

**For freedom : a biographical story of the American Negro / by Arthur Huff Fauset ; drawings by Mabel Betsy Hill.**

Fauset, Arthur Huff, 1899-1983.

Philadelphia : Franklin Pub. and Supply Co., [1934, c1927]

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## XXI

### THE NEW NEGRO

ALAIN LOCKE wrote a book in 1925 which he called *The New Negro*. The book contained some astounding information about things which Negroes were doing, especially in the world of art, such as music and literature.

Thousands of people read that book. It made a great impression.

For the first time since slave days people stopped what they were doing and took a moment to notice the Negro. They were surprised. They had not realized that while the world was progressing in art, literature, education, and industry, the Negro also was quietly forging his way in all these fields of culture.

They had imagined that the Negro of the twentieth century was no different from the Negro they knew in the days when Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin." To their utter astonishment, when they gave themselves time to take a good look at the Negro's development, they discovered that he was as much changed as the new Europe is from the old.

Locke was right, they agreed. The Negro whom they saw was not the Negro of a hundred years ago or even of twenty-five years ago. He had accomplished too much not to be influenced by his successes. Indeed, this was the New Negro.

Really, though, the New Negro has been in America for a long time. Only, everyone was so used to seeing Negroes that practically no one discovered that differences were taking place under our very eyes.

Du Bois was different. Locke was different. Many others were also. But it was not until Locke packed the evidence of these differences into one single volume, calling it "The New Negro," that people fully realized what had been taking place.

There are so many of these "New Negroes" that it is impossible to do much more than mention a few of them. Many of these persons are quite important, and their mention here ought to make you want to find out more about them elsewhere.

We must not overlook Kelly Miller, now an elderly gentleman, who has been a warrior for his people for dozens of years. He is a philosopher and mathematician who rose from the utmost poverty in South Carolina to a position of eminence among his people which few others have excelled.

Benjamin Brawley is another. He is a man still in his prime, and is one of the best scholars of the race. He was not satisfied to be a *Negro* scholar only, and so he set out to learn in the best schools of the country, and then to compete with the finest writers.

Today he is one of the leading literary critics of the country. He wrote a text-book of literary criticism recently which is being used in many of the largest and best schools and colleges in America. He is a graduate of Harvard University.

Still another was Matthew Anderson of Philadelphia.

Even when Anderson was an elderly man as years are

counted, his spirit was the spirit of youth. He started his life work while a very young man and he never ceased to be intensely busy.

Matthew Anderson was born in Greensburg, Pa., some years before the Civil War. He was not a slave, however. As a youngster his eyes wandered over to the hills of his native state, and he had visions of surmounting lofty peaks of human endeavor. As soon as he was able he left Greensburg and proceeded to Ohio. There he was educated. Finally he was graduated from Oberlin College.

He became enthusiastic about the ministry. True to his inclination to seek the uppermost places in any effort he undertook, he set out for Princeton University. He studied there to be a minister, and developed a friendship with Francis J. Grimke, which has lasted for more than fifty years. Dr. Grimke is one of the most revered clergymen in America today.

Anderson was not satisfied when he had completed his work at Princeton, so he continued his studies at Yale University. By the time he was ready to preach he was one of the best trained ministers in this country.

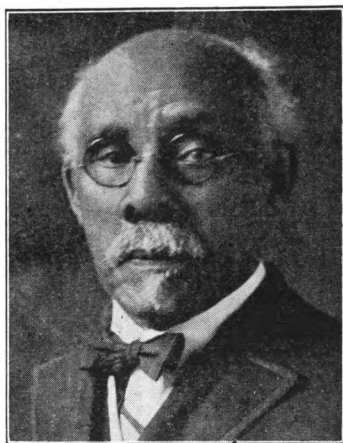
Quite by accident he settled in Philadelphia for his life work. The little Gloucester Mission which he undertook to develop grew to such proportions that it became necessary to establish a larger church home. The result was the Berean Presbyterian Church which even today is one of the most picturesque and best equipped churches owned by colored people anywhere.

Anderson's church continued to flourish, but for a man of his abounding energy and mental capacity the church did not seem sufficient to employ his talents. He observed that

there was a great need for a school for young colored men and women where they might equip themselves for the practical pursuits of life. He set out to establish such an institution.

