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STERLING BROWN

A Tribute



By Michael R. Winston

Sterling Allen Brown, one of the great minds of the 20th century, has returned home.

A titan has fallen. The sounds of ambient life throb on, but for many of us there is the sudden silence that commands: *Be Still*. We grope for words to express the reality, bare, painful, that a guiding light in our lives is gone.

For many of us, the world will never be the same.

Each of us has a special and different relationship to the life of Sterling Brown. Each of us experienced a particular facet of that vital personality from a range of angles and perspectives. That was part of his genius.

There were many dimensions to Sterling Brown — family member, godfather, friend, teacher, poet, folklorist, literary critic, cultural historian, blues scholar, jazz buff, comic wit, polemicist, nurturer of the young, legend, mythic hero, defender of his people, *natural man*. He touched the Promethean fire and at different times grasped greatness in the stunning multiplicity of his restless quest for the full measure of life.

Professor Brown loved Howard University and Howard's people. Nothing that happened here — and much happens at a major university in a lifetime — nothing obscured from his vision the priceless tradition planted at Howard when the guns that had blasted the chains of slavery fell silent. His father, the Rev. Sterling Nelson Brown, started teaching here in 1892. One block from Howard, at Sixth and Fairmont Streets, Sterling A. Brown was born. For more than half of Howard's long history a Sterling Brown, father and son, was on the faculty.

Much could be said about Professor Brown's relationship to the old Howard

tradition he absorbed in his youth, represented by John Mercer Langston, James Monroe Gregory, George William Cook, Kelly Miller, and Dwight O.W. Holmes. Even more, of course, about the intellectual revolution that reshaped that tradition, creating a new community here in the 1930s and 1940s. A transformation that eventually proved to be a catalytic agent for the destruction of statutory segregation and the emergence of a new racial consciousness in this country, the Caribbean and Africa. America, and by extension the world, could never go back to the old order. He was a spark plug of that change.

For the rest of his life he beamed when recalling the camaraderie of those turbulent but fruitful years with his colleagues and friends: Ralph Bunche, Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, Rayford W. Logan, Mercer Cook, Harold O. Lewis, James W. Butcher, Arthur P. Davis, Emmett E. Dorsey, Eugene C. Holmes, James M. Nabrit and others.

Sterling Brown was part of the old and the new, alive to the rhythms of change that came with the succeeding cohorts of faculty, and especially the generations of students that stretched across the years this university was fortunate to count him among its distinguished faculty. He was conscious of the indispensable link that he was between Howard's past and the present. For years, I have no idea how many, but as he would say, heaps, he gave a lecture in Andrew Rankin Chapel to the freshman class entitled "Down the Long Walk." In an hour that seemed magical, his resonant voice conjured up General Oliver Otis Howard and the founders from worn history books and made them live again. He recalled the campus characters of his youth, the student traditions in sports, debating and drama, and the faculty of the past who had made Howard great. It was for many

It has been said that the born teacher is as rare as a poet. Can there be any doubt that Sterling Brown was both?

Howard students the entry to a new awareness that Black people had such a tradition — and it was ours, we belonged to it, at center stage, potential links in a chain of confidently competent alumni. That was not indulgence in mere nostalgia. It was in James Weldon Johnson's apt phrase—Sterling Brownian; it accomplished complex aims by simple means.

As integral as Professor Brown was to local collegiate life, his claim on us has much deeper sources. A university as a center for teaching and research is inherently a means to remake the world; by changing our understanding of it, through the discovery of new knowledge and the reinterpretation of what has been known but partially or wrongly understood. Sterling Brown's career at Howard was a fulfillment of that potential. Yet only by placing that career in the context of its era, nationally and globally, can we begin to take in his remarkable accomplishment.

It is often said by historians that the 19th century really ended in 1914. World War I knocked what there was of authentic Western civilization off its hinges. And the "lost generation" cliché had enough truth in it to become emblematic of an entire culture falling apart.

In a time of chaos in values, death-dealing political and social change, and intellectualized ideologies that one after the other failed to fulfill promises to the common man, Sterling Brown held steady and unaccusing. He searched for a way to confront the modern world's materialism and potent emptiness with an enduring human response that had integrity and space for real people.

