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W.E.B. Du Bois

W.E.B. DuBois was a spokesman for the Negro's rights at a time when few were listening: he was highly intelligent, but toward the end of his career, he became embittered, a Communist, and finally left the United States and took refuge in Ghana. There shortly before his death, Ralph McGill sought him out for this talk.

by **Ralph McGill**

A LUNCHEON given in early 1963 by [Conor Cruise O'Brien](#), vice-chancellor of the University of Ghana, beautiful on the gentle hills of Legon near Accra, made possible a subsequent talk with William Edward Burghardt DuBois. Until one met him he was myth grown out of some seventy-five years of the often turbulent and tragic history of the South's and the nation's trauma of race. I did not expect the first question, after greetings, to be concerned with the author of the Uncle Remus stories. But it was.

Did you know Joel Harris?

"No," I replied, "he died some years before I went to work on the Atlanta Constitution. After going there; I got to know three of his sons and a daughter. He wrote some of the Uncle Remus stories at the old double-rolltop desk I have in my office."

"I had a letter of introduction to him after I went to Atlanta," he said. "One day I decided to present it. Walking to his office, I passed by a grocery store that had on display out front the drying fingers of a recently lynched Negro."

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He fell silent. No one else said anything. Outside the windows of his spacious house, provided by the government, in the old residential section of Ghana, there was a sound of children at play. A breath of air blew in past the flowering shrubs near the windows. We waited -- his wife, his stepson, David, Mark Lewis, of the U.S. Information Agency office in Accra, a wide-eyed, solemn-faced young Ghanaian girl who was nurse to the aged and ailing man, and I.

The frail body of the ninety-five-year-old man lay stretched on a sofa. He wore trousers, a soft white shirt, and socks and slippers. His mustache and goatee were carefully trimmed. He had been asleep when we arrived. We had waited perhaps half an hour for him to awaken and then be dressed. Neither illness nor a prostate operation in a London hospital some months before, where Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah, had insisted he go, had reduced the fire of his mind, though he said his memory was not as quick as before.

There was a lot of history in the slender, sick, and slowly dying man. At ninety-four he had become a citizen of Ghana, where he had resided since 1960. Three years before, he had requested membership in the Communist Party, because he had ceased to believe, he stated, that any other system, would produce the sort of world he wanted. But in keeping with his controversial past, he denounced the U.S. Communist program to set up an all-Negro state somewhere in the South. The idea was repellent to him.

Always the fiercely independent, sensitive intellectual, he had been for more than fifty years a passionate fighter for full civil rights and equality of citizenship for the Negro. This placed him in opposition to Booker T. Washington well before the turn of the century. He had helped found the NAACP but had broken with it in 1948 because of its "timidity" and his own growing obsession with Communist causes and ideology.

As I waited for him to speak and studied his face, revealing that his mind was going backward in time and memory, he seemed to me somehow alien to the old colonial house that some long-departed English civil servant had occupied in the Gold Coast days. On its walls were richly and beautifully wrought red hangings of Chinese silk and a few paintings. There were busts of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Tse-tung. Save for the sculptured head of Marx, there was no evidence of Russian art, though DuBois had made a number of journeys to Moscow. One sensed that perhaps the Chinese intellectuals, with their polished manners, had more attraction for the man who for most of his life had himself been somewhat formal in manner and had often worn a pince-nez, carried a cane, and kept carefully trimmed both goatee and mustache. The Chinese had honored him in Peking on his ninety-first birthday with a dinner at which Premier Chou En-lai had been present. Ghana's President Nkrumah, as a student in the United States, had become an apostle of DuBois's Pan-Africa policy. Ghana honored him as a citizen-scholar. Yet the feeling persisted that although the DuBois concept of the Negro's proper status in America was coming into being, the old fighter seemed lonely and unrequited by life.

At last he spoke, his ivory-colored face changing from reflection to anger.

"I saw those fingers...I didn't go to see Joel Harris and

present my letter. I never went!"

"I wish you had gone," I said. "Joel Chandler Harris was a good man, as were his closest associates."

"No," he replied, "it was no use. He and they had no question in their minds about the status of the Negro as a separated, lesser citizen. They perhaps were kind men, as you say. They unhesitatingly lived up to a paternalistic role, a sort of noblesse oblige. But that was all. The status slowly had become immutable insofar as the South's leaders of that time were concerned. Booker T. Washington had helped them rationalize it. I do not think that he meant to do so. But he did. In fact, he put a public stamp of acceptance on it there in your city when he spoke at the Atlanta Exposition."

"I've read that address many times," I said. "I also have talked with men who saw and heard him deliver it. They've told me of the tremendous drama of that day. They said that when he came to his key paragraph, he began it by holding up both arms, the fingers of each hand spread wide, and said, 'In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet as the hand' -- and here Washington quickly clinched each hand -- 'in all things essential to mutual progress.'"

DuBois nodded.

"I know," he said, "and in that same speech he implicitly abandoned all political and social rights."

There was a long pause.

