

The first farmers of America put up a good fight against the elements with which they were unable to cope. But compare their efforts with those of the gifted Greeks and Romans. Even with their culture they could not prevail against the desert of North Africa where they left splendid cities to be covered by the drifting sands. If they failed, as they did, how could one expect the prehistoric farmer to fight off the encroaching desert with only a stone hoe and his hands? But his monuments reflect his everlasting glory. If he had only been equipped with an iron hoe, history might not have been written as now.

THE NEGRO "RENAISSANCE" *

BY LLOYD MORRIS.

RECENTLY there appeared in the newspapers an item reporting the endowment of a chair to the memory of Ira Aldridge in the new Shakespeare Memorial Theater at Stratford-on-Avon. The funds for this memorial were contributed entirely by colored citizens of the United States in appreciation of the place held by one of their race as a great tragedian in theatrical history. Aldridge died nearly seventy years ago, and the honor which his memory is now receiving serves to remind us that the contemporary contribution of the colored race to the arts is not lacking in a long and honorable tradition. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the "Negro renaissance" of the last few years is rather a renaissance of interest on the part of a white audience than a renaissance of production on the part of Negro artists.

The names of Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Charles Gilpin are thoroughly familiar to lovers of music and the theater. Yet few of their white admirers are apt to think of them as being other than exceptional; as being, in fact, the first members of their race to distinguish themselves in the more serious realms of music and drama. It does not derogate from the honor due them that this impression is false.

Their predecessor, Ira Aldridge, was a picturesque and romantic figure who, seventy or eighty years ago, achieved European celebrity as the "African Roscius." The accounts of his early life are conflicting. One reports him as a mulatto born in Maryland and apprenticed to a German ship carpenter. Another states that he was the son of a native of

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Senegal who was brought to America as a slave, became a Christian, and was later pastor of a church in New York City.

Whatever Aldridge's early life may have been, it is known that he became the servant of Edmund Kean, the famous Shakespearean actor, and that he accompanied Kean to England in the early years of the nineteenth century. Later he returned to America and appeared on the stage in Baltimore without success. He again went to England and made his debut at the Royalty Theatre in London in the role of Othello. He was an instantaneous success and achieved wide popularity. In 1852 he essayed the role of Aaron in "Titus Andronicus," and at Belfast he played Othello to the Iago of Edmund Kean. Before his death in 1867 Aldridge had toured Europe, had been decorated by the Emperors of Austria and Russia and the King of Prussia, and had been elected a member of several of the great European academies.

When we speak of the contemporary Negro renaissance, it is of literature that we usually think first, for the contribution of colored writers to recent American fiction and poetry has been substantial and significant. Nearly all readers of poetry have become acquainted with the verse of James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes; nearly everyone who has been concerned with the general revival of poetry in America appreciates the valiant service to art of William Stanley Braithwaite, the critic and anthologist.

Similarly, many readers of fiction are familiar with the names of W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Walter White, Nella Larsen Imes, Jessie Fauset. Moreover, long before the younger Negro novelists had begun writing, discerning readers had already discovered the works of Charles W. Chesnutt, the most distinguished of modern American colored novelists, and those of Paul Laurence Dunbar, to whom recognition came chiefly as a poet.

A contemporary of Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Ban- of colored writers to our literature as an isolated phenomenon. The literary tradition of the colored race is, as we are apt to forget, not only creditable but passably long. The first Negro writer of distinction of whom we have any record was Juan Latino, professor of Latin at the University of Granada, who published a volume of Latin poems in 1573, and a work dealing with the Escorial in 1576. Latino's first work was thus published twenty years before the earliest published work of Shakespeare. In northern Europe the first Negro to receive a degree from a university was Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein, who was made a Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Leyden, and whose thesis for his degree, which

ironically enough was a defense of slavery, was published in 1742.

From the time of Latino to the present day the contribution of the colored race to literature has been abundant and unbroken. Negroes have written in Arabic, French, Portuguese, Russian, German, and Spanish. Two writers with colored blood, Pushkin and Dumas, were among the most eminent of nineteenth century European men of letters. Frederic Marcelin, some of whose novels merit translation into English, wrote with distinction of the life of his people in Hayti. And the most celebrated of contemporary Brazilian writers of fiction, Machado de Assis, was a Negro.

The literary tradition of the Negro in the United States begins with Jupiter Hammond, who lived on Long Island, and who, about 1760, began publishing broadsides in verse. A much more picturesque figure, however, was Phillis Wheatley, a Negro slave who was sold in Boston, whose "Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral" was first published in London in 1773 and has since been republished in fifteen editions, the last of which appeared in 1915. The title page of the first edition of her work announces its author as "Negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England." Her verse was sufficiently meritorious to bring her a letter of congratulation from George Washington, and it is pleasant to know that her increasing poetical reputation won her her freedom.

