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Condon, Amy Paige. *A Nervous Man Shouldn't Be Here in the First Place: The Life of Bill Baggs*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020, 30 pp., \$32.95 (hardback). Reviewed by David R. Davies, University of Southern Mississippi, dave.davies@usm.edu.

As editor of the old *Miami News* for more than a decade until his untimely death in 1969, Bill Baggs stood out even among his progressive peers such as Ralph McGill of Atlanta and Harry Ashmore of Little Rock: He was an unapologetically outspoken liberal editor, favoring racial equality and promoting environmentalism years before the issue rose to national prominence. His editorial stands earned him legions of loyal liberal readers as the *News* took on the larger and more established *Miami Herald* but also constant criticism and threats of violence from more conservative Miamians. He kept a gun at his bedside and – to avoid being killed in a bombing – installed a remote starter in his used Mercedes.

Independent scholar and writer Amy Paige Condon profiles Baggs' life in a readable and well-researched biography that captures the essence of Baggs both as a crusading editor and a seasoned political operator who counted John and Robert Kennedy as friends. She also captures Baggs' time and place – an era not so long ago when journalistic leadership on questions of conscience could make a profound difference in a community. It also serves to cement the historical record of Baggs' life and journalism, which otherwise might have been forgotten given his mid-career death at just 45. Baggs, like so many other influential journalists of his day, has not attracted nearly the level of attention of his more prominent peers such as McGill and Ashmore. Condon's monograph is a welcome addition to the historiography of newspapers and journalism in the postwar period and illustrates the important contributions that journalists at mid-sized dailies of this era made to their communities and to journalism.

William Calhoun Baggs was born to a prominent and wealthy Atlanta family in 1923. In high school he happened to witness a Black man being dragged from the local courthouse in what most likely was a

lynching; seeing one of the abductors passing the plate at his church the following Sunday awakened him to Southern hypocrisy. Another turning point for Baggs came after graduation, when he moved to Panama and ultimately took his first paying job with a newspaper. The move opened his eyes to the wider world and sparked a lifelong fascination with Central America and its problems. By nature outspoken, he was comfortable challenging authority, particularly to take up for the little guy.

After service in World War II, Baggs wound up in Miami, where the *News* hired him in 1946 to cover aviation. This was a prize beat in booming Miami, teeming with ex-servicemen after the war and rapidly developing into an aviation and commercial hub. Baggs quickly advanced, landing plum writing assignments such as a lengthy syndicated series on the rebuilding of postwar Europe and later becoming a high-profile columnist. His column-writing brought him into contact with Floridians of all stripes and forged relationships with the *News*' owner, James M. Cox.

Named editor in 1957 at just 34 years old, Baggs quickly set about establishing the *News* as a progressive voice for Miami, arguing for conservation, historic preservation, and racial equality. His deep friendships within the Black community and its church leadership helped to advance the African American community in the face of segregation and discrimination. As Baggs' profile grew nationally, he developed lifelong friendships with prominent editorial peers across the country, including Ashmore, McGill, and John Popham of Chattanooga. His editorial creed, cross-stitched and framed for his wall, was "A nervous man shouldn't be here in the first place." He also became friendly with national politicians, including Vice President

Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Baggs' relationship with Kennedy was especially close and contributed to the *News*' breaking stories during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Kennedy so relied on Baggs' insights into the Miami Cuban community that he had a direct line to the White House installed in Baggs' home. Condon acknowledges that Baggs' relationships with politicians entered a gray area even for his day, though Baggs always argued that he had always maintained his impartiality and editorial independence. In 1967 and 1968, he and Ashmore took trips to Hanoi to deliver messages on behalf of the U.S. Government to North Vietnam, meeting personally with Ho Chi Minh. In those missions, Baggs' opposition to the war and commitment to peace overrode his concerns about impartiality. That

trip resulted in a book, *Mission to Hanoi*, authored by the two journalists.

Baggs died in early 1969 after several years of ill health, and tributes poured in from across the country. A state park Baggs had championed was named in his honor not long after his death. It was an honor intended to recognize the contributions the progressive Baggs had made on behalf of his community and profession. Condon's fine biography does the same. The book is well-researched and nuanced, relying on interviews, letters, and other archival materials to convincingly document one journalist's contributions to his community. The work would be a welcome addition to historians and students studying Twentieth Century journalism and is noteworthy for shining a spotlight on a journalist whose contributions would otherwise have been forgotten.