

# New Directions

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## notes

Editorial Staff

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# From the Editors Notebook

## STERLING ALLEN BROWN

*The strong men . . . coming on  
The strong men gittin' stronger.  
Strong men . . . .  
Stronger . . . .*

(from the poem "Strong Men")

*Lemme be wid Casey Jones  
Lemme be wid Stagolee,  
Lemme be wid such like men  
When Death takes hol' on me.*

*When Death takes hol' on me . . .*

(from "Odyssey of Big Boy")

2



The dean of Afro-American literature, the last of the great American folk poets of this century, has gone to rest, leaving with us his poetry, his wisdom, his courage and his counsel that the strong do get stronger and their life's contributions do keep on living.

When Sterling Allen Brown, born in Washington, D.C., educated at Williams College and Harvard University, died on January 13, 1989, the nation lost a literary giant and Afro-American literature lost one of its strong pillars.

The Howard University community gathered in Andrew Rankin Chapel on the 19th of January to say farewell and celebrate the life and contributions of the Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English. He died at age 87, but he had already made his mark years before

as a living legend in his nearly half a century of teaching and other intellectual pursuits on the Howard campus and at other institutions before and after joining the Howard faculty in 1929.

Professor Brown may have gone, but his legacy lives on, getting stronger . . . stronger. He was a poet/folklorist/essayist/literary critic/author/teacher/scholar, and a friend to those of us fortunate enough to have crossed paths with him at points during his long tenure at Howard. We find solace in the knowledge that his life-long contributions will continue to enrich both us and future generations.

As those who have studied under him tell us, Professor Brown exemplified the best of two worlds—the past and the present . . . the old and the new. Howard University may have been his intellectual home but he belonged to all everywhere, particularly to the common folk he so eloquently celebrated in his highly acclaimed folk poetry.

Professor Brown was a master of African American dialect verse, the blues, the ballad, the sonnet, free verse, the classic form and jazz. When *Southern Road*, his first volume of poetry was published in 1932, it was hailed as a work of great importance. And when it was reissued in 1975, it was described as a classic. These adjectives would also do equal justice to Professor Brown's voluminous work and his use of Black vernacular structures in his poetry . . . *After Winter*, *Sporting Beasley*, *Slim Greer*, *Sister Lou*, *Old Lem*, *Big Boy*, *Georgie Grimes*, *Ma Rainey*, and *Strong Men*, just to cite some of his poems.

In the second issue of our magazine *New Directions* early in 1974, we published a long profile of Professor Brown, written by the late Genevieve Ekaete. Here is some of what she said:

"Sterling Allen Brown, despite his modesty and protracted teaching career, is widely recognized as a man of letters of great stature. He may not have written a library of books, but neither has Ralph Ellison, his contemporary, who is, nevertheless, duly recognized. So even as Brown is quick to say for the record that he is not a major American poet, just as quickly do others refute that assertion. And the latter base their ascription of creative genius to Sterling Brown on many of his works which have earned him the label of folklorist.

"His gripping poems are vivid and realistic portrayals of the 'common folks' as they live, love, work and die. And they possess a certain immortality."

Indeed, they do. In his poetry, his subjects move through the gamut of human emotions—they shout . . . scream . . . yell . . . cry . . . laugh. And when he performed his poetry before audiences—large or small—he brought his subjects to life. What an enriching and moving experience to have witnessed him recite his poetry!

Once, when asked what his legacy should be, Professor Brown replied: "My legacy is my students." Scholarly modesty may have kept him from saying this, also: "My legacy is my life's contributions to scholarship and to American literature, especially Afro-American literature. □

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