Yvonne Ryan’s *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* is the first published biography of one the most critical leaders of the civil rights movement and is part of the University of Kentucky Press’s Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century Series, which includes a number of highly respected works on previously unexamined subjects on the Black freedom struggle. The biography masterfully weaves the personal tragedies and triumphs of Wilkins with his critical and savvy leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during one of the most significant periods in American history. She uses an array of sources to aid her analysis, ranging from archival material (the NAACP Papers, the private diary of President Johnson, and the Roosevelt Study Center in the Netherlands, to name a few) to oral histories, interviews, FBI files, and the personal papers from an assortment of key players of the civil rights movement and American politics of the period. According to Ryan, this is a long overdue examination of Roy Wilkins, who spent 46 years as a member of the NAACP and led the organization during the height of the civil rights movement, but who has been overshadowed in scholarship by other equally prominent figures of the time, such as “Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Malcolm X” (p. 1).

Although Wilkins has been acknowledged by Black freedom studies, Ryan points out that most scholarship situates the NAACP leader as “a counterpoint to the more interesting players… and a hierarchical bureaucrat who held his organization back…” (p. 2). While believing that the
legislative approach was the best way to ensure that rights were protected, Ryan persuasively argues that Wilkins served “as a conduit between civil rights activists… and the white power structure… [while being] particularly adept at negotiating and navigating the corridors of power” (p. 2). For example, Wilkins not only led the NAACP, but also the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), which played a crucial role in both civil rights and voting rights legislation as a result of its army of lobbyists.

The first two chapters cover Wilkins’s early years and his introduction to the NAACP and the editorial staff of the Crisis. As the text shows, his experiences growing up in Minnesota helped to guide his convictions in regard to the power of a legislation, litigation, and lobbying approach to equal rights later in life, some of which are highlighted via his numerous personal and ideological battles with the intellectual Pan-Africanist W. E. B. Du Bois during Wilkins’s early years in the NAACP. Chapter three begins the story of Wilkins’s tenure as secretary of the NAACP and the remainder of the biography covers his 22 years (1955–1977) as head of the organization and critically inspects how and why he and the NACCP achieved their many successes. But what is new about the book? What new information or arguments does the text provide scholars of the subject? The biography clearly demonstrates that Wilkins played the “long game” in his fight for equal rights. He waged a protracted war against racism and segregation, dedicating his leadership to ensuring compliance with the US Supreme Court ruling Brown V. Board of Education and overseeing the victories of both the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act.

Ryan takes an even-handed approach, exploring both Wilkins’s successes and his failures, arguing that his greatest deficit was his inability to engage young people, especially those who were members in the NAACP. Although the NAACP established its youth department
in 1934, there was very little investment in the development of its young activists. In the 1960s, the youth provided much of the energy for direct action protest, but near the end of the decade many defected to join other organizations (primarily Black Power groups) that advanced and empowered youth leadership and development. One example was Fred Hampton. Arguably one of the most important grassroots organizers and young organic intellectuals in American history, he was once head of the NAACP youth council in Maywood, Illinois. He left the NAACP, due to many of the reasons outlined above, to establish the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP), believing his skills and activism would be unconstrained and better utilized. Hampton does not directly blame his exit on Roy Wilkins, but does mention the national leadership and NAACP policies as two of the reasons for his departure. Ryan rightfully points out that, although many of the NAACP’s youth defected to other organizations, such as the BPP and SNCC, during the latter years of the 1960s, the NAACP continues to thrive today, while others have long died out, and much of the NAACP’s continued success can be attributed to Roy Wilkins.

Nevertheless, Wilkins made attempts to build alliances with the youth-led Black Power organizations of the period and this aspect of his biography is one of the most important contributions to scholarship on the Black freedom movement. While Wilkins rejected the Black separatism, Black nationalism, and revolutionary nationalism phases of Black Power, he embraced its economic self-determination and racial coalition because he believed they were relatives of the march on Washington platform—jobs and freedom. His connection to Black Power was viewed by some as tumultuous, while others would eventually appreciate his contributions and support. As Ryan shows, a possible plot to assassinate Wilkins by the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in 1967, due to his position in the NAACP and his perceived rejection of the fundamental principles of Black Power, can help to explain his
complex relationship with the movement. Despite this tense relationship, after the assassinations of BPP members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by the FBI and the Chicago Police Department on December 4, 1969, and attacks on the BPP office in Los Angeles four days later, Wilkins and former attorney general Ramsey Clark formed a commission to investigate both their deaths and the attacks. Primarily funded by the NAACP and other monies raised by Wilkins, *Search and Destroy: A Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the Police* was published in 1973 and serves as yet another example of his methods of fighting for equal rights. As the report showed, there was probable cause to declare that Hampton and Clark were assassinated and that the justice system had yet again failed two of its African American citizens.

Yvonne Ryan has produced a clearly written and well-researched biography of Roy Wilkins that fills a void in the historiography of the civil rights movement and Black freedom struggle. Utilizing a top down approach, the biography is nuanced and provocative, incorporating enough academic rigor to satisfy scholars, while also being accessible to a general audience, so that both may gain a greater appreciation for one of the movers and shakers of the civil rights movement. Moreover, the text is a great companion to Patricia Sullivan’s *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, which details the struggles of rank and file members along with branch leaders of the organization. Given the relationship between the two texts, one would be hard pressed to teach a course on the black freedom struggle that encompasses the history and legacy of the NAACP without using both. Ryan’s text will, furthermore, be beneficial to both undergraduate survey and graduate courses on African American history and US history and can serve as a teaching tool to push future scholars to engage research subjects with a prose that is lively and empathetic but also judicious and objective.
References


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