

# THEN--AND NOW

## THE PRESENT TAKES A LOOK AT THE PAST

### The "New Negro" of the '20s Makes Way for a New Artist

By MARVEL COOKE.

"We have tomorrow  
Bright before us  
Like a flame."

This hopeful chant, sung by the "New Negro" a little more than a decade ago, presaged a fruitful era of art, music and literature.

The period beginning early in the 1920s and ending abruptly when the depression hurled the country into panic in 1929, stunting not only the financial machinery of the land, but also the aesthetic, cultural growth of renaissance youth, was one of movement, scintillating color and sophistication. It was during this period that the "New Negro" was born.

**Find Beauty in Black.**

Who, in reality, was the "New Negro"? Suddenly, a few years after the World War—or perhaps the time would better be measured from the day that Marcus Garvey made the world aware that there was good and stirring beauty in black people—stories, poems and decorative art by young Negroes began to appear in such periodicals as the Atlantic Monthly, the New Age, Vanity Fair, the Bookman and Harper's.

So began what is popularly designated as the "Negro Renaissance"—that hectic transition period after the war which gave birth to the "New Negro." That unparalleled period when the bourgeoisie of lower Fifth and Park avenues jammed Harlem night spots and Harlem plunged headlong into the maelstrom of downtown New York, seems like something which happened a lifetime ago. The real renaissance, however, actually came afterwards, when the "New Negro," a little older, a little saner, his feet more firmly planted on the earth, and worn by the terrors of the depression, suddenly found a new proletarian philosophy which is now coloring his art, his music and his literature.

During the 1920s it was quite the



COUNTEE CULLEN.

thing to be a writer or a singer or an artist. Almost anyone who was able to put a thought down on paper or who could draw a straight line or who could sing a note was heralded as one kind of an artist or another. It was a period of mistakes and of unconscious patronization when anything the "New Negro" did was "good" and he was tooted to the skies as a great artist.

**Find "Oneness."**

It was a period of success, too, when many genuinely talented young Negroes, encouraged by a new feeling of "oneness" with their white confreres, began the difficult task of chiseling for themselves rich, bright careers. And it was a period of heartaches—a pre-depression starvation period, when many of these new-born artists, steadfast of purpose, went without shoes and bread to further their art.

But where are they now—those courageous young people who blazed a brave trail for others to

follow? Where are they, whose careers were so brilliantly begun during the "Negro Renaissance"? Most of them, who formed the spearhead for the "New Negro," have lived through the trying intervening years and are building their art into sturdier stuff; a few of them have died; still others, their courage, perhaps, undermined by the grim necessity of having to make a living, have dropped completely from sight.

**McKay Starts Movement.**

But all of them played an important role in the history of music, art and literature during the twentieth century. Without them there would not have been the new "New Negro," who is profiting from their mistakes and successes to further the culture of America.

It was Claude McKay, not actually a "New Negro" (he had published two columns of verse before the "Negro Renaissance" relay began), who started the ball rolling with his book of highly sensitive poems, "Harlem Shadows." A Jamaican by birth, Mr. McKay lived abroad

for many years, and it was while he was in Europe that he wrote his "Home to Harlem," which was read with avidity on both sides of the Atlantic. "A Long Way From Home," an autobiography published this year after his return to this country, received favorable comment. At present he is collaborating with Sterling A. Brown, Guggenheim fellow and himself a fine poet, and Gene Holmes on a history of the American Negro.

Countee Cullen, the first "New Negro" to receive wide attention, might have been "just another poet" had he not, somehow, realized that he was living in an abnormal period. A Phi Beta Kappa student at New York University and winner of numerous poetry prize contests, his contribution during the period was a shining light for others to follow. A Guggenheim Fellowship winner, his "Color," "Caroling Dusk," "Copper Sun" and, more recently, his novel, "One Way to Heaven" are rated by many critics among the finest works by contemporary writers. At present he is teaching at Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where he finds time to interest himself in a students' literature club.

Perhaps one of the most talented of the young poets of the period was Langston Hughes, who began his career ruggedly by traveling extensively in Africa and Europe "on his own and for the sake of experience," to quote him. Although his books of poems, "The Weary Blues" and "Fine Clothes to the Jew," definitely placed him as a coming poet, he actually displayed the greatest depth and social vision in a volume of published short stories, "Ways of White Folks."

Hughes Criticizes "Mulatto."

