

Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell

Alison M. Parker

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Alison M. Parker's salient academic biography of undersung civil rights and women's rights activist Mary Eliza Church Terrell analyzes excerpts from Terrell's diary, letters, and autobiography to depict how personal and public events shaped her.

Terrell, a writer, community leader, and the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1863. Historical context about race and gender discrimination contributes to the book's dense portrait of Terrell's fraught ancestry: her parents had enslaved mothers and white, slaveholder fathers, and Terrell witnessed her family's troubled resilience throughout Reconstruction.

Terrell was one of a few Black women of her time to graduate from Oberlin, and she married Robert Terrell, who encouraged her advocacy. Throughout, she is revealed as a formidable intellectual whose career was fueled by stalwart, strategic commitments, rather than heroic crusading. Both her work and her pain is recorded, as are her hopeful ambitions, frustrations, and passions. Her impact, however, is often submerged in the imposing details of organizational politics.

Sections regarding the Terrells' efforts to uphold their status as part of Washington D.C.'s Black elite illuminate the pressures involved in working toward racial uplift. Terrell is rendered as an overprotective mother, helping to frame her ambitions and concerns about representing herself well across color lines. The book covers her years on the anti-lynching lecture circuit, her differences of opinion with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, and how she helped to found the NAACP. She is seen campaigning for the Republican party and working as an elder during the era of the New Deal. Terrell's unique position as a public figure who spanned decades of the Black freedom movement is clear.

Unceasing Militant is an admiring yet fair tribute to activist Mary Church Terrell, whose sustained, determined belief is inspiring.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2020)

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