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By Louis B. Bryan
April 20, 1937

Group XVI, Negro Group
Mr. Cumberbatch, Editor.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF HUBERT HARRISON.

Dr. Hubert Henry Harrison, Author, Lecturer and Journalist; born of poor parents or what is more commonly known as the middle class in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, April 27, 1883. Attended the Danish Government Schools where he became Under-Teacher at the age of 15. When he was 16 years old, he joined the crew of a steamship as cabin-boy which gave him the opportunity of an extensive travel to Africa and all parts of Europe.

On his return from abroad to the Virgin Islands with many experiences to his advantage and a mind much more developed, he became anxious to gain a better knowledge of the world and concentrated his mind on the United States. Through the assistance of his sister, Harrison came to New York during the year 1900. While adapting himself to the environment of the largest and greatest city in the world, he quickly picked up odd jobs as hall-boy, elevator operator, messenger, etc. until he finally secured a position as clerk in the Japanese Fan Company.

As a young man whose greatest ambition was to become educated, he immediately grasped every opportunity and attended Evening Schools in the City of New York where he gradually and diligently absorbed all courses offered in the curriculum. Professor Hendrik Karr, Principal of the High School which Harrison attended, in a statement to the New York World, April 5, 1903, said: "Harrison is the most remarkable Negro that I ever met. In the examinations for his diploma - and they were rigid, he passed perfect at 100 percent - the only student in the class having that rating. He will be heard from in the future if learning has anything to do with success".

By L.B. Bryan

Dr. Hubert Harrison did not attend any Colleges or Universities, he was a self educated man and one who was very well informed. As an Educator he was Instructor of English and Economics, Harlem School of Social Science; Professor of Embryology, Cosmopolitan College of Chiropractic; Adjunct Professor in Comparative Religion, The Modern School of New York. At this school Dr. Harrison lectured on such topics as:-"The mind of primitive man; Nature of religion;"The life of the dead;" "How God grew" and many others of paramount nature and significance. William Pickens, former Dean of Morgan College, in speaking of Harrison said:- "Here is a plain black man who can speak more easily, effectively and interestingly on a greater variety of subjects than any other man I have ever met, even in any of the great Universities". "If he were white (and I say it boldly) he might be one of the most prominent Professors of Columbia University, under the shadow of which he is passing today".

In politics Harrison was the pioneer racialist for the Negro. He was the first to preach to the common people all forms of radicalism, the first Negro whose radicalism was comprehensive enough to include politics, theological criticism, sociology and education in a thorough scientific manner. As a Socialist he preached to the masses on soap boxes from Wall Street to Washington Heights. As a leader in that party^{he} was very active with "Bill" Haywood of the I. W. W. and Elixabeth Gurly Flynn, in the Silk Strike of Patterson, New Jersey, encouraging and addressing thousands of workers (all of them white) to keep up the fight which would eventually give them better working conditions and victory as a whole.

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By L.B. Bryan

During the World War Dr. Harrison severed his connections with the Socialist Party and centered all his political activities with his race. As a representative of the race he was constantly noticed on a soap box in Harlem, and at Wall and Broad Streets between the Stock Exchange and the offices of J. P. Morgan, attracting, educating, and sometimes amusing thousands who passed to and fro, in that section of the money market of America. His policy of representation of the Negro was not of compromise or apology for his race, but the brotherhood of man and the common basis of all the problems of mankind.

As founder and president of the Liberty League of Negro-Americans, an organization which grew from his labors of public lectures, he is given credit for starting a propaganda to make lynching a Federal offense. On the 4th of July, 1917, a petition was sent to Congress by the Liberty League of Negroes of America, demanding the Nation to justify to the World her assertions of democracy, by setting free the millions of Negroes in the South from political and civil slavery, through the enactment of laws which would either take the Negro under the direct protection of Congress by making lynching ~~an~~ a Federal crime, or compelling the several States which now deprive the Negroes of their right of self-government, to give them the suffrage as Russia has done for her Jews. From the date of that petition, the lynching bill was a sore spot in the various committees of the House of Representatives. The lynching bill never got as far as the floor of the House of Representatives until recently when Congressman Mitchell, (Negro) assisted by another representative from the City of New York, after a great amount of pressure and in the midst of the Mississippi lynching of two Negroes, one of the greatest horrors in the history of lynching, the bill was voted favourably by the House and sent to the Senate.

By L.B.Bryan

As a critic Harrison wrote literary criticisms on books for several newspapers and magazines, including The New York Times, The New York World, The Sun, The Tribune, The Evening Post, The New Republic, The New Masses and The Christian Science Monitor. He also contributed articles of scholarly nature to The New York Sunday Call, The Truth Seeker and The Modern Quarterly.

Dr. Harrison as Editor and Founder of The Voice (a Magazine) wrote as radical as he lectured. This attitude was somewhat resented by his Negro Contemporaries, especially The New York Age. In his book "When Africa Awakes", Harrison in making reference to The Age said:- "Now, although The Voice seeks no quarrel with The Age, we are forced to dissent from this cringing, obsequious view which it champions. And we do this on the ground that cringing has gone out of date, that The Age's view does not represent any influential or important section of Negro opinion. The group which once held that view went to pieces when Dr. Washington died".

During the year 1926, Dr. Harrison was appointed as Staff Lecturer on the Board of Education, New York City, and Special Lecturer at New York University. He was also listed on the Mayor's Committee on reception of distinguished guests, and a member of New York Public Lectures' Association. As an orator he was most brilliant and convincing, one who commanded his audience at all times on any subject. At the 135th Street branch of the Y.M.C.A. on December 11, 1927, Dr. Harrison delivered his last lecture, choosing as his subject "The Conflict of Color". He was also scheduled to speak on December 25th and on January 1st. at the said Y.M.C.A. on the subjects "Soviet Russia and the Darker Races, and "The Yellow Peril", but unfortunately he was called to the Great Beyond 17th of December 1927, after a very short illness, leaving a widow and a few children to mourn his irreparable loss.