A Guggenheim Fellowship winner last year, Mr. Hughes spent his time in New York and Cleveland writing several plays. His "Mulatto," had a long Broadway run, but he was really not very proud of it. "I wrote the play a long time ago," he explained to his friends, "before I was actually mature." Quite in keeping with his spirit of wanderlust and adventure, he recently went to Spain to gather first-hand information of the war-torn country.

It was not alone in the field of literature that the Negro shone during the Negro Renaissance, but

City, Mo., high school before he came to New York in 1925. A student of Weindold Reiss, whose portrayals of folk types and folk characters are listed with the finest in the world, Mr. Douglas has distinguished himself as a mural painter, having executed several delicately subtle panels in the new Fisk University Library and at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. He studied for a year in France and at present he is at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he expects to gather material for further work.

**Bontemps Modest.**

One of the least talked of "New Negroes" and one of the most modest was Arna Bontemps, whose poetry, even ten years ago, was more deeply rooted than that of most of his contemporaries. He never made much of a stir or talked of himself much, but his work was always of the same high standard. Several years ago he turned from poetry to the novel and published "God Sends Sunday," which received good reviews. But when he published "Black Thunder," last year, the critics hailed it as the finest novel the Negro had yet produced. He is now teaching in a parochial school in Chicago.



Claude McKay.



Zora M. Hurston.

One of the most prolific writers of the period, who is only now reaching her stride with a new novel just announced a few weeks ago, is Zora Neale Hurston, who first came on the scene in 1925 when she captured a prize in the contest sponsored by Opportunity Magazine. She did not allow the depression to "get" her. While many of her contemporaries lost themselves in the mire of melancholy, she went South to gather material. Both her "Jonah's Gourd Vine" and "Mules and Men" received splendid reviews. More recently, after Miss Hurston won a Guggenheim Fellowship, she traveled through the West Indies to enrich her experience.

**We Will Not Forget.**

Who will ever forget Rodolph Fisher, one of the most talented of the crop—a handsome, bronzed youth, who did all things well? A Phi Beta Kappa student at Brown University and perhaps one of the finest physicians in New York City, he was also a musician of note. His two published novels, "Walls of Jericho" and "Conjure Man," true records of contemporary Harlem life, gave promise of a brilliant career. He died a little more than two years ago after a long and brave fight for his life.

Death, too, halted the brilliant career of Wallace Thurman, novelist and short-story writer, who also had a definite talent for drama—still an untouched field for the

also in the field of art. Perhaps the most successful of the "New Negro" artists, and certainly the most diligent, was Aaron Douglas, a graduate of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Nebraska and a teacher of art in a Kansas

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Negro. His "Blacker the Berry" was a poignant story of an ebony-hued girl's struggles to thwart prejudice even within the race. But it was when he co-authored "Harlem," which had a significant Broadway run, that he found that he had a definite flare for the theatre. Shortly before he died, only a few years ago, he was employed by one of the leading Hollywood motion picture companies to write scenarios and continuity.

But where are some of the others who showed such fine promise during that period—as fine promise as those we have mentioned? For instance, where is Gwendolyn Bennett, a talented artist and poet? Delightful bits from her pen at one time appeared regularly in well-known magazines. But for some time, now, she has remained silent.

## Where Are the Others.

And where is Eric Walrond, whose book of short stories, "Tropic Death"—sheer poetry in prose—won for him in 1928 a Guggenheim Fellowship? At intervals one hears that he has had an article in The Black Man, Garvey's magazine in London. With more talent than most of the others, Mr. Walrond's disappearance from the American scene has been a great loss.

And where, particularly, is Jean Toomer, whose "Cane," published in 1923, is considered by many the finest book that came out of the "Negro Renaissance"? His marriage to Margaret Lattimer, herself a fine novelist, was an interracial experiment which ended tragically with her death in Portage, Wis., several years ago. Mr. Toomer later married another white girl and, to the best knowledge of his closest friends, he has not turned his hand to writing since then.

And where are many others who played important roles in the drama that was the "Negro Renaissance"? Will we hear from them again? But, even though we don't, we must not lose sight of the fact that, without them, we would not have had the new "New Negro," just as without the novelist Jessie Fauset and the talented young sculptor, Augusta Savage, who were working before there was a "Negro Renaissance" and who are still making their contributions to the culture of America, we would not have had the "New Negro."