aspects of inequality and injustice.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker* several years ago pictured a middle-aged man showing physical signs of his years. He is standing in front of a mirror and he says, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, lie to me!” We are like that man, for we have a hard time facing the truth about our racial history in this country. But Franklin believes, and I agree, that unless we have looked honestly into this mirror, it will be difficult for us to move forward toward a more just society. This is not an invitation to us to submerge ourselves in guilt. Rather, it is a call to action, to face honestly the truth about “the color line” and the sad history of our treatment of our African American brothers and sisters and then to do something about it. It is a reminder of the words of Jesus that knowing the truth shall set us free. This book is an invitation to learn how to listen to and to speak the truth in love.

There is an incident described near the end of the book that captures our dilemma. Franklin was in Washington staying at the Cosmos Club. He describes what happened after a dinner with friends: “It was during our stroll through the club that a white woman called me out, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat check to a uniformed attendant, ‘and all of the club attendants were in uniform,’ perhaps she could get her coat” (340). The next day, Franklin was standing in the East Room of the White House receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given by this country to a civilian. The old world and the new world exist side by side, and we stand in both.

There is much love expressed by the author that reflects his gratitude and joy in life. Consider his description of how life is enriched by others:

My life and my career have been fulfilled not merely by my own efforts but also by the thoughtful generosity of family, friends, and professional colleagues. I can only hope that they realize, as do I, how interdependent we

all are and how much more rewarding and fulfilling life is whenever we reach a level of understanding where we can fully appreciate the extent of our interrelationships with our reliance on those who came before us, kept us company during our lives, and will come after us. (8)

The great photographs in the book capture Franklin's strong affirmation and appreciation of life. The time he spends in his greenhouse with orchids is a source of great pleasure; in one photo, his beloved wife, Aurelia, holds one of his beautiful orchids. His gratitude and devotion to her is moving. Couples about to be married should read his chapter, "In Sickness and in Health"; it is a marvelous testimony to the way a commitment to another enriches life. Another photo captures Franklin's love of fly-fishing; in it, he proudly holds a thirty-two pound salmon. Through these photos, his joy in life shines through.

Are you looking for a gift for the person who has everything? I'll bet that person does not possess a mirror like this autobiography. I admit that I did not have one until this book arrived. There is still some "dimness" in the mirror, but thanks to John Hope Franklin, my eyes have been opened so that I may see a vision of God's truth that has the power to set us all free.