The result was the Berean Manual Training and Industrial School. Here people of all races and classes may learn to become stenographers, bookkeepers, automobile mechanics, plumbers, and efficient workers in other industrial occupations.

Dr. Anderson also established a building and loan association so that poor people might be able to purchase their own homes without great difficulty. Today hundreds of persons of all classes have purchased homes through the Berean Building and Loan Society, and it is one of the strongest associations of its kind in America.



MATTHEW ANDERSON

Dr. Anderson died in 1928. Since then the Berean School has continued to advance under the leadership of his widow, Mrs. Blanche E. Anderson.

Many of the "New Negroes" are artists, but before we speak of some of them we ought to mention Carter G. Woodson, who is the leading historian of the race. He was born in the South and getting an education was difficult. Always there burned within him the ambition to

learn from books. He found a way, working with all his might, early and late.

He worked so hard that when he finally prepared to take the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Harvard University he completed the work required in the short space of two years. Today Woodson is one of the foremost historical scholars on the Negro in the world.

Then there is Charles Waddell Chestnutt. He became a prominent novelist about the same time that Du Bois was writing the beautiful essays which brought him so much praise.

Chestnutt was born in Cleveland. He was such a bright lad that when he was only sixteen years old he taught school in North Carolina, and by the time he was twenty-three he was principal of the normal school for colored teachers of that state.

School teaching did not altogether appeal to him. He went to New York and did some newspaper work, then he returned to Cleveland. Stories under his name began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and these showed how well he had observed life among Negroes while he was in the South. Later these stories were collected in one volume under the title "The Conjure Woman."

He wrote three novels. They are: "The House Behind the Cedars," his first and most popular novel, "Marrow of Tradition," and "The Colonel's Dream." He has written other stories, and a most delightful brief biography of Frederick Douglass. Chestnutt died in 1932.

When Chestnutt was just budding into manhood a Negro boy was born in Boston who later helped many aspiring poets of all races. His name is William Stanley Braithwaite.

Braithwaite was unable to go very far in school. However, he was ambitious and zealous. He wanted to write poetry and to be able to criticise it, and so he did not let lack of education ruin his hopes.

By sheer hard work he mastered the difficult art of writing verse. Two volumes of his poetry are "Lyrics of Life and Love" and "The House of Falling Leaves."

But Braithwaite became a far greater critic of poetry than a poet. For years his opinions have been sought for eagerly by persons interested in poetry all over America.

Each year until recently he published a book in which he announced his opinion as to the finest magazine verse that had been published during the preceding twelve months. It was called "Braithwaite's Anthology." To have one's name or a poem inserted in this book was considered a rare honor.

Braithwaite is a Negro. But because he conceived the idea of being a "New Negro," which meant to give to the world his very best without offering any excuses because he was a Negro, he has attained a position of eminence not excelled by anyone.

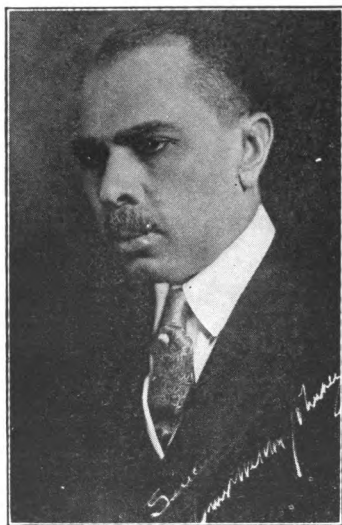
His fame as a critic has made it possible for him to help many ambitious poets of both races by calling attention to their work, or, as he has done frequently, by offering friendly counsel and advice to the young poets.

Slowly the outpouring of the Negro soul spread itself over the pages of American literature. Gradually the number of artists increased, then suddenly a whole flock of New Negro artists appeared at the same time.

This was especially true after the World War. In that conflict the Negro fought not only for his own freedom, but for the freedom of the world. He did not fail. Whole regi-

ments were cited for bravery. Names like Needham Roberts and Noble Johnson became symbolic of magnificent valor on the fields of Flanders, yet these were but two out of the many Negroes who gave their blood with devotion to their country's call for world freedom.