One might think usefully of that tremendous enterprise, whose solemn purpose he camouflaged at times with humor and music, by visualizing three expanding concentric circles of effort.

The first was his teaching, the direct encounter with young people whose lives were tethered to a future that no one could see.

The second was his scholarship, his redefinition of the genuine content and boundaries of American cultural history. Reaching far beyond his Howard base, he laid the foundations for the reconceptualization of what is *American* in American culture. He also projected the means for exposing literary canons as frequently little more than rarefied rationalizations for the ascendancy of a political and social elite.

The third was his poetry, the message and meaning that transcended teaching and the limits of scholarship to reach people who would never see him personally but come to understand the past differently and see the present with fresh eyes.

It has been said that the born teacher is as rare as a poet. Can there be any doubt that Sterling Brown was both? In one sense he taught as much off campus as on, but to have seen him in a classroom or in a seminar was to experience a major aspect of his greatness. He thought deeply about the purposes of teaching and what he taught. And the range of courses he taught was as re-

markable as his depth of knowledge. Many today might not realize that prior to the English department's growth in later years, Professor Brown taught across the entire curriculum, from the surveys of English and American literature, to drama, the English Romantic Movement, types of fiction, and the specialized courses for graduate students. He created new courses on the ballad, the frontier in American literature, and his most famous course for undergraduates, the introduction to masterpieces of world literature.

I am not qualified to say anything about the specifics of Sterling Brown's teaching of English and American literature, I just know that over the decades graduate students came to study under him from all over this country, from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. I would speak to something else with authority, his impact on students.

Professor Brown taught critical thinking, he enlivened the imagination, he stretched our capacity for grasping what was central to an argument. But that was only the vestibule of the structure he built. He brought his students to a confrontation with the selves they never knew before, with the reality of the price that must be paid over and over again to maintain personal integrity when the odds are all against you.

We knew his poem "Old Lem" and its refrain, "they don't come by ones," "they don't come by twos," they come by *tens*." Where we had in our schooled ignorance heard only clumsy dialect in folk speech, he revealed to us a rich *language* expressive of subtle irony and wisdom. We were introduced to its ability, in Zora Neale Hurston's phrase, to "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." Let me quote his own words about his encounter with the riches that he passed on to us:

"I went South. I taught at Virginia

Imagine our surprise when one day the "guest professor" in our literature class was Willie "the Lion" Smith, with his trademark suspenders, derby and cigar.

Seminary, where I learned a great deal that I could not learn at Williams. I learned the strength of my people, I learned the fortitude. I learned the humor. I learned the tragedy. I learned from a wandering guitar player about John Henry, about Stagolee, about the 'Ballad of the Bollweevil.' I learned folk tales. I learned folkstuff. I was like a sponge."

What Professor Brown was teaching us was nothing less than honest reconciliation with the source of a strength and wisdom that we had scarcely imagined existed. And the artist that he was always, he *showed* it in many ways rather than *told* it, so that sometimes we congratulated ourselves on our perception not recognizing his masterful subsurface teaching for what it was.

As Professor Eleanor Traylor has pointed out, Sterling Brown was one of those singular thinkers who revealed to us that we are a classic people, with spiritual and intellectual aspects of our total cultural tradition that stand on their own, born of our historic determination that circumstances would not dictate the limits of our integrity or dignity.

Through him we discovered the depths beneath the deceptively simple surface of what others saw as merely en-

tertainment: humor that had a delayed kick after you understood the multiple meanings of the words, music that redefined what is artistically vital in modern music. In classes in which we learned of the understanding of human nature that could be gleaned from Melville, Poe, Conrad, Balzac and Tolstoy, we also learned that there was another vital source of understanding from the railroad men, the workers on the levees, our own grandmothers. That there was more than entertainment to be gleaned from Cool Papa Bell, T. Bone Walker or Meade Lux Lewis.

Imagine our surprise when one day the "guest professor" in our literature class was Willie "the Lion" Smith, with his trademark suspenders, derby and cigar. Imagine our awe when we "sophisticated" Howardites soon realized that he was not there as imported "local color" but as a wise honors graduate of the University of Adversity. It was, again, "Sterling Brownian" to see past the superstitions of academics about who could teach us something as valuable as the "official" professor in the course.

