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FREEDOM DAY, 1963: A LOST INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BALDWIN

After Baldwin's biographer died, her niece opened an old desk drawer and discovered a trove of interview material, some of it unpublished.

By **Fern Marja Eckman**
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James Baldwin's first biographer was my aunt Fern Marja Eckman, a prize-winning feature writer and reporter for the *New York Post*. She died in 2019, at the age of a hundred and three. As her closest living relative, I cleaned out her apartment. Hidden in a concealed drawer of an old mahogany desk, I found transcripts of interviews that she had conducted with Baldwin. Some of that material was included in her book, "The Furious Passage of James Baldwin," which was published, in 1966, by M. Evans & Company. It is especially interesting to read the carefully typed transcripts of their conversations in light of our current moment.

With the encouragement of Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., the chair of the department of African-American studies at Princeton University and the author of a current best-seller on Baldwin, "Begin Again," I am making more of this interview material public. The session captured below, part of which appeared in my aunt's book, is particularly relevant. It took place on the afternoon of October 9, 1963, just two days after Baldwin returned to New York from Selma, Alabama, where he had taken part in "Freedom Day," a Black voter-registration drive organized by the Dallas County Voters League and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Selma is a town in Dallas County, part of the so-called Black Belt, where Black voting registration was almost nonexistent. In Dallas County, the population at the time was fifty-eight per cent Black; only one per cent of the Black population was registered to vote. More than eighty per cent of the Black population in Dallas County lived under the poverty line and was routinely disqualified from voting by literacy tests and other restrictions. The registration rate among the white population was sixty-four per cent.

The historian Howard Zinn, who attended the march as an adviser to SNCC, wrote in his memoir, "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train," "The idea was to bring hundreds of people to register to vote, hoping that their numbers would decrease fear." In Selma, Baldwin marched alongside SNCC's executive secretary, James Forman, and other activists. "Freedom Day," 1963, was a forerunner to events in Alabama in 1965—the "Bloody Sunday" confrontation at the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the march from Selma to Montgomery—that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

At the time of the interview, Baldwin was already a major literary star. He had recently published "Another Country," as well as "The Fire Next Time," which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* and was riding high on the best-seller lists. He and my aunt were joined at the table by Baldwin's brother David. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—Leslie J. Freeman



James Forman, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with James Baldwin, in Selma, Alabama, in 1963. Photograph by Danny Lyon / Magnum

JAMES BALDWIN: On Sunday morning [October 6, 1963], James Forman called me and asked me if I would come down that night. The reason was that he had designated October 7th as “Freedom Day,” and that involved a tremendous registration drive. He wanted to make sure that we’d get more than the usual press coverage and that I would write about it and speak that evening at the mass rally. So, in a way, I was being used as bait. I wasn’t at all sure I could. Then I thought about it and I got my ticket, and we flew down, David and I.

He wanted me to get down early because he wanted to brief me on the situation in Selma, Alabama, which is a town I’d never seen, and to prepare me for what Monday would be like. I must say, in that he completely failed. No one could have prepared me for Monday.

We got to Selma early Monday morning, about 1:30 A.M. Alabama time. And we had a talk. Jim gave me some idea of the town itself. The proportion of Negroes is something like fifty-eight per cent, which is, of course, the key to the whole battle. It’s a cotton town. And poor.

We were sitting around talking. You would be aware of sudden silence fell. And then you’d realize that a car was coming. And that everyone was listening . . . for a car. And, of course, you did, too. You’d see the lights of the car pass the window, in this total silence, and you’d be aware that everyone, including you, was waiting for bullets or a bomb. And the car would pass, and you’d go to the blinds and look out.

Then we’d start talking again. This went on the whole time we were talking. During this same conversation, Prathia Hall, [a SNCC field secretary] who was later arrested, went to the phone. We couldn’t hear what was on the other end of the phone, but we heard Prathia saying, “What happened there? How are your wife and children?” And, “Did you know who they were?” Which is sufficiently disturbing. It turned out that a man named Porter found two white men under his house, fiddling with his gas pipe, at two-thirty in the morning. It was his dog who barked and alerted him. The next day, we saw Porter, and we learned they had come and killed his dog. Then we went out to the [voter-registration] line.