A contemporary of Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, similarly attracted the attention of a President. Banneker published, during the years from 1791 to 1796, a series of almanacs which revealed a considerable knowledge of astronomy. President Thomas Jefferson, the foremost of intellectual liberals in America, sent a copy of one of Banneker's almanacs to his friend, the French philosopher Condorcet, to illustrate his contention that the Negro had the same potentialities as the white man.

A little after Phillis Wheatley there emerged another slave poet named George Horton, whose volume of verse, "The Hope of Freedom," was published in 1827. Following Horton, the next Negro poet to achieve any considerable distinction was Mrs. Frances Harper, whose verse had so widespread a vogue as to sell in the tens of thousands of copies. Mrs. Harper's work was especially popular with the Abolitionists, and she forms a link between the earlier and later colored writers in this country, for she published a novel as late as 1893, when Chesnutt and Dunbar were first beginning to publish.

Mention of the Abolitionists suggests the part which they played in the development of at least one phase of the literary production of the colored race. Under their inspiration more than one hundred slave narratives, some only narrated and some actually written by escaped slaves, were published in England and this country before the Civil War. The most celebrated of slave narratives were the three volumes written by Frederick Douglass: "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," published in 1845; "My Bondage and My Freedom," published in 1855, and "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," published in 1882.

The first volume of fiery protest against slavery was "Walker's Appeal Addressed to Colored Citizens of the World," which was first published in 1829 and ran through three editions. It urged the slaves to rise against their white masters; as may be supposed, copies were promptly destroyed in the South whenever located, and the book has become exceedingly rare.

The first novel of Negro life in America was written by a fugitive slave named William Wells Brown. It was published in England in 1852 under the title of "Clotelle: or the President's Daughter." When it was published in the United States the title, for obvious reasons, was changed to "Clotelle: or the Colored Heroine." Eleven years later Brown published another volume, "The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements." Meanwhile, in 1857, another novel of Negro life appeared: "The Garies and Their Friends," by Frank J. Webb, which carried an appreciative introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe. These two novels have claims to be considered the predecessors of the many contemporary novels by colored authors which study the relation between the colored and white races in our civilization.

The period after the Civil War saw the publication of a large number of propaganda race novels by colored writers, most of which were privately printed. It witnessed likewise the publication of a large controversial literature attempting to establish that principle of equality of potentiality which Jefferson affirmed to Condorcet. The first important volume of this kind was Major Martin R. Delaney's "Principles of Ethnology," published in 1879, and perhaps the most recent is Dr. Du Bois's "The Gift of Black Folk," published five years ago.

The attention which has been focused upon the novels and poetry of contemporary colored writers has obscured the contribution made by Negroes to other departments of litera-

ture and scholarship. For colored writers have written admirable books upon almost every variety of subjects: folklore, sociology, criticism of the arts, history, embryology, African and Polar exploration, law, classical languages and literatures, and philosophy, among them.

The contribution to historical literature begins as early as 1855 with William C. Nell's "The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution." The contribution to scientific literature begins in 1847 when Richard Hill, Jamaica Negro, collaborated with P. H. Gosse, the father of Edmund Gosse, on "Birds of Jamaica." This volume was followed four years later by Gosse's "A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica," which made liberal acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Hill.

The first book on exploration by a Negro was Major Martin R. Delaney's report of an expedition sent to explore the Niger Valley, which was published in 1861; the most famous is Matthew Henson's "A Negro Explorer at the North Pole," for which an introduction was written by Peary.

Professor W. S. Scarborough, of Wilberforce University, published a Greek reader in 1881 which for many years was a standard college textbook. He had been fired to distinguish himself as a classical scholar by having, in his childhood, run across Henry Clay's sarcastic statement that when he had heard a Negro conjugate a Greek verb or decline a Greek noun, he would believe in the potential equality of the Negro mind to the white.

The only Creole grammar in English was written by a Negro scholar, J. J. Thomas, and although it was published in 1869 it has not been superseded. Two standard works on law, Scott's book on interstate extradition and Cosey's book on land titles, are the work of Negro authors. In the field of physics there is Robert T. Browne's "The Mystery of Space, A Study of the Hyperspace Movement." In pedagogy, there is Gilbert H. Jones's "Education in Theory and Practice." And a Negro graduate of West Point, Colonel Charles Young, has written a standard work on military tactics, "Military Morale of Nations and Races."

The contemporary Negro renaissance in the arts is making a significant and interesting contribution to our culture; there is no longer any doubt of that. But that it is a renaissance of anything more than our interest in the work of colored writers and artists is doubtful. The tradition of creative expression and of scholarship among the colored race is too old to be still considered new.