By L.B.Bryan

In order that the fruits of the late Dr. Harrison's labor would remain a living monument in the minds of his friends, students, associates and even his contemporaries, a committee was organized by many prominent persons in the community through the determined efforts of Rev. Ethelred Brown and Mr. Hodge Kirnan, chairman of the committee, The Hubert Harrison Memorial Church was dedicated in honor of the man who was appraised as the intellectual giant of the Negro Race. The Church is situated at 149 West 136th Street, New York City.

Source of information:

Who's Who in Colored America, 1927; 135th St. Library

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Hubert Harrison

And other facts.

HUBERT HARRISON

by J.A. Rogers.

Hubert Harrison was born in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, April 27, 1883, and came to New York at the age of sixteen. He worked as hall-boy, elevator operator, and similar positions, going to De Witt Clinton at night where he was one of the most brilliant pupils. ~~Prof.~~ Hendrick Carr his instructor said, "Harrison is the most remarkable Negro I ever met." He passed his ratings at 100 per cent.

Later, he entered the Post Office service, which he left to centre his attention in the field of social economics, becoming one of the ~~leading~~ leaders of the Socialist party.

He was an associate of Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Morris Hilquitt, Emma Goldman and others, and took a prominent part in the strike at the Patterson (N.J.) silk mills.

He lectured on street-corners at Broadway and 96th; Broadway and 135th; at Wall Street, and elsewhere on socialism, sometimes coming to blows with Irish Catholics when he spoke on birth control.

He was also one of the leading spirits of the Sunrise Club, an organization composed of some of the leading liberals of the city who used to meet every two weeks for dinner at a hotel on 40th Street, near Broadway.

A student of the leading writers on Sociology as Herbert Spencer, Lester F. Ward, ~~Emory~~ Prof. Dewey, Labriola, and others, he lectured on their works from street-corners. Indeed his topics covered a wide range, anthropology, literature, comparative religion,

poetry, science, literary criticism, etc. He was one of the best read men of his times and he possessed the rare gift of making ^{Knowledge} ~~these~~ simple, alive, and interesting to his hearers, who would stand sometimes for three to four hours listening to him. He also had a highly developed sense of humour with the result that his outdoor talks were entertaining.

Harrison finally left the Socialist party, declaring that white people could not be relied upon to save the Negro as ^{white} the liberal ~~institutions~~ would always ~~be counted upon to~~ swing to the illiberal side when forced to make a choice. From preaching "Class First," as he did among the Socialists, he came to preach "Race First," which doctrine brought him into sharp disagreement with the Socialists, Randolph, Owen, and others. Harrison was especially disgusted at the way in which some of the agencies which opposed the Ku Klux Klan balked when it came to attacking the Klan openly on the persecution of the Negro. Harrison, in a word, was sadly disillusioned, as to the whole-heartedness of the white radical in the cause of the Negro. His plain-spokenness also brought him many enemies among the leading Negroes, one of whom was Dr. DuBois, who never ^{mentioned} ~~referred~~ to him in the Crisis.

When he left the Socialist, he came to Harlem and founded the Liberty League, with its organ, The Voice. He had a considerable following, which later, seemed to have been swallowed up by the Garvey movement. Harrison often said that the Garvey movement came out of the Liberty League, and that Garvey got the germ of his idea for the U.N.I.A. from him. For years, he edited a column for Garvey's Negro World.

Harrison also used to say that he was the chief influence in the starting of the Messenger Group, which he probably was. He was certainly a pioneer of Socialism among Negroes.

In 1926, he became a lecturer for the Board of Education of New York City. Sometimes these lectures were given at City Hall. He also wrote book reviews for the New York Times, World, Sun, as well as the Nation, New Republic, Masses. He wrote two pamphlets, "The Negro and the Nation," (published by the New York Cosmo-Advocate Company, 1917); and "When Africa Awakes," (The Porro Press, New York, 1920). These pamphlets consisted chiefly of his published editorials.

Harrison, in short, was one of the most profoundly learned of scholars and one of the most urbane of individuals. He suffered greatly from poverty, especially in his later years as he was a poor business man, although he was adept at selling books. He died in December 1927, after an operation for appendicitis at Bellevue Hospital.

William Pickens said in a long editorial on him in the New York News, "Here is a plain black man who can speak more easily, effectively, ^{and interestingly} on a greater variety of subjects ~~on a greater variety of subjects~~ than any other man I have ever met even in the great universities.....I know nothing better to say than that he is a walking encyclopedia of current human facts....If you have brains you will give him the palm as an educational lecturer...If he were white, and I say it boldly, he might be one of the prominent professors of Columbia University, under the shadow of which he is passing his days."

Hodge Kirnon wrote, "Harrison was the first Negro whose radicalism was comprehensive enough to include racialism, politics, theological criticism, sociology and education in a thorough-going and scientific manner."

Harrison was a influence of first-class importance in the educational life of the Negro in New York. He was second to none in this respect.

The Hubert Harrison Memorial Church at West 136 Street was named for him.

Claude McKay's If We must Die was first published in Pearson's Magazine. What Issue I have not been able to find.

Brisbane's editorial on Garvey was published sometime in 1923 before he went to trial, either in the New York American or the New York Evening Post. I think more likely the latter.

There was a Negro Liberator, a ^{newspaper} weekly, published for a short time in Harlem in 1934 or 1935, edited by Ben Davis. This was after the passing of the Liberator Magazine, white publication on which Claude McKay worked.