FERN MARJA ECKMAN: Were you scared?

J.B.: Yeah! I was scared physically, because I knew what could happen, and I was scared because I didn’t know how to handle myself. The Deep South depends on a certain kind of I didn’t want to get anybody else in trouble. I didn’t know what I would say to any of those cops. It’s a principal terror when I’m there. There’s a weird kind of etiquette which I can’t observe, because I wasn’t born there, and you can’t learn it.

We got there around 9:45 A.M. The press people were out there. I don’t know if I can explain to you what it means in a town like that to get that many Negroes out to stand on line to vote.

F.M.E.: Well, try to tell me.

J.B.: Well, it’s almost impossible, you know. Here is a town that’s ruled by terror, that’s ruled by mob. The white population and the police are all the mob, and there’s no protection for any Negro in the town of any kind whatever. You cannot call the police. You’d be out of your mind. And the Negroes are not armed. They cannot protect themselves. It’s not a rich town, so everyone there is, in one way or another, dependent for his livelihood on some white man. Now, to get, as Jim did, three hundred and seventy-five Negroes out to vote

F.M.E.: How long had they been working on that?

J.B.: They’d been working on it since February. A fantastic thing, you know, to be able to do. Fantastic!

F.M.E.: What age ranges were they?

J.B.: They were from sixty to twenty-one, but the higher proportion of people in the line were young people. The older people in one way or another are, in general, too victimized, too intimidated, too tired, you know? It was the kids — obviously, most of the kids — who led the registration drive.

It was very peaceful in the beginning. We walked up and down the line. Jim was proselytizing as he went. It was very impressive to see. I guess we wandered about for an hour, talking to various people, who kept coming. But no Negro had gone through the doors as of yet. No Negro did go through those doors until ten-thirty, and it was not because there was a great press of people inside. They were determined not to register any Negroes. They dawdled as long as they could. We went away about eleven, and when we came back the posse was out. With green helmets.

F.M.E.: The storm troopers.

J.B.: The storm troopers, yes. And the state troopers' cars.

DAVID BALDWIN: They weren't in yet.

J.B.: That's right. There were so many it's hard to remember the colors. Orange helmets. Orange and blue and green helmets.

D.B.: The blue ones were state troopers. The orange and the green are the posse.

J.B.: Yes. The posse was so many people. The sheriff — Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark — had deputized anybody who could carry a gun.

D.B.: And white.

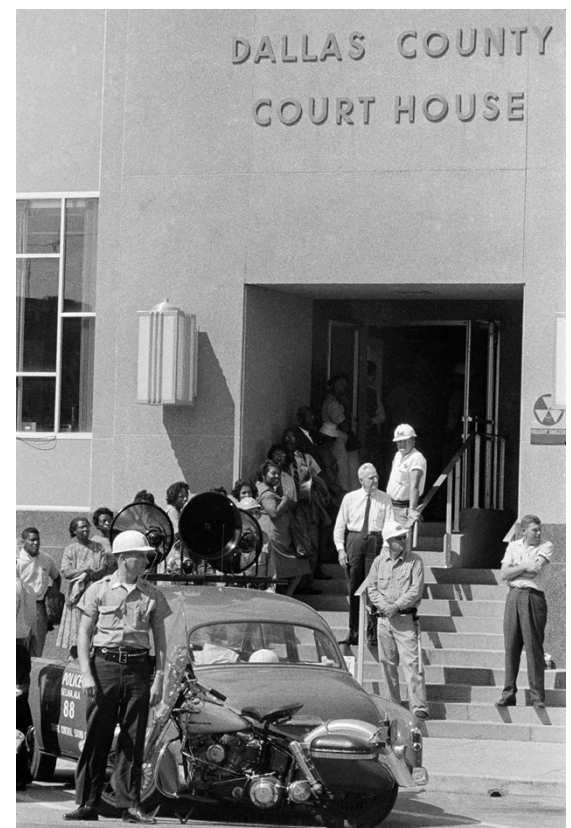
J.B.: And white, yes. I should have pointed that out. [Laughs.] It was the orange deputies first. The other cats didn't come in until later. But, still, everything was very peaceful. We could still talk to the people on the line, and the line was still stretched around the corner. And there was no real hassle. There was only a very faint harbinger of what was to come in the fact that these men behind with the helmets kept saying, "You're blocking the sidewalk. Move along, move along." And so on. We kept moving. But there was no question about whether or not we could talk to people.

