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Gregory U. Rigsby

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# **Neglected Strands in Black History**

*A Tribute to Ivan E. Taylor*



By Gregory U. Rigsby

In Black history, there is a strand of leaders well honored and nobly enshrined. Standing tall amidst these leaders is the magnificent Frederick Douglass. True, his famous advice to some Howard students was: "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" But Douglass's essential position was "moral suasion"—a reasoned approach appealing to the nobler instincts of the oppressor. And there have been Sojourner Truth; and Harriet Tubman—unsurpassed in her saintliness and mystical powers; Benjamin Banneker; the great Booker T. Washington, who sought economic independence for the Black population in America; the prophetic visionary Marcus Garvey, who sought national independence for all the children of Africa; the martyr Martin Luther King Jr., who offered peace and love to all of God's children; Malcolm X who, if need be, was willing to engage in open war.

Then there is the intellectual giant, W.E.B. Du Bois, who stands like a mighty Colossus, legs astride, each foot planted firmly in each of the strands. Who spoke more warlike words than those expressed in Du Bois's "Litany of Atlanta?" This great intellectual warrior raged against God Himself for His too long silence over Black suffering. But it was Du Bois, too, who led a silent, peaceful protest march against the injustices meted out against Black people. Du Bois venerated in a biographical monogram the great John Brown, who gave his own life and the lives of his sons in his war against racial bigotry: "Greater love no man has but to lay down his life for his fellow-man." Du Bois never flinched from war.

Although Du Bois has not been given in this country the kind of homage he justly deserves, in time he will be. He lay in state in Ghana and was given a State Burial, complete with all the honors which President Kwame Nkrumah could grant, just as

Henry Highland Garnet was honored decades earlier in Liberia.

But, there is yet another strand of Black leaders who are, relatively speaking, neglected in Black history, and it is this strand that Professor Ivan E. Taylor exemplifies. The ubiquitous Du Bois is also rooted in this neglected strand. Indeed, he best states the principle on which this strand is grounded. In the essay, "Of the Wings of Atlanta," which appeared in that magnificent classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes: "Where, for sooth, shall we ground knowledge save on the broadest and deepest knowledge? The roots of the tree, rather than the leaves, are the sources of its life."

These noble strands of leaders, Taylor among them, are the roots of the race. They are the ones who teach the teachers, who give their all so that others might blossom. They provide the very sap of survival, but they remain buried from view. As Alexander Crummell, one of the great spokesmen for this neglected strand put it, "We must labor in the shade." More than shade, most of these dedicated men have worked in the darkness of night. No memorials are erected in their names; no best-sellers written to commemorate their selfless giving.

Where are the songs for a Peter Williams Jr., who surrendered the business suit for the religious collar, for his father had a thriving catering business and looked forward eagerly to the day when his educated son would streamline the business and bring wealth to the family? Instead, the Rev. Williams chose to give his talents to the abolitionist cause and educate young Black minds. No books record the life and efforts of this truly outstanding Black leader.

Where are the wreaths and crowns for the teachers in the African Free Schools of the late 18th and early 19th centuries? These schools produced men like Ira

Aldridge, Crummell, Garnet, Williams and so many great leaders that one scholar accurately dubbed that period when these schools' graduates flourished—"The Golden Age of Black Nationalism." But where are the hymns of praise for the teachers of these teachers? Only in general texts known only to specialists are these "roots of the race" even mentioned.

Who had strewn garlands in the paths of Anna J. Cooper, the saintly Mrs. Crummell, the enterprising Mrs. Garnet, who contributed so much to the survival of Liberia during its crisis years in the second half of the 19th century? So much these leaders gave up in order to serve those in direst need—no praises, no spotlight, no drums and parade.

Crummell turned down being president of a nation in order to set up schools in the interior of Africa and bring a different light to people cut off from the rest of their fellowmen. McCune Smith sacrificed what could have been a lucrative medical practice in order to serve his enslaved brethren. The deeds of these great but forgotten men, forgotten in the ordinary speech of the public, are golden nuggets that might not shed the glare of broken bits of glass, but they glow for those who have eyes to see.

