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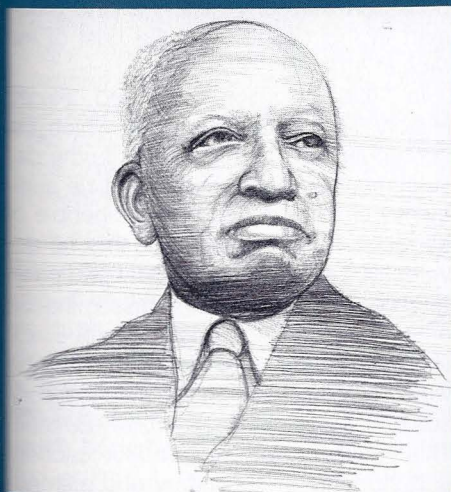
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Carter G. Woodson

A Short Essay

By Olive A. Taylor



Carter G. Woodson

The second half of the 19th century witnessed the development of a set of defenses for the subjugation and proscription of the Black man in America. The contributions of the sciences, the social sciences, the rationale of history and historians, moralists, religious figures to this end are phenomenal. The idea of the inferiority of the Black man enjoyed wide acceptance among Americans in this society. It was organized into a body of systematic thought, out of which emerged a doctrine of racial superiority that justified all kinds of controls over the Black man.

History was used as basic element of the segregationist thought, from which two elemental beliefs emerged: Black Africa produced no civilization worthy of the name; second, the history of Blacks in America demonstrated their incapacity for responsible citizenship. In their attempt to prove the latter, segregationists received substantial assistance from historians, many of whom believed in the inferiority of the Black race.

As an element of anti-Black thought, religion was hardly less important than science or history. Many were led to the Bible and fundamental Christianity for justification of inferiority. Hence, to be complete, anti-Black thought must appeal to all levels of American society, and to most Americans, religion was a vital force, an intimate part of life.

*The views of the Right Reverend William Montgomery Brown, a native of Ohio, who spent his adult life in Arkansas as an Episcopal clergyman, are exemplary. He published, in 1907, *The Crucial Race Question, Or Where and How Shall the Color Line Be Drawn*, in which he attempted to prove that Blacks were "bestial" and "degenerate."*

The object of racial policy, he noted, is the maintenance of racial purity among whites. Amalgamation must be avoided at all cost because it "thwarts God's plan." The vehicle for achieving amalgamation was social equality:

*If a representative of one race admits one of another to his table, he opens a wide door to . . . the thwarting by intermarriage, of God's plan in the creation of different races.*¹

Perhaps the chief spokesman of the most extreme anti-Black thought was Charles Carroll, a Missourian. In 1900, he published the *Negro a Beast*, and in 1902, *The Tempter of Eve*. Considering himself a man of science and a man of God, Carroll reinterpreted biblical history starting with the garden of Eden to the coming of Christ. The tempter of Eve, according to Carroll, had been a Black person, not a serpent. He wrote, Biblical scholars had simply mistranslated as "serpent" the Hebrew word which in reality meant black. "The discovery that the culprit in Eden was a Negro solved many difficulties of interpretation. Not only did it explain the tempter's ability to speak but it also accounted for Eve's lack of surprise at hearing it speak."² The Black man was, therefore, responsible for the fall of man from the Grace of God!

Indeed, this was the era of the infamous Black Codes, Grandfather clauses, poll taxes, white primaries, restricted covenants, race riots, the KKK, Knights of the White Camelia, the Jay Hawkers, lynchings, *Dred Scott*, *Civil Rights Cases*, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Also, it was the period in which Carter G. Woodson [dean, 1919-1920, School of Liberal Arts, Howard] began his long but rewarding task of re-writing the history of the Black man in America.

Woodson was born in New Canton, Virginia, in December of 1875, of poor parents who had been slaves. In 1892, his family moved to West Virginia, where in 1896 he entered Berea College, an interracial institution. He was awarded the B.L. degree in 1903. Later, he travelled around the world, including a year in Paris as a student at the Sorbonne (1906-07). Upon his return home, he continued his education at the University of Chicago and earned a Master's degree in 1908. He was awarded the Ph.D. in history from Harvard University in 1912.

Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 in Chicago, with the purpose of collecting and investigating all historical and sociological data bearing on the Black race in America.

In founding the association, Woodson

proclaimed as its purpose the collection of sociological and historical data on the Black race in America, the study of peoples of African blood, the publishing of books in this field, and the promotion of harmony between the races by acquainting the one with the other.³

Acutely aware of the impact of "Southern Revisionist" scholars, such as John Burgess, William Dunning, U. B. Phillips and their disciples, who were writing the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction from the viewpoint of the South, Woodson saw more clearly than anyone that unless the records of Blacks in the country were found and published, they would become a negligible factor—obsolete in the thought of the world.⁴ He was convinced of the necessity for original research in the history of Black Americans and for the publication of monographs dealing with the subject.

In that period, most historians and most college and university courses either did not mention the Black man or if they did represented him in a most unfavorable light. Clearly, Woodson understood the necessity for instituting these researches and publications not only for the purpose of filling the lacunae and of showing the need for new interpretations; but also of creating respect for the Black race in the minds of Americans of all races.

In 1916, Woodson organized and edited the *Journal of Negro History*, which within only a few years became a publication with a national reputation. Practically all accredited universities of the South as well as the North subscribed to the *Journal*, as well as other publications of the association.⁵ With this kind of success, the association was able to stimulate nationwide interest in the study of Black life and history. And Woodson began to give a part of his time to field work among social clubs and schools, inducing them to pay more attention to the study of the Black race. In the 1920s, a considerable number of reputable universities and colleges—even some high schools—had begun to feature the study of the Black man in race relations or provide special courses.

In the prosecution of this beneficial work, institutions made frequent use of the publications of the association and of such other special works of Woodson: *The History of the Negro Church*, *A Century of Negro Migration*, *Negro Orators and Their Orations*, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, and *The Negro in Our History*. The last book met a popular demand for a textbook on Black history; by 1926 it was in its third edition and was used for

collateral reading throughout the country. It was also adopted for classroom instruction in about 100 schools and colleges.

The association rendered a distinct service in functioning as a free reference bureau for information respecting Black people. Almost all writers in this field either drew upon the facts collected and published by the association or consulted Woodson in preparing outlines of their studies and in developing their treatises. Some of the writers were graduate students; others were seasoned scholars and university professors who found that to exhaust their subjects, they had to take into account what was being produced by the association. Finally, an important by-product of the association was the collection of valuable materials in the form of documents, old manuscripts and rare books on the early history of the Black man in this country and the past of the race in Africa.⁷

In 1926, Woodson conceived "Negro History Week" as a period in which the contributions of Black people to the development of civilization would be sufficiently emphasized to impress people of all races. In conjunction with this, he developed a history kit, circulars and news releases necessary for the dissemination of truth and knowledge about Black people. And in 1937, to strengthen the work of the association in schools, Woodson developed the *Negro History Bulletin*. This endeavor was designed for teachers and students in secondary and elementary schools. Woodson knew that there had to be a wide dissemination in order to secure understanding, appreciation and support for his work.⁸

Acutely aware of the problems encountered by Black scholars in having their scholarly works published, Woodson said:

*The Negro faces another stone wall when he presents such scientific productions to the publishing houses. They may not be prejudiced, but they are not interested in the Negro. . . . What is the use of knowing things if they cannot be published to the world? If the Negro is to settle down to publishing merely what others permit him to bring out, the world will never know what the race has thought and felt and attempted and accomplished and the story of the Negro will perish with him.*⁹

Therefore, Woodson organized the Associated Publishers, a private publishing venture with 90-odd percent of the stock held by himself.