The spirit of these brave, loyal soldiers crept into the fiber of the American Negro. New fires of ambition and pride stirred in the Negro heart.



JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

Freedom meant more to him now than ever before. He saw himself for the first time, perhaps, a citizen of a remarkable country, full of opportunities for development, and bidding him to contribute in civil life the same fire and zeal which he had exhibited on the battlefield. The result was almost immediately noticeable in a startling wave of artistic expression in which the New Negro, full of joy and pride in his race and his national

heritage, seemingly announced to his country, "America, we are here!"

One of the most prominent of these present-day writers is James Weldon Johnson. He and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, a well-known actor and composer, were born in Florida. The author was educated chiefly in Atlanta University.

Though not so well known, his "Autobiography of an



Ex-Colored Man," is one of the most delightfully written stories from the pen of an American Negro. The volume was published some years ago, before the World War, without disclosing the author's identity, but recent popular demand has resulted in a new edition.

Johnson is one of the finest poets of the race. Perhaps he is best known as the author of the words of the so-called Negro National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the music of which was written by his brother. This has been compared with the "Marsellaise" for majesty and beauty.

Not long ago he published a volume of verse entitled "God's Trombones." This is an exquisite volume containing seven old Negro sermons set to very stirring rhythm.

For years Johnson and Du Bois were associated in the organization which publishes the periodical called *The Crisis*. This magazine and another, called *Opportunity*, have done remarkable things in the way of encouraging young Negro writers.

The effect of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* in stimulating Negro art has been almost like a shock of electricity. Mere boys and girls have had a chance to display their talents, and through encouragement and criticism some of them have become national figures. The success of these young artists has depended largely, of course, on their determination to make the grade, and on their willingness to work unceasingly and to take criticism without flinching.

The most gifted of these young New Negro writers are

three poets, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.

Claude McKay is sometimes credited with being the finest of the New Negro poets. He was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, and after receiving some training in the schools there, came to America in 1912. He studied in Kansas University, then entered the literary field, writing for newspapers and other periodicals.

Many of his best poems have been collected in a volume called, "Harlem Shadows." One of his most stirring bits of verse is the poem, "If We Must Die." McKay now resides in France.

Countee Cullen has had a remarkable career. He is not yet twenty-five years of age. Born and reared in New York City, he attended New York and Harvard Universities, and won the highest scholastic honors, including Phi Beta Kappa.

As a boy Cullen liked to write verse. Long, long years he tried. People laughed at his attempts. "You'll never make it," they said. "You haven't it in you." Once he took his work to some rather well-known critics. These persons scarcely paid any attention to his verse. Still he was not discouraged. He had the pluck to keep on.

While he was a student in De Witt Clinton High School a prize was offered for the best poem submitted by a student. To the surprise of everyone, Countee Cullen, the young Negro, won the prize with a poem entitled, "I Have a Rendezvous with Life."

His rise from that time was meteoric. Poems appeared regularly in *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. People who read poetry commenced to say, "Watch Countee Cullen."

One day a long poem of Cullen's appeared in one of America's most widely read periodicals, *The American Mercury*. The name of that poem is "The Shroud of Color."

Cullen was not yet out of college, yet with that poem his name became nationally famous!

Cullen has won numerous important prizes and even more valuable tributes because of his excellent verse. Lately he published many of his poems in a volume entitled "Color." With this collection of his works he entered the ranks of the foremost American poets of the present time. Since, he has become the author of a second volume of verse, entitled "Copper Sun."



LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes is almost as young as Cullen. His career has been equally brilliant, and even more colorful.

He was born in Joplin, Missouri, but, like Blanche Bruce, he has been a rolling stone. After receiving his education in the Lawrence, Kansas, public schools, and Cleveland, Ohio, High School, he then decided to go to Columbia University, New York City. He stayed there one year.

College seemed too dull for one of Hughes' roving inclinations, and he set sail on a ship to Africa.

His experiences were many.

He traveled hundreds of miles in the interior of Africa, and also "roughed it" in many European countries.

Hughes, like Cullen, always had a great urge to create verse. He has developed a passionate love of his people, and his poems deal largely with the life of lowly Negroes and of the hopes of Negroes. He has made a special study of the type of American verse known as the "Blues."



