Lindsey R. Swindall. *Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art*. Library of African American Biography Series. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2013. 212 pp. $38.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-44220-793-6.

Lindsey Swindall explains in the acknowledgements that she authored *Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art* so that younger generations could become acquainted with the life, career, and politics of Paul Robeson. To this end, this new Robeson biography is geared towards a popular audience. It lacks footnotes or endnotes and contains only a "Notes on Sources" section, which is broken down by chapter. Her book's popular orientation notwithstanding, Swindall articulates a clear agenda that seeks to correct what she insists is an overemphasis on Robeson's relationship with communism at the expense of his commitment to the liberation of the African diaspora. Indeed, Swindall argues that Robeson's philosophy and worldview are more accurately characterized as antifascist rather than communist. Since Robeson was an international figure, his ideas, she contends, were shaped by key domestic and international developments of the twentieth century.

Swindall opens the biography by describing the diverse array of people who gathered at Robeson's funeral to pay their final respects to what she emphasizes was his uncompromising commitment to human freedom at the expense of material gain. Thereafter, each chapter of her narrative essentially addresses a formative decade of Robeson's life. Swindall assigns paramount importance to the tightly knit African-descended community in Princeton, New Jersey, in which Robeson grew up, to shaping his future interests. She credits this community for helping to explain not only Robeson's eventual embrace of Pan-Africanism, but also his attraction to socialism, since he claimed that everyone in the community helped raise him in the wake of his mother's early death. Swindall also highlights how Paul's father, the Reverend William Robeson, influenced his son in multiple ways, cultivating for example his oratorical skills, love of languages, and respect of all humanity. Swindall directly references passages from Robeson's famous autobiographical political manifesto *Here I Stand* and his son's 2001 biography of him to substantiate her depiction of the young Robeson.[1] Robeson excelled academically and athletically at Rutgers University in spite of the constant racial discrimination he encountered. Swindall posits that this made him the embodiment of W.E.B. DuBois's conception of the Talented Tenth. Robeson's eventual admission to Columbia University Law School, which he paid for by taking on

1. Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1958); and Paul Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898-1939* (New York: Wiley, 2001).

many different jobs including playing professional football, placed him in the midst of the emerging Harlem Renaissance. According to Swindall, Robeson's gift for placing white people at ease allowed him to move relatively easily between the predominantly white world of law school and the vibrant Black society of Harlem.

Chapter 2 charts Robeson's entry into the acting world as a result of the limitations that he confronted as a black lawyer. He cultivated his stage career by acting in plays and films and by giving concerts of African American spirituals, not only in New York City but also throughout Europe. While Robeson believed that he could effect change by excelling as an African American in the artistic world, he incurred criticism from some African Americans who insisted that all the roles that he played and the type of music that he sang did not further the dignity of African American people. Swindall underscores Robeson's belief in the central contributions of African Americans to American culture and the debt of African heritage to African American culture. Since this short biography is intended for a popular audience, Swindall interweaves, in this and subsequent chapters, Robeson's life with general histories of major world and U.S. developments such as the First World War, the Great Migration, and the Great Depression.

Swindall discusses in the third chapter how Robeson became a world citizen during the 1930s. He increasingly voiced his opinion about political issues, spent most of the decade outside of the United States, and started performing folk songs from around the world. Although much of this time was spent in Europe, Swindall claims that during this period he further cultivated his interest in and knowledge of African languages and culture, and more fervently championed African liberation from Western colonialism. Robeson's experiences in the Soviet Union and his belief in the country's firm stance against racism occupied a critical place in shaping what Swindall characterizes as his antifascist worldview. Although he emphasized the equality of African culture and stressed the need for African Americans to become familiar with African culture, music, languages, and history, he also stressed the shared humanity of the world's citizens as evidenced, he believed, in folk culture.

Robeson used the Second World War, a major focus of chapter 4, to connect the struggle against fascism in Europe with the need both to eliminate racial discrimination in the United States and to support anticolonial liberation movements. Robeson's growing consternation with the demeaning, stereotypical portrayal of blacks in film inspired his decision in the 1940s to refuse future film projects. Swindall points out that Robeson achieved greater success at fusing his political views with cultural projects as years passed. The advent of the Cold War brought Robeson under

fierce attack in the United States for his central role in the global peace movement, his advocacy of greater diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, his demands for an end to colonialism in Africa and Asia, and his determination to end the violence against African Americans. Robeson refused to renounce his affiliation with communist leaders, stressing that the Communist Party was a legal entity and that he had a constitutional right to freedom of speech and association. As Swindall explains, Robeson consistently identified himself as an antifascist committed to peace and to ending racial oppression of all persons of African descent. Despite the attacks of mainstream media, certain civil rights leaders, and government officials, Robeson's support, Swindall contends, continued to grow among African American communities, white American union members who often served as Robeson's bodyguards at public appearances, and people around the world.

The following decade, as chapter 5 details, brought Robeson under even greater surveillance from the FBI. The U.S. State Department denied him the right to travel abroad because of his political views – an eight-year punishment that was prompted by comments Robeson made abroad that African Americans should fight for an end to U.S. racial apartheid rather than fight in any foreign wars. State Department officials also claimed that his remarks about African liberation were not in the best interest of the United States. During this period, Robeson's income suffered significantly, since he earned most of his money from performances outside of the United States. Robeson increasingly found it difficult to perform at major venues across the country. Leaders of mainstream civil rights organizations like the NAACP were encouraged to denounce him as a stooge of the Soviet Union who was not qualified to speak on behalf of African Americans (a charge that they claimed was substantiated when he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize at the end of 1952). Nevertheless, Swindall reiterates that Robeson found continued support from union halls, black churches, and supporters abroad, who campaigned to have his passport restored.

After his right to travel abroad was restored in 1958, Robeson and his wife Eslanda Goode Robeson embarked on an international trip, in part because he felt obligated to express his gratitude to those who supported his constitutional right to travel. Largely drawing on Paul Robeson Jr's aforementioned biography of his father and Martin Duberman's authoritative and extensively researched 1988 biography of Robeson, Swindall uses the final chapter to contemplate the role that government repression and harassment played in his suspicious suicide attempt in Moscow in 1961 and his subsequent mental breakdown. Depression and anxiety largely crippled Robeson in the years that followed. He was treated in

England, East Germany, and the United States, where he experienced the greatest stabilization and improvement in his health, until his death in late January 1976 after suffering a stroke. Although health issues caused him to relinquish his status as a public and international figure, African American activists, Swindall stresses, showered him with praise in the last few years of his life for his contributions to the struggle for freedom of the African diaspora.

Swindall does not shy away from dealing with Robeson's extramarital affairs, the tensions in his marriage with Eslanda Goode Robeson, and the disagreements that Eslanda and her son Paul Robeson Jr. had over Paul Senior's psychological treatment. She counters any portrayal of Robeson as a dupe of communist leaders by insisting that he strategically withheld criticism of the USSR, because he did not want to aid the agenda of right wing conservatives. Although he celebrated his African roots and continued to praise the Soviet Union as a place where he felt human for the first time in his life, Robeson continually emphasized that he was an American whose slave ancestors helped build the United States. Swindall has given those who are unfamiliar with Paul Robeson a very readable introduction to the life of a man who, because of his politics, is too often silenced from the American mainstream.

Meredith Roman *The College at Brockport (SUNY)*