"I never thought Washington was a bad man," he said. "I believed him to be sincere, though wrong. He and I came from different backgrounds. I was born free. Washington was born slave. He felt the lash of an overseer across his back. I was born in Massachusetts, he on a slave plantation in the South. My great-grandfather fought with the Colonial Army in New England in the American Revolution." (This earned the grandfather his freedom.) "I had a happy childhood and acceptance in the community. Washington's childhood was hard. I had many more advantages: Fisk University, Harvard, graduate years in Europe. Washington had little formal schooling. I admired much about him. Washington," he said, a smile softening the severe, gaunt lines of his face, "died in 1915. A lot of people think I died at the same time."

"Could you pinpoint the beginning of the controversy and break between him and you?"

"The controversy," he said, "developed more between our followers than between us. It is my opinion that Washington died a sad and disillusioned man who felt he had been betrayed by white America. I don't know that, but I believe it. In the early years I did not dissent entirely from Washington's program. I was sure that out of his own

background he saw the Negro's problem from its lowest economic level. He never really repudiated the higher ends of justice which were then denied.

"As Washington began to attain stature as leader of his new, small, and struggling school at Tuskegee," DuBois continued, "he gave total emphasis to economic progress through industrial and vocational education. He believed that if the Negro could be taught skills and find jobs, and if others could become small landowners, a yeoman class would develop that would, in time, be recognized as worthy of what already was their civil rights, and that they would then be fully accepted as citizens. So he appealed to moderation, and he publicly postponed attainment of political rights and accepted the system of segregation.

"I know Washington believed in what Frederick Douglass had crusaded for from emancipation until his death in 1895. But he made a compromise.

"We talked about it. I went with him to see some of the Eastern philanthropists who were helping him with his school. Washington would promise them happy and contented labor for their new enterprises. He reminded them there would be no strikers. I remember once I went with him to call on Andrew Carnegie -- with whom he had a warm and financially rewarding relationship. On the way there Washington said to me:

"Have you read Mr. Carnegie's book?"

"No,' I replied, 'I haven't.'

"You ought to,' he said; 'Mr. Carnegie likes it.'"

DuBois chuckled softly. "When we got to Mr. Carnegie's office," he said, "he left me to wait downstairs. I never knew whether Mr. Carnegie had expressed an opinion about me or whether Washington didn't trust me to be meek. It probably was the latter. I never read the book."

Washington came to national prominence by way of the Atlanta Exposition speech in 1895. It is possible that his decision toward acceptance of the political status quo was influenced by the frustrations and failures of Frederick Douglass. Douglass had been a crusading abolitionist, and he carried his fervor into the years from 1865 until his death, demanding full and equal citizenship. Washington had watched the party of Lincoln cast off the Negro in the historic compromise with Southern leaders that enabled Rutherford B. Hayes to be elected in 1876. The price of this steal of a national election was a removal of occupying federal troops and an end to the radical reconstruction that had been imposed after Lincoln's assassination. This deal had left the future of the newly freed, largely uneducated Negro to "states rights" decisions. By 1895 the several Southern states had about completed total disfranchisement of the Negro by way of constitutional amendments and legislative statutes. Washington's

decision may have lacked a certain idealism, but it was born out of present reality. He may have died feeling a certain betrayal; he nonetheless had made a substantial contribution to preparing many thousands of Negroes for participation in the drive for long-denied rights that began after his death. It came to fruition in the late 1940s and culminated in the 1954 school decision and others that quickly grew out of it. There was a greatness about Washington.

"As I came to see it," said DuBois, "Washington bartered away much that was not his to barter. Certainly I did not believe that the skills of an artisan bricklayer, plasterer, or shoemaker, and the good farmer would cause the white South, grimly busy with disfranchisement and separation, to change the direction of things. I realized the need for what Washington was doing. Yet it seemed to me he was giving up essential ground that would be hard to win back. I don't think Washington saw this until the last years of his life. He kept hoping. But before he died he must have known that he and his hopes had been rejected and that he had, without so intending, helped make stronger -- and more fiercely defended -- a separation and rejection that made a mockery of all he had hoped and dreamed. I felt grief for him when I learned of his death because I believe he died in sorrow and a sense of betrayal."

There was time for one more question. Booker T. Washington's influence was supreme in racial leadership for twenty years. He was frequently attacked by Negro intellectuals. But he had so successfully appealed to what was a national mood that developed in the years after the Hayes-Tilden election of 1876 that he easily put down all opposition. He had the support and friendship of powerful figures in the industrial and political life of the nation. He was a guest in their homes and in their private cars. And always he came away with money to help educate greatly disadvantaged young Negroes. Many historians believe that Washington's postponement of a decision on Negro rights was largely influential in the U.S. Supreme Court's separate-but-equal decision of 1896, a year after Washington's separated fingers were upraised in the Atlanta Exposition address. Certain it was that Washington's appeasement view, however temporary he anticipated it to be, came to be accepted, North and South, as the view of the Negro himself. Washington was confronted with that conclusion on those occasions when his speeches called attention to the fact that the Negro must, one day, be admitted to the ballot and to full citizenship. Southern editors and leaders invariably took him sharply to task, demanding to know what he meant and why he had changed his mind after the Atlanta speech.