### A Tradition of Service

I had the good fortune to meet Howard University professors in this tradition of service: Arthur P. Davis (my dissertation advisor), John Lovell Jr., Charlotte Watkins, Lewis Fenderson, Gertude Rivers, Sterling Brown (who in recent years is getting some attention) and others outside the English Department. During my tenure as graduate student and full-time teacher at Howard, the organizing head of the English Department was Dr. Ivan E. Taylor. He truly epitomized the scholar "working in the shade." With apparent effortless ease



(I stress "apparent") he, like a conductor of renown, evoked from his musicians their best music. But the best conductor must master the score if he is to effectively inspire his symphonic orchestra. Professor Taylor mastered the score.

To my understanding, the two features that best characterized this neglected strand in Black history are scholarship and compassion. These are the qualities that define the "Talented Tenth." And here let me set the record straight. The concept of the Talented Tenth, though not the phrase, originated, not with W.E.B. Du Bois, but with Crummell. In a celebrated address at the inaugural meeting of the Negro Academy, Crummell defined what the role of the members of this august Academy must be: "If the [academic scholars, i.e., representatives of the Talented Tenth] are not inspired with the notion of leadership and duty, then with all their Latin and Greek and science they are but pedants, trimmers, opportunists."

Crummell went on to urge the Talented Tenth to seek out "the latent genius, garnered up, in the by-places and sequestered corners of this neglected race." One almost feared to be a member of Crummell's Talented Tenth, so awesome the responsibilities, so demanding the duties. Talent and inclination to serve defined Crummell's elitism, not privilege and class. In short, compassion and scholarship characterized the Talented Tenth—not property, not money, not station, not office, not lineage, but hard work and sacrifice.

Professor Taylor epitomizes the scholarly and compassionate concerns of the Talented Tenth and clearly mastered the score which his orchestra of scholars in the English Department at Howard so deftly performed for more than two decades. As a scholar, his research is painstaking and meticulous. As a young graduate student, he did his master's thesis on Henry Brougham, better known as a jurist and politician than a literary scholar. But Brougham as founder and editor of the *Edinburgh Review* did publish a substantial amount of critical reviews and analyses of contemporary literary works. Why this (relatively speaking) obscure literary critic of the early 19th century? There were in this Age of Romanticism critics aplenty. Why, I wondered, why Brougham?

As I read the thesis it became clear. In the opening paragraphs and in the very final sentence of the thesis, Taylor highlighted Brougham's concern for the ordinary, aver-

age man. In an introductory paragraph he writes, "Henry Brougham's interest in contemporary literature was always intimately connected with his interest in the common man." Then, he ends his study with an emphatic observation: "his [Brougham's] ideal life-program [included] the amelioration of the common man."

This is vintage Taylor, this the almost obsessive concern of the Talented Tenth—a deep and abiding faith in the worth and value

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## Professor Taylor epitomizes the scholarly and compassionate concerns of the Talented Tenth. . .

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of "the little man." In the midst of his close scrutiny of every single critical essay published by Brougham, in the midst of this meticulous analysis, Taylor applauded and admired Brougham's concern for the average man.

As teacher, Taylor had the ability to make every student, whatever his or her background or training, strive to achieve excellence in scholarship. (And I know this from personal experience.) A Taylor-trained student invariably felt that he/she could be a writer or a scholar, and that of the highest order. So when Brougham championed the advent of "Popular Literature," a literature which focused on the welfare of the common man, Taylor knew he had found a kinsman in spirit. Though his thesis investigated Brougham's critical theories and pronouncements, Taylor's careful scholarship sent him to pamphlets and other expressions of Brougham on social matters which impinged on his critical theories. In this brief look, we see both the scholarship and compassion which characterize Professor Taylor.