JESSIE FAUSET

Encouraged by such friends as Alain Locke and Du Bois, Hughes gained considerable note as a writer even before he was out of his 'teens. Then, in 1925, he won first prize for the best poem submitted in a contest arranged by *Opportunity*. The name of the prize poem is "The Weary Blues." This poem was reprinted in various periodicals and earned for him the applause of the nation.

Soon after, Hughes published a volume of poems under the same title. This year another volume has appeared under the title "Fine Clothes to the Jew." Since then he has written several volumes of poetry and a novel.

Hughes has oftentimes been called the Burns of the Negro because, like Robert Burns, the Scottish bard, he has chosen to write verse which treats of the experiences of common folk. At present he is a student in Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.

These three poets have earned some of the renown which

formerly Paul Lawrence Dunbar alone had achieved. Dunbar still ranks as the bard of bards among Negroes, but he is the last crusader of the old school, a kind of middle ground between the days that had been and the days which McKay, Cullen, and Hughes represent.

But it is not in poetry alone that the New Negro has achieved distinction. Noteworthy attainments developed in other fields also.

Jessie Fauset, a young woman from Philadelphia, distinguished herself in the public schools there, and at Cornell University, where she became the first colored female student to win Phi Beta Kappa honors, and became the first Negro woman to write a novel. Its name is "There is Confusion."

She has also written "Plum Bun" and "The Chinaberry Tree."

Almost at the same time Walter White, a young Negro trained in Atlanta, wrote a novel called "The Fire in the Flint." Later he published a second novel, "Flight."

The novels of Miss Fauset and Mr. White deal with Negro topics. They met with immediate success, and created a growing interest in the New Negro.



WALTER WHITE

William Pickens, while not a novelist or a poet, is one of the leading writers of the New Negro group. He is the author of a very thrilling account of his own life, called "Bursting Bonds."

Pickens was born in South Carolina. His education came only after the greatest hardships. Eventually, however, he entered Yale University, where his record was so brilliant that in all the history of the university it has scarcely been surpassed.

The Negro is becoming a more familiar character on the stage. Years ago, Ira Aldridge, a Negro born in Bel Air, Maryland, was famous as Othello in the renowned Shakesperian drama.

Perhaps the most illustrious actor of recent times was Egbert Austin Williams, known to millions of admirers as "Bert" Williams. He was born in the island of Nassau, British Bahamas, in 1876. Coming to America at a very early age, he received an extensive education in California. Not long afterwards, he became famous with George Walker, another Negro, in a theatrical company known as "Williams and Walker."

After the death of Walker, Williams' fame as a comedian continued to grow. Curiously enough, it was always Williams' ambition to be a serious actor. Unfortunately, his dream was never realized. He died in March, 1922, just as another Negro actor, Charles Gilpin, was achieving the very thing Williams longed for.

Gilpin was born in Richmond, Virginia. He drifted into acting, but once he realized that he had rare talent in this field, he struggled with all his might to excel. He succeeded so remarkably that when he scored his greatest triumph in

"Emperor Jones," many Americans hailed him as the foremost actor of the year.

A young lady, Florence Mills, made quite as remarkable a record. Beginning as a very obscure player, she rose to the pinnacle of fame, both at home and abroad, where she became endearingly known as the "little songbird." Her very sudden death in the fall of 1927 brought to a close the most promising theatrical career among the New Negro group.

Paul Robeson is the most notable Negro actor at the present time. He is one of the finest examples of the New Negro.

Robeson is a graduate of Rutgers College. There he won rare honors, attaining both Phi Beta Kappa and "All-American" honors in football.

For a while he devoted himself to law. Then it was discovered that he possessed a remarkable speaking and singing voice. Today, Robeson is the outstanding interpreter of Negro folk songs, and the race's foremost actor. In both fields he has gained international fame.

Thus it is readily seen that Negroes are performing no small part of the task set for them when the great emancipator finally made them citizens of this great nation. Daily their poets and writers, artists and professional men, and their industrial and financial leaders are striving to enlarge their contribution to American culture.

With such an end in view, the New Negro sings, smiles, and labors patiently.

Who can predict what the future holds for America's Negro children?

