

Levi Pennington

People

1940

Achievements of the American Negro

Levi T. Pennington
George Fox University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/levi_pennington

Recommended Citation

Pennington, Levi T., "Achievements of the American Negro" (1940). *Levi Pennington*. 377.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/levi_pennington/377

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the People at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Levi Pennington by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO.

Again I have a subject suggestive of the occasion when a speaker was given as the topic for his address "The Mississippi Valley" and he said he would not fully cover his subject.

An old book the perusal of which I can highly recommend contains the statement that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men"; and anthropology, physiology and other sciences agree with the statement; so we need not be surprised to find achievements of the negro in any area in which other races achieve.

In the physical realm, with which we are least concerned, there have been remarkable records made by negroes. In pugilism, perhaps the lowest form of athletics except professional wrestling, which is more brutal and more crooked, there are such names as Jack Johnson, Jersey Joe Walcott, Ezzard Charles and Joe Louis, each of whom has held the title of world's champion heavyweight pugilist, and the various weight classifications have at various times had their negro world champions. In basket ball the Harlem Globe Trotters have few equals if any in this one "invented" game. In football we have All-Americans such as Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson; in track there are many negro champions, Jesse Owen holding a long string of world titles and world records in the sprints, the jumps and the hurdles; in baseball, after being barred for many decades the negro was admitted, and Jackie Robinson, Campinello and others have won the distinction of "most valuable player" in the big leagues and others have won like distinction in the minors; and so one might go on with negro achievements in many fields of physical prowess.

But we are more interested in other things. The negro has made his mark in art, literature, music, education, the theater, the pulpit, and even in international affairs. Naturally we can deal with only a few of the many who have wrought worthily.

In the graphic and plastic arts, the negro has not yet produced many great artists. But Henry O. Tanner, son of an African Methodist Episcopal bishop, ranks high among painters, whatever their race or color, with medals and prizes and other awards, and with his masterpieces in many of the leading art museums of the world. Edouard Scott, perhaps second among negro painters, has specialized in portraits and murals. His work decorates the walls of many public buildings, state houses, churches, banks, schools, etc. Probably the most famous negro in the field of sculpture is a woman, Meta Warrick Fuller, whose work at first was gruesome, macabre, but which later concerned itself with matters of social interest.

In the field of education the name most widely known is probably that of Booker T. Washington, the creator of Tuskegee. His emphasis was on the preparation of the negro for the agricultural and industrial fields, and his emphasis was so little upon matters of social and political equality that he aroused the emphatic not to say bitter opposition of W. E. Burghardt DuBois, who led the Niagara Movement which insisted on absolute equality, socially, politically, industrially, professionally, and in every other way. The controversy dulled the fame of Dr. Washington, who, however, did more for the advancement of the negro in his day than any other man or woman, white or black. Whether in segregated schools or in schools where all races study on an equal footing, the negro has won recognition

in many places and distinction in not a few. **Hodand Hayes** in his position at Harvard is an outstanding example of such recognition and distinction.

Many negroes have won marked success in other fields. There are highly successful lawyers among the negroes, doctors, surgeons, bankers, merchants, preachers, etc. **Ralph Bunche** has done a noteworthy work in international conciliation. **George Washington Carver** in the field of practical science made a name for himself, worthy to be in the list with such men as **Edison, Ford, Marconi, Roentgen** and others. But it is in the fields of music and literature that the negro has won his highest distinction, and in each field his work is both distinguished and distinctive.

In the literary realm there has been notable achievement in both prose and poetry. In biography and especially autobiography **Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery"** holds a high and unique place, a wonderful story told in such simple language that some have criticized it as being childlike -- some have even said childish. **Paul Lawrence Dunbar's** short stories would have made him notable if he had never written a poem. The extent of his literary achievements is almost unbelievable when one remembers that after a long and losing fight against disease, he died before reaching the age of 34. There are many other names of negroes in prose literature worthy to be in *Who's Who* in America, and not a few of them were so included.