In his study of Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), published 35 years after his master's thesis, Taylor is still the compassionate scholar. He admired the Englishman's *Diary* because it demonstrates that "[every man's life can be important and . . . any man can write the story of his days so that all men would delight in reading it," as Taylor

writes. There is that belief in the beauty of the "meanest flower."

It is such a delight to see Taylor peeping in on Pepys! What he said of Pepys could well be said of him: "[Pepys was] loyal to his inferiors, to his equals, and to his superiors." And again, "Men trusted him, sought his advice, and gave him their confidence." This accurately describes the standards Taylor set for the English Department at Howard University—faculty and students alike.

In Pepys's *Diary*, Taylor's intellectual sensitivity let him to discover how this diarist was, in his entries, celebrating "the poetry of little things." Had I the power and privilege to delegate patron saints to deserving persons, to Professor Taylor I would assign Saint Teresa, The Little Flower. But never be misled into thinking that this love for little things betrays a fragility, a weakness, a namby-pamby attitude. Far from it! Any student or friend of Taylor's knows that he could be stern and demanding. A classical rigor and a vigorous, uncompromising standard (much as Brougham required) define Taylor's "little flower." But the marvel of the man, and his measure, has been his rare ability to reconcile a classical rectitude with a caring sensibility.

For Pepys, time and time again, he shows understanding and care beyond the responsibility of the run-of-the-mill scholar. When Pepys's taste seems a little out of line in the appreciation of Shakespearean drama (Pepys did not care for a performance of *Henry IV, Part I*), Taylor goes out of his way to explain that Pepys had recently bought a copy of the play (there is the careful, meticulous detail) and "no doubt was reading . . . along with the actors." This distraction, he implies, probably affected his reaction! Also, in euphemistic language par excellence, he describes the diarist's promiscuous ways as "Mr. Pepys's frivolous inclinations." Yet again, he looks into the bedroom of Mr. and Mrs. Pepys on a New Year's morning, comments about Pepys's elbowing *accidentally* Mrs. Pepys on her nose, but, almost tongue in cheek, he observes that Mr. Pepys soon turned aside and fell asleep.

These comments about the little things in Pepys's life tell us so much about Professor Taylor's ability to see the poetry in little things. No wonder he could see the poetry and potential in the ordinary student. For to him, every student was extraordinary. In defining the representative



Talented Tenth individual, Crummell, had he a Taylor in his presence, would undoubtedly have turned to him and said, "Behold the man!"

Professor Taylor's exacting scholarship may be found in all of his publications. In "Negro Teachers in White Colleges," a piece which, in essence, called attention to the lack of Black faculty in white colleges, Taylor offers a historical overview of Black instructors of white students from the days of slavery down to the late 1940s, stopping to offer such details as Richard Greener's cataloguing of 30,000 volumes in the University of South Carolina library. We find this same kind of thorough treatment of a subject in his essay on "Milton's Views on the Teaching of Foreign Languages." In this essay, I was also impressed with another Taylor quality which I had picked up on during my years knowing him—his concern for the practical aspects of life as opposed to contemplating knowledge from Olympian heights. In this essay on Milton, he emphasized Milton's insistence that the reason for learning foreign languages was not for ornamentation, to be a dilettante, but to learn useful and wise thoughts—"solid things" Milton called them—of other cultures. "Scire ut Agere"—"To know in order to do"—is certainly a dictum of Taylor's. So, too, in a text, *Reading for Writing*, which he edited with Saunders Redding. In it, we can see that effort to ferret out the "solid things" in a range of writers from Renaissance scholars like Ascham, Bacon and Donne, through social thinkers like Benjamin Franklin, Laski and Du Bois, to popular newspapermen and radio scriptwriters of the day. There is that reconciling of the classical with the popular, a feat he had admired in Brougham in his younger days.