In his fight for, and the dissemination of truth about the Black race, Woodson

object of attacks by "established" organizations. But Woodson held steadfastly to his integrity and professionalism:

Here and there, therefore, were heard complaints expressing dissatisfaction with the policy of telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth regardless of whom it affected. One . . . agency, assuming authority to dictate the leadership of the Negro race in all matters in America and in Africa, became most vicious in its attacks. This agency prepared a memorandum setting forth the reasons why the Association . . . should not be further supported and clandestinely circulated it to lop off the supporters of the Association. Finally, it had the effect of depriving the Association of the assistance of all foundations and the rich people, who had formerly assisted the undertaking. . . . Observing . . . that such was the situation with respect to financial support, the Director began to organize the Negroes of the country to obtain from them what the interracialists had succeeded in diverting from this effort.¹⁰

Woodson was a discoverer, a contributor, an organizer, a disseminator, a fighter and a significant scholar in pursuit of the truth. Books, monographs and articles were his research contributions to historical accuracy. In 1915, he published *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, which began a new period of research and writing in the historical background of the education of Blacks in the United States. The volume has been regarded as a significant contribution to educational history and to this date is used as a foundation reference work. In 1918, during the period of the Black migrations of World War I, Woodson published *A Century of Negro Migration*, in which he noted that while there had been a large migration of Blacks from rural to urban areas, from South to North, and from East to West in the war period, there had been nonetheless, continuous migrations of Black people throughout American history.

He became a pioneer in the writing of the first scholarly treatises concerning the Black church. This was represented in *The History of the Negro Church*, published in 1922. Also, in 1922, Woodson published *The Negro in Our History*, which provided basic materials for college and secondary school uses drawn from many individual studies of Black people in Africa and the Americas. His book, *The Negro Wage Earner*, published in 1930 (Lorenzo Greene co-author) was a significant contribution to the economic history of Black people. Moreover, he

often fought against tradition in the education of Black youth, and against those who would rob the Black population in the United States of faith in themselves. His *Mis-Education of the Negro*, published in 1933, was directed against education agencies which failed to recognize and make use of the truth about the Black race.¹¹

Another aspect of his scholarly contributions was his editorship of source materials. Among these were, *Negro Orators and Their Orations*, *Free Negro Heads of Families in the United States in 1830*, and *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830*, all published in 1925; *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written during the Crisis, 1800-1860*, published in 1926; and the *Works of Francis J. Grimke*, published in 1942.¹²

Woodson died in April, 1950. Yet as early as 1926, he received signal recognition for the work that he had already accomplished. In that year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded him the Spingarn Medal for Distinguished Achievement. Virginia State College conferred upon him the degree of LL.D. in 1941.

Perhaps the best yardstick of Woodson's major achievements is in the realization of the need for revision of textbooks and other important teaching materials that are essential to the establishment and maintenance of world peace. In 1944, the American Council on Education published *Latin America in School and College Teaching Materials*. Much of it was devoted to an enumeration of inaccurate statements and of vital omissions that gave North American students false ideas about Latin American history and civilization. The book called for a revision of texts and other teaching materials not only for the sake of historical accuracy but also in the interest of promoting the good-neighbor policy.

The American Council on Education also published *Teaching Materials in Intergroup Relations* by Howard Wilson. The Public Affairs Committee summarized this report in a pamphlet, *Prejudice in Textbooks*. Similarly, the United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published in 1949 *A Handbook for the Improvement of Textbooks and Teaching Materials As Aids to International Understanding*. A number of member-states initiated studies and UNESCO has held regular seminars for the purpose of revising texts and improving teaching materials.¹³

The contributions and impact of Woodson were probably best summarized in

remarks by Mary McLeod Bethune following his death in 1950:

When Carter Woodson passed on, last April, he left behind the strongly burning torch of his hard-won and ever-increasing knowledge of our past, and his courage and steadfastness in adhering to the truth. He struck that torch high into the crevice between the rocks of prejudice and discrimination—a crevice forced by the growing pressure of the facts assembled and sent far and wide by this Association. It was forced by the strength of the facts that have given to us who are of Negro origin, a firm foundation of pride in a past which has contributed greatly to the forward march of civilization. It was forced by the strength of the facts that have opened in new respect the eyes of many who have scorned or pitied us as a people without a past save that of savagery and slavery. . . . We must relight our own torches from Carter Woodson's bright flame, and continue the search for the sustaining truth; . . . until we, in our turn, shall pass his saving light, undimmed, into the waiting hands of posterity.¹⁴ □

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