I guess the crisis began around noon. Just before noon. When did the sheriff get there?

D.B.: The sheriff got there, say, around eleven-thirty.

J.B.: Yes, it was something like that. The sheriff said that the people, if they left the line, they couldn't get their place back in line. They'd been standing there for more than two hours and couldn't leave the line to go to the bathroom. Lunchtime was coming, and they were going to close the courthouse for an hour. But the Negroes were not allowed to leave under any pretext whatever.

So Jim decided they had to feed people. We got some money together and went out and got a whole lot of made up a whole lot of sandwiches. I'm telescoping the story a little now, because lots of things happened in between, which was really a stepping up of pressure. The pressure of us keeping moving got greater and



"All these people were jeopardizing their lives, their jobs, their children, everything they had in order to stand on that line in order to vote," Baldwin said, of the "Freedom Day" registration drive.
Photograph by Darryl Lyon / Magnum

greater. I must go into that whole “keep moving along” bit, because the pressure was there, you know CBS and cameras, and microphones and things.

F.M.E.: And surely some newspaper reporters?

J.B.: Newspaper reporters, yes, but also cameras and they were talking to me. And, whenever this happened, along came the deputies, saying, “Move along you’re blocking the sidewalk.” We kept moving, from the sidewalk to the grass, and from the grass to someplace else. We kept moving. And as we moved these men would stick behind us, and that’s how we ended up in the streets. Then we had to move from there. We were “blocking the sidewalk.” No matter where you were, you were blocking traffic.

F.M.E.: How was their manner?

J.B.: The only word I can find for it was that it was mindless. They sounded like parrots. It was the only phrase they ever used: “Move along you’re blocking the sidewalk.” And also, I must say, when I finally looked into their faces, they were terrified. With their guns and their helmets. And terrified in a very strange way. Terrified as the mindless are terrified. Because the only way they could react to any pressure was a rock or bullet or gun. They don’t have any other defenses at all! This is the police force the Southern oligarchy has used and created to protect their interests.

Finally, after all this “moving along” bit, Jim Forman wanted to go into the courthouse a federal courthouse. We started in, and the two guards at the door said we couldn’t come in. And Jim Forman said, “You know, we have to go upstairs to the courthouse. What do you mean we can’t come in?” And they just repeated the same phrase: “You can’t come in.” And when we said, “Why can’t we come in?” “You can’t come in.” And Jim said, “Do you mean you’re forbidding us to enter a federal courthouse?” And he, the first guard, said, “You have to ask him about that.” The other guard looked away, and the first guard finally said, “The chief of this operation” or whatever phrase he used said we had to come in “through the front door.” So we went around to the front door, where the line was, and Sheriff Clark said we couldn’t get in there. We had to go around to the side door, so we went around to the side door again, and the guard said we couldn’t get in. And then, you know, we’re standing there, trying to figure out what to do next, and he said, “You’re blocking the door.” [Laughs.] So we moved to the side. This is all happening under the eyes of the Justice Department and the F.B.I., by the way.

F.M.E.: What did they do? They stood and watched?

J.B.: And taking pictures. And making phone calls. I guess it was after that that the trouble with the food started. Around twelve-thirty, Mrs. Amelia Boynton, one of the activists in Selma, and I came back with her car. We didn’t realize we were going to have any trouble about that. I don’t know when I realized it, because Jim and Mrs. Boynton knew it first. They were dealing with the sheriff. We were on the other side of the street. And by this time the state troopers were there. Twelve cars, bumper to bumper. And all their helmets on. I forget the color of their helmets. Blue or green.

D.B.: Blue ones.

J.B.: The helmets were like a garden. So many colors. And, with their guns and their clubs and their cattle prods, they pushed Jim once and one of the Negro photographers. Not with the cattle prod but with a stick. But nothing else. Anyway, the climate was much more tense. And there was a gang of white hangers-on.

F.M.E.: Were you scared?

J.B.: I was furious.

D.B.: I was scared and furious.