### Intellectual Acumen

But the piece of work I enjoyed most was Professor Taylor's "The Negro Arrives," which appeared in *The Crisis*. During the early 1930s, Du Bois was still the editor of this literary arm of the NAACP, and his stringent demand for scholarship and wholesale rejection of shoddy workmanship attest to the high level of thought and intellectual acumen Taylor had displayed as a young man to have had an essay of his published in *The Crisis*. Indeed, Taylor's essay follows almost immediately Du Bois's article, "Pan-Africa and New Racial Philosophy," and Du Bois is always a tough act

to follow. However, not only did Taylor acquit himself well, in my opinion, Taylor's piece topped Du Bois's! Here I quote in full extracts from this article. Taylor begins:

*I am fully convinced that the Negro is paramount in the entertaining arts what with the way he is being capitalized on radio, stage and screen; but there is something wrong with it all. Somehow, instead of being proud of his success, I am ashamed. What are the reasons for this shame which*

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For Pepys, time and time again, he shows understanding and care beyond the responsibility of the run-of-the-mill scholar.

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*sometimes amounts to disgust?*

*In the first place those who capitalize on the artistic abilities of the Negro insist on depicting him either as a fool or a vagabond. And when I say fool or vagabond I do not mean the Falstaffian brand of fool-vagabond with subtle wit and pathetic humor; I mean a plain ass.*

And young Taylor is just warming to his subject. He proceeds to lambast the buffoonery, the clownish dumb-witted roles to which Blacks were submitted in the media:

*The Negro in song and story is submitted to and submits himself to ridicule and contumely. His artists and entertainers have bowed to the whip of prejudice. They are still clowning, still playing the ass. They have sold their honor for a mess of pottage. I am heartily sick of the whole damn business.*

What more can be said? What a feisty young man! What caring! What concern! What guidance! What watchful advice!

Professor Taylor truly epitomizes that noble band of leaders who belong to the neglected strand in Black history. These women and men who have served and given themselves for the uplift of others have never been recognized as superstars, but they are the North Stars of the race—ever looking over, ever guiding, and ever inspiring hope.

Let me end by taking you to the paradisaical islands of the Caribbean. In one of his more comical compositions, the brilliant

Calypsonian Lord Nelson, who hails from Tobago, sings about his presence at a "Lying Competition." It is a competition along the lines of "Tall Tales" which Mark Twain was a master at recounting. At this competition, Nelson reports, contestants strove to outdo one another in telling of the best tailor each had known. I will deal only with the final three.

The first claimed that he knew a tailor who "could sew suit so good" that he could make a suit, not only for an unusually large man, but even for that man's unborn son, and the suit would fit that son when he was of age, "sitting down correct" (what a beautiful poetic image—the suit becomes alive—"sitting down"). But this tailor who could sew a perfectly fitting suit for a yet unborn son was topped!

The second liar claimed that he knew a tailor who could sew a suit, also "sitting down correct," for an imaginative man. As he put it, "I know a tailor who could sew a suit for Hamlet!" But even this tailor was topped!

The third liar, who was defying his crown as King Liar, claimed that he knew a tailor who could "make suit" for an invisible man. As he so graphically presented it, he could sew a perfectly fitting suit for a man, "if you only show him a corner where the fella pass." Needless to say, King Liar retained his crown.

I, too, know a Taylor; I certainly know a Taylor who tops all these tailors. The man of whom I speak is a living reality. So, to all those who had to fabricate tailors to produce great feats I say:

I know a Taylor who can fashion suits "to sit down correct" on the minds and hearts and souls of men and women alike, a Taylor who creates his form to suit his suit; a Taylor who fits the soul to make it stand upright in virtue and goodwill; a Taylor who sews a suit to make the mind stand out with intellectual shine; a Taylor who, finally, so dresses the hearts of his proteges and friends and relatives that their hearts are groomed with the blessings of love.

As the Calypsonian would say, "Dat is Taylor! He could make a suit!" □

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*Gregory Riggsby, Ph.D., who in 1968 was the first student to receive a doctorate from Howard's Department of English, now teaches at the University of the District of Columbia. The above was excerpted from his tribute to his former professor at the First Annual Ivan E. Taylor Scholarship Awards Banquet. (See page 21 for a brief bio of Professor Taylor.)*