There was no doubt in DuBois's mind. He was sure, he said, that without Washington's position there would have been no Plessy-Ferguson decision in 1896.

There was a sense of unreality in talking about all that was past with DuBois, who after 1915 had been one of the

stormy, and sometimes storm-tossed leaders in the struggle for civil rights. He was always a bit arrogant, or so those who worked most closely with him felt. Except for one summer early in his teaching career spent in the South's poorer plantation region, he had never been directly interested in the masses. W. E. B. DuBois was an intellectual and a scholar. He dreamed, his associates and biographers say, of creating a "talented tenth" that would supply the leadership necessary to winning rights and full equality for the Negro.

He was most comfortable with small groups of intellectuals and good conversationalists. In the 1930s he proclaimed in *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine which he edited, that he wrote his personal column for sophisticated persons, not for "fools and illiterates."

He was best at polemics. Delay and contradiction drove him to frustration and frequent outbursts of invective and criticism that revealed the storm within him. He once admitted that he, opposing racial prejudice, was "one of the greatest sinners" in the intensity of his prejudice against white persons. He was honest enough to say that he expected prejudice and therefore may have even caused it by anticipating it. In *Darkwater*, published in 1920, he concluded a section of verse which condemned "The White World's Vermin and Filth," with the lines:

I hate them, Oh!
I hate them well,
I hate them, Christ!
As I hate hell!
If I were God I'd sound their knell
This day.

Oswald Garrison Villard, who admired DuBois very much and who had worked with him in the NAACP, wrote in 1920 of the personal bitterness "that so often mars his work." In the same year, in a letter to a friend, he said, "I think I pity Dr. DuBois more than any man in America."

The *Crisis* was founded in 1910 with encouragement from Villard and others who disagreed with Booker T. Washington's policies. The magazine legally was the property of the NAACP, but in making DuBois editor and promising him independence of action, they asked him only to agree not to make *The Crisis* a personal organ and to avoid personal rancor. This pledge was not well kept. But DuBois made *The Crisis* a dynamic and forceful voice for the major objectives of the association. In 1910, the magazine condemned the proposal to establish segregated public schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, Columbus, Ohio, and Atlantic City. In 1913, DuBois joined with Villard and others in a written protest to President Wilson against segregated practices in government employment. In 1917, DuBois launched an attack on the white primary system, which was the chief barrier to Negro participation in the ballot. Some of the white social reformers of his time who gave him consistent support, although occasionally they

became dismayed by his polemic excesses, were Jane Addams, John Dewey, William Dean Howells, John H. Holmes, Lincoln Steffens, Stephen S. Wise, William H. Ward, and Lillian D. Wald.

By 1916 one NAACP board and many of DuBois's most ardent supporters were becoming increasingly embarrassed by his extremes of editorial expression. His race prejudice was more and more apparent. Typical of these editorial comments in *The Crisis* was one stating that "the most ordinary Negro is a distinct gentleman, but it takes extraordinary training and opportunity to make the average white man anything but a hog."

Slowly DuBois's bitterness narrowed his once piercing view. He broke with Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP. Editors of Negro newspapers who dared criticize him were dismissed as "croaking toads." DuBois left *The Crisis* editorial chair in 1934 to go to Atlanta to teach, and the magazine ceased publication soon after. For a long time it had been mostly a personal organization for DuBois. and he was beyond question as Walter White said, "one of the chief molders of modern thought regarding the Negro," but he had to rule. The Negro in America, despite harsh discriminations and segregation, was making great advances and producing new leaders for the changing times. DuBois could accept neither them nor the changing scene.

Ten years after his retirement from *The Crisis*, he was back with the NAACP, but his influence and position had lessened. Four years later he was dismissed with a pension. Paul Robeson, chairman of the left-wing Council on African Affairs, welcomed the old man as he left the NAACP. Dr. DuBois worked for various Communist front organizations, but it is likely he believed he was using them to further his own ends. The Russians interested him, but they were not Negro.

By 1952 he simply abandoned the struggle for Negro rights to give full time to world movements for world peace, for socialism, and later, to team with Kwame Nkrumah and others in promoting a Pan-Africa movement. It has never been possible to separate the man from the myth in considering W. E. B. DuBois.

Mark Lewis and I said good-bye. There was a feeling of having emerged from a place far back in time as we came out of the cool high-ceilinged house -- where the talk had been of Atlanta, of the South, and of a man's more than seventy-five years of participation in the revolutionary background of changes in American educational, political, and social life -- into the sun and beauty of Accra's best residential area of old walls, gardens, verandas, and flowers. Six months later in faraway Ghana W. E. B. DuBois died. It was August 28, 1963, the eve of the march on Washington, the largest demonstration for civil rights ever held. One could not help experiencing a feeling of destiny linking both events. The man who for many years

had spoken with the loudest and most articulate voice was now silent while his objectives were being realized.

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