



Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle

Gregg Andrews

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In 1938, a black newspaper in Houston paid front-page tribute to Thyra J. Edwards as the embodiment of “THE SPIRIT OF AFRAMERICAN WOMANHOOD.” Edwards was a world lecturer, journalist, social worker, labor organizer, women’s rights advocate, and civil rights activist—an undeniably important figure in the social struggles of the first half of the twentieth century. She experienced international prominence throughout much of her life, from the early 1930s to her death in 1953, but has received little attention from historians in years since. Gregg Andrews’s *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* is the first book-length biographical study of this remarkable, historically significant woman.

Edwards, granddaughter of runaway slaves, grew up in Jim Crow–era Houston and started her career there as a teacher. She moved to Gary, Indiana, and Chicago as a social worker, then to New York as a journalist, and later became involved with the Communist Party, attracted by its stance on race and labor. She was mentored by famed civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, who became her special friend and led her to pursue her education. She obtained scholarships to college, and after several years of study in the U.S. and then in Denmark, she became a women’s labor organizer and a union publicist.

In the 1930s and 1940s, she wrote about international events for black newspapers, traveling to Europe, Mexico, and the Soviet Union and presenting an anti-imperialist critique of world affairs to her readers. Edwards’s involvement with the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, her work in a Jewish refugee settlement in Italy, and her activities with U.S. communists drew the attention of the FBI. She was harassed by government intelligence organizations until she died at the age of just fifty-five. Edwards contributed as much to the radical foundations of the modern civil rights movements as any other woman of her time.

This fascinating new biography details Thyra Edwards’s lifelong journey and myriad achievements, describing both her personal and professional sides and the many ways they intertwined. Gregg Andrews used Edwards’s official FBI file—along with her personal papers, published articles, and civil rights manuscript collections—to present a complete portrait of this noteworthy activist. An engaging volume for the historian as well as the general reader, *Thyra J. Edwards* explores the complete domestic and international impact of her life and actions.

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