But it is in the realm of poetry that the negro has made his most notable contribution, and this is not strange, since poetry is aimed at the emotions and the negro is close enough to his primitive backgrounds to be moved more by emotion than by intellect in many cases. And while much of this poetry is poetry written by negroes rather than negro poetry, there is not a little of it that is written in negro dialect, which is to a great extent simply the dialect of the south, not a little of it is distinguished by its consciousness of and resentment against the inequities, the discriminations and the injustices, sometimes the actual outrages, from which the race has suffered so bitterly in the past, and from which, in spite of advances, it is not yet free.

Without question the most outstanding poet of the negro race is **Paul Laurence Dunbar**. He is best known for his poems in dialect, but it was his ambition to be known for his work in classic English, and this work would have given him worthy fame if he had never written in dialect. He deserves a month's real study, not a few minutes in a paper like this.

But we must have a few samples from his non-dialect poems. Here is one:

Negro Genius, P 155. "Ere Sleep Comes Down."

And here is another:

Negro Genius, p. 156. "The Poet and His Song."

One more; probably most quoted of all his verse:

Negro Genius, p. 156. "Life."

One more:

Negro Genius, p. 157. "When All is Done."

And finally his valedictory:
 Negro Genius, p. 157. "Compensation."

Dunbar's dialect poetry has been seldom equalled, probably never surpassed. They should be read only by a real artist as a reader -- which I am not. Among the best known are "A Coquette Conquered", "When Malinda Sings" (by many considered his dialect masterpiece), "When de Co'n Pone's Hot", "How Lucy Backslid", "At Candle Lightin' Time" -- the list could be made much longer. But here is one that was included in the illustrated edition of the book, "Candle Lightin' Time" but strangely enough was omitted from both the larger edition of these poems:

Negro Genius. p 158. "Lullaby."

But Paul Laurence Dunbar is not the only negro writer of verse deserving of the title "poet." William Stanley Braithwaite, James Weldon Johnson, Leslie Pinckney Hill, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Countee Cullen, Claud McKay, Langston Hughes, these and many others that could be named have written genuine poetry.

It is natural that the bitterness of segregation, discrimination, lynching, should get into not a little of the poetry of these sons and daughters of Africa. Walter Evans Hawkins' poetry is a cry of protest, as witness:

Negro Genius, p. 239. "A festival in Christendom."

Leslie Pinckney Hill has the same spirit in the horrible thing he writes about a case where a negro was stolen from the train on which he was taken to prison, and his guards said they did not know he had been taken till the train moved out and left him in the hands of the mob. Hill calls his poem "So Quietly:

Negro Genius, p. 215, "So Quietly."

Countee Cullen expresses in a milder form his feeling of hurt at discrimination:

Caroling Dusk, p. 182. "Yet Do I Marvel."

And again:

Caroling Dusk, p. 187. "For a Lady I Know."

And once again:

Caroling Dusk, p. 187. "Incident."

But enough about poetry by negroes. Time is passing; and we must pass the achievements of negroes in the dramatic world, achievements that range from high tragedy to low comedy, from high opera to minstrelcy, accomplishments in libretto and score. ~~William~~ ^{Willis} Richardson, Charles Gilpin, Richard B. Harrison and Paul Robeson are notable names, from "Green Pastures" to "Othello."

But perhaps in no realm of achievement has the negro reached as great a height as in the world of music. And here there is such a wealth of material that one can mention only a few of the truly great performers.

"Blind Tom" (Thomas Green Bethune) was an almost unbelievable musician who died in 1908 at the age of 59. He was not only the possessor of "absolute pitch" but could tell the pitch of any chord, however dissonant; and it was his delight at his concerts to have some musician play a composition that he had never heard, preferably the musician's own composition that had never been published, and the more complicated the better, and then "Blind Tom" would sit down at the piano and play the entire composition, "verbatim et literatim."

Flora Batson Bergen, Sissierett Jones, "The Black Patti", the Hyers Sisters and others were world famous in the early part of this century and the last years of the former.

"There were giants in the earth in those days", and there are giants in the earth today. The list of great singers is too long to give, and the list of great negro singers is not a short one. But I will name Dorothy Maynor, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes, and ask if you can name another four, of any race or color, that excel them in excellence. All four of them can sing greatly; and each can render the finest classical music, the most acceptable of popular music, and the most characteristic of the music of the black race, the negro spirituals. It has been said that only a negro can sing a negro spiritual as it should be sung; but we are to have the privilege of hearing that theory disproved right now.
