

duced some results, but he marginalized the radical black caucuses that were “best situated to generate the bottom-up pressure” and achieve “real gains” for Detroit’s black workers (131). In an essay on Mexican Americans’ struggle for fair employment in Los Angeles, however, Kenneth Burt argues that there was activism by overlapping alliances that included anti-Communists as well as Communists. The alliances achieved the election of Edmund Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949. Although they failed to secure a fair employment ordinance, Roybal, the Community Services Organization, and a liberal anti-Communist network led principally by Socialists and Social Democrats helped secure the passage of state legislation in 1959.

The Blindness Revolution: Jernigan in His Own Words, by James H. Omvig. Critical Concerns in Blindness Series. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2005. xxiv, 477 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$73.25 cloth, \$39.99 paper.

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One of the many useful features on Google Book Search is its “Places Mentioned in this Book,” an on-screen map that locates every place mentioned in a book. On the map for James H. Omvig’s *The Blindness Revolution: Jernigan in His Own Words*, a dense mass of red arrows obscures the state of Iowa, gradually thinning as you reach its borders, with a smattering of arrows beyond. This is an Iowa story.

Kenneth Jernigan arrived in Iowa in 1958 with a master’s degree in English, four years of teaching experience at the Tennessee School for the Blind, and five years with the California Training Center for the Blind, to become director of Iowa’s Commission for the Blind. The Commission was in a sorry state. The year before, a federal study had found it to be the least effective state agency for the blind in the country. By the time Jernigan left in 1978, however, it was considered a model for the nation. How he accomplished that is the tale Omvig sets out to tell.

Jernigan’s professed aim was to demonstrate that blindness was the least of the problems that he and other blind people faced, that their generally low educational achievement and underemployment were the result of societal prejudice. The “blindness revolution” of the title was the product of Jernigan’s long struggle against two entrenched adversaries: blindness professionals whose paternalism and low expectations fostered habits of dependency and self-doubt among blind people, and certain Iowa politicians who fought with Jernigan over re-

sources. The former battle was doubtless the more substantive and far reaching, but the political battle turns out to be the more gripping tale.

Omvg has arranged Jernigan's correspondence and reports chronologically, interspersed with his own commentary and narrative. Jernigan's forceful personality and intellect turn what might have been dry bureaucratic business into fascinating reading. His first report to the governor, submitted after two weeks on the job, bluntly catalogued the gross inadequacies of the commission as he found it: "It would not be an exaggeration to describe the present situation as desperate." Too many blind Iowans were "simply being permitted to sit at home and rot . . . , receiving no instruction in Braille, no help in learning to travel or perform simple household tasks, no information about what other blind people have accomplished, no hope or encouragement—in short, nothing." If his recommendations were adopted, he concluded, "the present Director [that is, Jernigan] should be given a reasonable (but only a reasonable) time in which to show results. If he does not show results, he should be fired" (51–52).

Such "Jernigan classics," as Omvg aptly terms them, would by themselves justify the price of the book. In another, Jernigan responds to a publishing company's attorney who has refused to grant permission for a textbook to be transcribed into Braille for a blind college student:

We are now at a stage where certain circumstances are likely to cause a chain reaction. When you receive my letter, you either will or will not give us permission. . . . Assuming that the material is transcribed without your permission, you either will or will not decide to commence litigation. Assuming that you choose to commence litigation, I will either decide to make a public case out of the matter . . . or I will not. Assuming that I should choose so to react, your client will either decide that you have served his interest well or that you have not (153).

Omvg approaches historical explanation in a manner long out of favor among historians. He is an unabashed practitioner of the exemplar model of history, dominant in the eighteenth century but today found mostly in popular didactic works. It is also history in the "great man" tradition, with little attention given to larger social and cultural developments. But Omvg is not a historian, and historical explanation is not his primary aim. Rather, he wants to "examine the civil rights-based empowerment model and the kinds of characteristics, traits, skills, and abilities that have proven to be successful in work with the blind" (5). As such, professionals will find this a valuable guide. While the lack of an index may limit the book's usefulness to scholars, it nevertheless serves as an accessible and highly readable introduction to Jernigan's ideas and to the revolution in ideas about blindness that he did so much to initiate and advance.