Devoted to Truth as passionately as to the cause of his people, Professor Brown was ever moving across the deck of argument to balance the ship's keel. If you were willfully ignorant of your own heritage—then down *that* road he led you with all his persuasiveness. Once in the country of your own, you could not stop; he was then prodding you to other territories of the mind. The injunction was clear. Don't stop growing, exploring. Don't exaggerate the virtues of your own and the failings of others, and *vice-versa*. He wanted none of his lessons to be *overlearned*.

Having spent decades of his life bringing neophytes to the well of what we now call Black culture, who can forget the public event when, after the thousandth

reference by other speakers indiscriminantly to "great black writers," Professor Brown rose and said, deadpan, "I am going to recite a sonnet from that great black genius William Shakespeare."

For him, there were no automatic virtues. All were fought for by each person facing his own dragons on the pathway of life. You held your ground or you fell, but the courage, the price of honor was yours to provide. No excuses, no alibis. He made it clear that heroism came in many forms. To admire Harriet Tubman was not to respect Mary Church Terrell less. "Big Boy" in his world was side by side with aristocratic race man James Weldon Johnson; Ma Rainey, in his ample view, no stranger to the honors of Marian Anderson. The "Old Man" John Brown was great but so was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

Professor Brown believed in the possibilities of people, and was able to recognize their gifts and faults with no consideration of social conventions or sanctified superstitions.

For students who traveled the well-trodden path to his campus hideaway, a dormer-windowed study in Founders Library jammed with an almost geological accumulation of books and papers, they found a different side of the classroom and seminar teacher. Here was the great listener. He listened more intensely than any person I have known, silently eliciting your best efforts to think straight. As Professor Robert O'Meally said of Professor Brown, "you could almost *feel* him thinking" as he gave you his full attention.

The number of lives steered to achievement or rescued from shipwreck by those one-to-one sessions on the heights of the campus cannot even be guessed. And when students found themselves in the Brown home, they spent some of the most memorable

Is there any wonder that
 . . . in cities and towns
 across the country he
 was embraced as a prince
 among us, always *ours*,
 yet simultaneously be-
 longing to the world?

hours of their lives. To be there with that splendid team, to see Mrs. Daisy Turnbull Brown and Mr. Sterling Allen Brown lead students to discovery of exciting new ideas while they also had high spirited fun was to grasp what good living was about.

From *other* faculty on campus we learned of Sterling Brown as scholar and poet. His friend of so many years, Professor Arthur Paul Davis, told us of Professor Brown's pioneering 1931 essay "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors;" his pathbreaking 1937 studies *The Negro in American Fiction* and *Negro Poetry and Drama*; his Guggenheim award to study the South from "the Potomac to the Mississippi."

From Eugene Holmes students learned of Sterling Brown's intrepid defenses of Negro writers and workers in the Federal Writers Project. From Harold Lewis they heard of Sterling Brown as literary social scientist on the landmark Carnegie-Myrdal study. And many already knew of the treasures between the covers of the classic *Negro Caravan*, edited by Brown, Davis and Ulysses Lee. Of the international impact of *Southern Road* some of us had the testimony of Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar

Senghor, who made it clear that Sterling Brown's poetry was an inspiration for the *négritude* movement.

Just the *outline* of Professor Brown's accomplishments commands acknowledgment of his genius. You may have noticed that I refer to him as Professor Brown. In nearly 30 years of friendship, I could never bring myself to call him Sterling. He has been the questing, archetypical "Prof."

He was a generous, kind, and loving man. He was funny, open to all people, at home with humanity. He touched us all. His friends are legion; they are loyal to the bone.

Is there any wonder that in these parts and in cities and towns across the country he was embraced as a prince among us, always *ours*, yet simultaneously belonging to the world? His life has been a triumph.

Some will say of Professor Brown what Wordsworth said of Milton "But dearly must we prize thee; we who find in thee a bulwark for the cause of men." Others will say "look out Mr. Beasley, look sharp Mr. Greer, move over John Henry and Stagolee—Sterling Brown is going to claim his place."

As for me, I say *thank you* Prof. Godspeed.

Michael R. Winston, Ph.D., is Howard's vice president for academic affairs. The above was first read at the funeral services for Professor Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989), at Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel, January 19, 1989.