Review Essays:


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During his ninety-five years (February 23, 1868—August 27, 1963), William Edward Burghardt Du Bois authored twenty-two books of history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and fiction, and he also contributed hundreds of critical and scholarly essays and columns to leading publications throughout the world. Moreover, he was a longtime university professor as well as a co-founder and leader of the Pan-African Movement, the National Negro Academy, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation’s most effective civil rights organization. As such, W. E. B. Du Bois was a veritable Renaissance man of American letters, one who left an indelible mark on the twentieth century.

The year 2003 proved especially important in Du Bois scholarship. Throughout the year, scholars convened at such varied sites as the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the University of Stirling in Scotland, and Morgan State University in Baltimore to commemorate the 100th anniversary of The Souls of Black Folk, and in so doing to celebrate, as Raymond Wolters puts it, “the preeminent black scholar of his era” (1). First published in 1903, Souls raised important new questions about American political and social history and thus helped to move American philosophy beyond the structures of pragmatism and positivism. The book consists of fourteen essays, varying in theme from a history of the Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction, to a mournful lament of the author’s deceased infant son, Burghardt, to a celebration of African American spirituals or “sorrow songs,” to a critique of Booker T. Washington’s politics of racial accommodation. It remains the most popular and influential of Du Bois’s books. In fact, its notions of “the veil,” “double consciousness,” and “the
problem of the color-line" in the twentieth century have become both prophetic and staples of African American intellectual history.


In this most recent volume, Raymond Wolters (Keith Professor of History, University of Delaware) dubs W. E. B. Du Bois "the great pioneer of the American civil rights movement" (1).

Where most of the centennial publications analyze in some depth *The Souls of Black Folk*, Wolters, much like David Lewis, focuses on Du Bois the man, particularly on his work as a civil rights leader. In doing so, he also illuminates the lives of Du Bois's principal friends and rivals—several black leaders who came to the fore in the years before World War II. Accordingly, Wolters envisions his book as a group portrait.

The book's central argument is that Du Bois was philosophically a pluralist. Although the author fails to provide a precise definition of pluralism, he does offer, in support of his thesis, a number of compelling examples. He notes, for instance, that in pursuing his life's work—the realization of economic, political, and social justice for Blacks in America—Du Bois repeatedly rejected either/or approaches and embraced instead both/and solutions. This occurred perhaps most famously in the opening pages of *Souls*, where Du Bois initially sets forth his theory of "double-consciousness." There he observes that the black American ever feels his two-ness, "an American, a Negro," and he goes on to identify the longing to merge these two halves into a harmonious whole as the great struggle of the
American Negro. Rejecting the feasibility of choosing either half, he calls for a society where one can be both a Negro and an American, “without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”²

Wolters shows that, in arriving at this position, Du Bois engaged three opposing bodies of thought that emerged during the nineteenth century. One group of activists, represented by Martin R. Delany and Edward Blyden (and later Marcus Garvey), argued that because white racism was so deeply entrenched Blacks would never be treated fairly in America. Since efforts at improved raced relations would in their view inevitably fail, they called for an exodus of African Americans back to the Motherland. At the opposite end of the political spectrum were those like Frederick Douglass who held that racial integration and assimilation were viable goals. Little value, they maintained, should be placed on cultural and other group differences, so as to produce a united, colorblind American citizenry. Others, like the Cambridge-educated Episcopal priest Alexander Crummell (the subject of Souls, chapter twelve), agreed in part with both groups. Crummell insisted, like the integrationists, on equal rights for Blacks, but he rejected their calls for assimilation, agreeing instead with the separatists' calls for the preservation of a unique African heritage and culture. Wolters concludes that Du Bois sided with Crummell and embraced what today is called cultural pluralism: “Rejecting the melting-pot idea, which looks toward a blending of different cultures into one, Du Bois envisaged the coexistence of distinct groups.” Hence “African Americans should fight for equal opportunities and also proudly develop certain aspects of their unique heritage and subculture” (33). Throughout the book Wolters includes several other interesting, well-described instances of Du Bois’s pluralism.

