

## When Martin Came to Newcastle

On Friday 5<sup>th</sup> October I had the pleasure and privilege of attending the Claudia Jones Memorial Lecture as part of the National Union of Journalists Annual National Delegates Meeting in Newcastle. The Lecture, or more accurately series of lectures in memory of the journalist and activist Claudia Jones was also commemorating the work of another famous civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King and the day he was awarded with an honorary doctorate in law by Newcastle University on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1967. Newcastle was the only university in Britain to honour Martin Luther King in his lifetime.

Originally King was invited in November 1966 to come to an awards ceremony in May 1967, but due to communication problems, as King was out of the USA at the time, this proved impossible. Martin was then invited to come to a ceremony in November 1967, until October 30<sup>th</sup> dawned; a mere fortnight before King was due in Newcastle. On that day, King entered a prison in Bessemer, Alabama on a contempt of court charge dating back to the Birmingham campaign in 1963. Although there were assurances that Dr. King would only be in prison for a few days, this news did cause no small amount of concern in Newcastle, amongst those organising the event on 13<sup>th</sup> November. Thankfully, King was released on 4<sup>th</sup> November and was free to come to Newcastle.

A few logistical matters still had to be sorted out. A member of Dr. King's staff had wondered whether Newcastle was a flight away from London or whether it was possible to get there by taking a taxi! The misunderstandings were resolved and Dr. King was able to come over.

Accordingly Martin travelled over from the United States on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> November and after an afternoon and evening in London, he and a couple of colleagues took the 1 a.m. 'Tynesider' train to Newcastle arriving in Newcastle in mid-morning. From there he went to a reception at Newcastle University, with students, including foreign students. Then there came the Awards Ceremony itself and almost before anybody knew what had happened King and his small entourage were back on the 16.08 train to London, from where he took a flight back to the States.

So why did Dr. King come to Newcastle and what did he say when he was here? In 1967, he was coming under increasing pressure as the Civil Rights Movement he had in many ways lead for the past ten years began to splinter. Much had been achieved including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing segregation and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, ensuring by law that Blacks in the south could vote. However, many Blacks wanted a more militant stance and felt that Dr. King was too close to White liberals. In the meantime, widespread rioting had broken out over the last few summers from Detroit to Watts in Los Angeles. King was also coming under increasing criticism for speaking out against the Vietnam War and accused of diluting the message. In these circumstances, the fact that a

provincial university, tucked away in the North-east corner of England was prepared to honour Dr King was undoubtedly a boost to him at this time.

Dr King was not directly asked to speak at the ceremony in Newcastle, but it was suggested that if he wanted to say a few words, this would be very welcome. In the event he did speak. Firstly, he thanked the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for honouring him and as at the ceremony when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1964, he was keen to stress that the award from Newcastle University was not just for himself but rather he accepted it on behalf of all those who had struggled with him for civil and human rights over the last ten years.

It has been noted by Brian Ward that, “apart from his comments on the racial situation in Britain.....King said little at Newcastle which he had not said elsewhere”. Dr King did talk of his concerns about the, “three urgent and indeed great problems that we face not only in the United States of America but all over the world today...the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war”. It is of course sad to reflect that if Dr. King was alive today, he would most likely still be concerned about the same issues. There was a lighter moment when Dr King referred to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in forcing the federal government in the U.S. to pass more robust laws against racist activity: “it may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can restrain him from lynching me; and I think that is pretty important also!” Dr. King also reached into his roots as a Baptist minister, quoting from one of his favourite passages from Amos, talking of “the day when all over the world justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”, at the end of his short impromptu speech.

Dr. King was not the only Afro-American to be honoured on Tyneside in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Paul Robeson, the singer, actor and civil rights activist and the boxer Muhammad Ali were given the honour of open-top bus rides and processions. I do believe that the way all three were honoured is an important part of the anti-racism heritage of the city and the region. As was noted at the time there were racial tensions in numerous parts of Britain at the time of the visit of Dr. King. Tyneside, with its well-integrated Yemeni community, was seen as a good example of race relations. There have sadly been some incidents recently which have tarnished that reputation. It would be a terrible shame if we were to lose it completely.

It should be a matter of pride to all people of Newcastle and the wider North-east that Newcastle University was the only university to honour Martin Luther King in his lifetime. I think it can also be seen in a wider context as part of a strong heritage of both internationalism and concern for human rights, stretching back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Long may those traditions continue.

I am indebted to Brian Ward and his article *A King in Newcastle: Martin Luther King, Jr and British Race Relations , 1967-1968*, The Georgia Historical Quarterly Vol LXXIX, No 3, Fall 1995