J.B.: I was scared in the morning, before it all began, and I was scared the first time I walked around there. But, later on, I wasn't scared at all. That's exactly what happened. Your fear is swallowed up by

F.M.E.: Fury.

J.B.: Fury! Yeah. What you really want to do is kill all those people.

D.B.: Exactly.

J.B.: And you feel that so strongly that you haven't got time to be afraid. And those faces – my God. You know? The faces of the white in the South is a real blasphemy. Anyway, we started trying to feed the people. Mrs. Boynton came back to report to Jim Forman that the sheriff was not allowing anybody to talk to anybody on the line. And Jim wasn't talking to anybody on the line. You were not allowed to talk to them.

F.M.E.: Did they give you any explanations?

J.B.: No. The food issue began to be crucial, because if you couldn't talk to them you couldn't feed them. And we had all these sandwiches.

F.M.E.: And they'd be tired and have to leave.

J.B.: Well, they didn't. As a matter of fact, as far as I could tell, nobody left.

F.M.E.: Was it terribly hot?

J.B.: It was very hot. And there they stood. They were leaning on one another's shoulders, and they took off their shoes and stood around. It turned out we couldn't even get close enough to the line, as somebody figured out, to put all the sandwiches in a shopping bag and carry it to the end of the line and have those sandwiches passed up by the people on the line. Kind of a bucket-brigade thing. Then Jim and Mrs. Boynton and I walked over to talk to the sheriff. Mrs. Boynton and Jim said that the people had been standing there for a long time, and it was hot, and they were hungry. We had food for them – we'd like to feed them. The sheriff said, "I'll not have them molested in any way." Mrs. Boynton said, "We're not trying to molest them. We're trying to feed them." And the sheriff said again – he said it four times, no matter what anybody said. Four times. And this had been the pattern of the whole morning, as though they'd learned one phrase.

F.M.E.: Isn't there a sign in the zoo – "Don't feed the animals"? Sometimes they say, "Don't molest the animals."

J.B.: That's probably where he got it from. "I will not have them molested in any way." And, finally, Jim said, "Are you really forbidding us to talk to these people and feed these people? Don't you know that's against the law?" And the sheriff said, "I don't care if it's against the law – that's my order." And he turned away, with his fat behind and his fat face. And his helmet.

F.M.E.: What's his name?

J.B.: "Big Jim" Clark. I wish to God that somebody'd blow his head off.

F.M.E.: Wouldn't help. There'd be another one just like him.

J.B.: No, it would help. There are some people whose only reason to be, whose only human use, is that they should come to a violent death. Their only human use.

F.M.E.: How were the three hundred and seventy-five people on the line? How did they behave?

J.B.: They were very orderly. They were absolutely silent, and they were just standing there. They didn't say a word to any of us, because we couldn't get anywhere near them.

F.M.E.: How far away from them were you?

J.B.: We were on the other side of the street. Jim then decided he would take the sandwiches over. And David said, "You'd be playing into their hands if you do. You're in charge of this operation. If you take the sandwiches over, they'll put you in jail, and so that destroys your usefulness for the foreseeable for the rest of this day, anyway." And, in the same way, Jim thought maybe I should carry one of the registration signs, and David said, "Well, you know, in that case, Jimmy will be arrested, and he's got to address the mass meeting tonight. They'll be delighted to have him in jail." And we prevailed upon Jim not to take the sandwiches. And two boys, [the SNCC activists] Carver Neblett and Avery Williams, about twenty and twenty-one, volunteered to take the sandwiches over, and, well, they did.

D.B.: There was a whole load of sandwiches, and they wouldn't let them take no more than a little box. They knew

J.B.: They went over with these sandwiches. You know, a handful of sandwiches. And from across the street we saw the two boys. They approached the sheriff together and were arguing with the sheriff, obviously. The sheriff struck one of them, and then the other boy went down. The posse closed in, and you could see them kicking them. And they were using the cattle prod on them. The cameramen were trying to get this. And the posse half the posse was on these two kids, and the other part of the posse was beating up a cameraman and jumping up with their helmets in front of the cameras, to prevent anything from being seen. This is also happening under the eyes of the F.B.I. and the Justice Department. And they finally carried the boys around the corner and threw them into a bus. It's the last we ever saw of them for the day.

