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St. G.

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J. L.

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Larry Jordan

Negroes of New York

In the following story on the life of James Weldon Johnson, I have tried to give a brief sketch of the salient facts. I have consulted in addition to his own writings, such books as Mary Ovington's "Portraits in Color", Benjamin Brawley's "Negro in Literature and Art" and the Who's Who of Colored America. The strict biographical pattern is not followed; an attempt to outline some of the man's ideas is made.....

BRIEF SKETCH OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

The life and work of James Weldon Johnson, who died on June 26, 1938, ~~was~~ was characterized by personal integrity woven together with unsparing loyalty to his race. A man of varied gifts, but not a dilettante, he made distinguished contributions in the roles of editor, diplomat, musician, poet, teacher, and, above all, as race leader.

As described by a friend, he was "a quiet man of middle age, of careful dress, with strangely expressive eyes - not brown or black as one might expect from his dark face but gray-green. A slender figure with long delicate musician's hands, a man of much dignity, who never shows a sense of inferiority either by shrinking back or by pushing himself forward." (1) And he had the rare combination of disciplined activity with an uncommon sensitivity.

His mind was shaped by an extensive academic background - at Atlanta University, Howard, and in graduate work at Columbia. Thus he became in time principal of a colored high school in Jacksonville, Florida - the city of his birth on June 7, 1871.

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Much later in life he taught at Fisk University. This training also resulted in his taking up a legal career- with sufficient persistence to break through tradition to become the First Negro admitted to the Florida bar.

But he stepped out of this niche when , in 1901, the inspiration to write music caused him to go North with his brother. In New York their compositions in the form of light opera and musical plays became widely known. James Weldon Johnson spent about seven years at this work, becoming as successful as he was prolific.

Another seven years was spent in the field of diplomacy- which in his case was not entered by the door of politics. Here he showed distinction, particularly during a period of revolutionary turmoil in Venezuela. He also served at a post in Micauragua.

On returning to New York , around 1912, he devoted time to writing for the New York Age, and, in the same year, published anonymously "Autobiography of an Ex- Colored Man". The book , a tour de force as an emotional expression of certain aspects of the race problem, was and is a definite contribution to Negro literature. A few years later he turned out the libretto for the Metropolitan opera production "Coyescas".

Just as it would seem that a literary career lay ahead, he set it aside- in this case only temporarily- and, in 1915, accepted the post of Field Secretary of the NAACP. It could not have been an easy decision to make. It meant discomfort, and danger that contrasted with the ease he could have had.

In the course of this work he often had to visit the scene of a recent lynching, to be exposed to the hardships of Jim Crow, plus the hatred for an investigator of conditions by those who feared exposure. After four years he was made

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Executive Secretary of the organization. At this time he began to wage an intensive fight for the passage of anti-lynching legislation. Public support was secured and the Dyer bill passed the House- a stalemate was reached, however, in the Senate.

And as he reacted firmly to each and every issue that came before the Negro people, his prestige grew- his word was looked for in the moment of crisis. Over a long period of time, it could be said that "His leadership has been virile, at times aggressive, but always sane. He is meticulous, nothing goes from his desk that has not been considered with care." (2)

At the same time his pen remained active: in 1918 his "Fifty Years and Other Poems" was published; the "Book of American Negro Poetry" which he edited appeared in 1922. This latter work and the "Book of Spirituals" (1925) brought a wider appreciation of Negro talent. Especially appealing was the book "God's Trombones" (1927) This was a collection of Negro sermons remarkably transcribed into verse; their expression was as simple as it was forceful- the use of dialect and of intricate form was excepted. The piece entitled "Creation" was set to music and played by Koussevitsky at Town Hall. In the field of historical research Johnson produced a much-needed, interesting study of the Negro in the world's largest city, "Black Manhattan".

He put a detailed account of his life in the Autobiography "Along This Way", published in 1933. Of this book it might truly be said "who touches this, touches a man." It is an equally valuable study of the period.

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But a sharper revelation of Johnson's ideas is his challenging book "Negro Americans, What Now?" (1934) Although no attempt is made in this discussion to offer a program or "way out", the opinions offered supply a base for the solution of the Negro problem. Johnson simply presents his beliefs to his people- "We must condemn force and banish it from our minds. But I do not condemn it on any moral or pacific grounds. The resort to force remains and will always remain the rightful recourse of oppressed peoples. I condemn it because ~~It~~ know that in our case it would be futile." (3) And his feeling was that "the solving of our situation depends principally upon an evolutionary process along two parallel lines: our own development and the bringing about of a change in the national attitude toward us. That outcome will require our persevering effort under whatever form the government might take on." (4)

On the question of Communism as a way out he finds that it would be impractical for the Negroes to identify themselves with so small a group, that they would be thus isolated; at the same time however, he says "I grant that if America should turn truly Communistic.....with the Negro aligned, as he naturally ought to be, with the proletariat, race discrimination would be officially banned and the reasons and feeling back of them would finally disappear." (5)

The race question, Johnson points out, is not the narrow concern of the Negroes- "the responsibility is not ours alone. White America cannot save itself if it prevents us from being saved. But, in the nature of things, white America is not going to yield what rightfully belongs to us without a struggle. In that struggle our watchword needs to be Work! Work! work!

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and our rallying cry Fight! Fight! Fight! (6)

The idea and principle which guided him, he expressed in the "pledge to myself which I have endeavored to keep through the greater part of my life: I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices to bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine and I shall defend it and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell. " (7)

SOURCES:

1. Mary White Ovington "Portraits in Color" (N Y 1927) p 2
2. Ibid. p. 15
3. James Weldon Johnson "Negro Americans, What Now?" (N Y 1934) p 6
4. Ibid. p9-10
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid p 101
7. Ibid. p102-3