When the posse started beating up these kids, the mob rushed forward, as though someone had blown a whistle and this was the signal for slaughter. I'll never forget that. Because that was what this town is like.

F.M.E.: How large a white crowd was there?

J.B.: It got bigger as it went on. They were integrated with the posse, because they'd driven us away. We were driven off the sidewalk, and we found ourselves on the federal-courthouse steps, where we thought we were protected, and where the sheriff had already arrested three boys carrying voter-registration signs.

F.M.E.: What was the charge?

J.B.: Unlawful assembly. We all had to stand on the federal-courthouse steps. We couldn't stand anyplace else. And I went inside. The F.B.I. was picking up statements, for what reason I cannot imagine. I went inside to give a statement, and while I was inside David and the cameramen and everybody this is an integrated crowd came in to report that the sheriff had driven them off the steps of the federal courthouse.

F.M.E.: Were the reporters friendly?

J.B.: The reporters were very friendly.

D.B.: It was the reporters who asked them if it was against the law to drive us off the federal-courthouse steps. And the F.B.I. man said, "Yes, it's against the law." By this time, you're quite mad. You ask if it's against the law and they ask you if you had a statement to make. In my statement, I said I'd had sixteen months in Korea. And what for?

J.B.: Yes. The moral of the story, Fern, is that what really happened was that three hundred and seventy-five people who are American citizens, whom the government would put in jail if they didn't pay their taxes, would

put in jail if they did not serve in the Army this same government says, and makes it known, they can't do anything to protect them. There were three hundred and seventy-five people in that street yesterday who could have been shot down under the eyes of the F.B.I., and the government could have done nothing about it. All these people were jeopardizing their lives, their jobs, their children, everything they had in order to stand on that line in order to vote, which is an American right and duty. And the government of the U.S., which can mount invasions of Cuba and "protect" the Vietnamese, cannot protect these people! That's a lie. The government can do anything it wants to do. What it means is that the government does not dare yet to offend the Southern oligarchy. It's not the F.B.I. who does it, you know, it's really the power of all these people in Congress who are Southerners, and the fact that Bobby Kennedy doesn't dare attack them. The Administration doesn't give a damn.

The terrible bargain America struck, when the North and South agreed they were going to use the Negro both as agrarian cheap labor and as industrial cheap labor do you know? And the South created that mindless mob, which rules the South in order to protect the Southern interests and continue to keep the Negro in his place. It's a creation of the American government.

And, really, you know, finally, the poor white is the great victim in the South. He's the real victim. It makes him humanly useless and monstrous. But that is the crime. And the Administration is still playing footsie with these people, you know? The judges Kennedy has appointed in the South are designed to protect the oligarchy. This has the effect of exposing, for example, to loss of life, three hundred and seventy-five Negroes yesterday in Selma.

F.M.E.: How did they make it so only fifty could register?

J.B.: What? Fifty, baby? I'm sorry the last count we had in Selma was twelve to twenty. All day long.

F.M.E.: I thought the *Times* said

J.B.: The *Times* was wrong! The *Times* doesn't talk to the Negroes on the line. The first woman came out at eleven o'clock. She went in at ten-thirty. She'd been there since twenty to nine. From nine o'clock until four-thirty, twelve to twenty people registered, all of whom are going to fail the test by the time the next registration day comes around.

D.B.: Doctors, lawyers, teachers are going to fail the test.

J.B.: And the government can't do anything about it. There were certain things I realized sitting in Selma and watching the local news, for instance. The implication is that the Negroes are so passive that they don't want to vote. That it's only people like Jim Forman and Jimmy Baldwin who stir them up. And, even then, they only had a hundred and fifty. And the sheriff kept everything very orderly.

The real drama is the fact that the people can't vote and the government won't help them, and that they're living in a police state with the collusion of the federal government. The last thing we heard as we left Selma, early the next morning, was a housewife saying, "I think I'd better get a gun." This is a Christian housewife. She said, "I'd better get a gun." I saw the guns out down there.

And when they shut down [the registration], this whole line of Negroes, just walking by the courthouse, marching in twos they didn't get a chance to vote. They all stayed there all day long. You know the day is coming when they will no longer go to the courthouse for redress of grievances. And, when that day comes, the country will have no one to blame but itself.