The book consists of a brief introduction and seven main chapters. Chapter one is devoted to Du Bois’s early years; the middle chapters explore his relationships with Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Walter White, as well as key experiences during World War I and during his two stints with the NAACP, first as Director of Publicity and Research (1910-1934) and later as Director of Special Research (1944-1948). The final chapter, titled “The Final Years,” gives a brief summary of the scholar and activist’s last years. In this concluding chapter, we first learn of a
number of difficulties he faced during his final years. As he entered his eighth decade, he was forced to retire from Atlanta University in 1944 and dismissed from the NAACP in 1948. In July 1950 his wife of fifty-four years, Nina, died. Seven months later he remarried, this time to Shirley Graham, an Oberlin and Yale graduate who was twenty-four years his junior and also an active member of the Communist Party. In the late 1950's the couple visited the Soviet Union, China, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. In October 1961, a decade after being jailed, indicted, and eventually acquitted of being a foreign agent, ninety-three-year-old Du Bois himself joined the Communist Party. Seeing little efficacy in further struggle in America, he and Graham then departed for West Africa, where he renounced his America citizenship, became a citizen of Ghana, and began work on the massive *Encyclopedia Africana* (a project recently completed by literary scholar Henry Louis Gates and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah). About his life's work, Wolters concludes:

Du Bois was a remarkable man. As a youth he recognized that black people were repressed by the racist notion that Negroes were inherently deficient and therefore doomed to servitude. As a young man he dedicated himself to demolishing the idea of racial inferiority. There could scarcely have been a more suitable person for the task. He was a Negro who was endowed with a first-rate intellect and an indomitable fighting spirit. His writings will endure as eloquent appeals for racial justice. (253)

The opening chapter, much like the conclusion, recounts familiar biographical information. We learn of his birth and boyhood in rural Great Barrington, Massachusetts; his education at Fisk, the University of Berlin, and Harvard (B.A. *cum laude* in philosophy, 1890; Ph.D. in history, 1895); and his early work as a professor at Wilberforce University and Atlanta University. During the Atlanta years Du Bois taught sociology and history, and he organized annual conferences devoted to some aspect of African American life, such as black families, workers, colleges, churches, and businesses. About the conferences, he recalled, proudly, "between 1896 and 1920 there was no study of the race problem in America made which did not depend in some degree upon the investigations made at Atlanta University" (38). His favorite Harvard professor,
the philosopher William James, praised the 1906 study—which focused on the health and physique of African Americans—as "splendid scientific work" (56). For Wolters, "The Atlanta monographs were competent rather than outstanding. Their importance lay in the fact that, because no other institution was sponsoring research on African American life at the time, they were the preeminent scholarly studies of the era" (38).

Such information is particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with Du Bois, but also for seasoned students of his work there are several interesting tidbits. Many will be surprised to learn, for example, that the professor held small seminars "at his residence, where he served cookies and a special blend of coffee in Harvard cups." Several students reported, comments Wolters, that these evening seminars were "perfectly delightful" (37). Although the professor's relations with his students were initially strained, in part because of his demanding standards, in time he became one of their favorites.

While teaching at Atlanta, Du Bois was approached by the Chicago Publishing firm A. C. McClurg and Company, who asked if they might publish some of his essays in book form. The result was The Souls of Black Folk. An immediate hit, the book has remained in print since its first appearance in April 1903. With the publication of Souls, discloses Wolters, "Du Bois was no longer just a prominent African American scholar." Indeed, by the time 1903 drew to a close, "Du Bois was the second most influential black man in the United States" (39). The nation's most influential African American was, of course, Booker T. Washington. Washington and Du Bois famously proposed divergent, oppositional plans for the advancement of the Black masses following Reconstruction. Yet, as we learn in chapter two, they were initially allies.

When Washington delivered his legendary opening address at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in September 1895, he in essence accepted racial segregation. He urged Blacks to forgo demands for political and social equality in the interest of achieving racial amity. They should acquire economic independence by learning trades and job skills, but by staying separate and apart they would remain non-threatening to the white hegemony. Afterwards, twenty-seven-year-old Du Bois sent Washington a warm personal
note, praising the Atlanta address as “a word fitly spoken” (53). Four years later, in the fall of 1899, they were friendly enough for Washington to offer Du Bois a position at Tuskegee, along with “a comfortable house and a salary that was 14 percent more than Du Bois was earning at Atlanta” (58). The Tuskegee job, however, fell through, in part because Nina Du Bois wanted to leave the Jim Crow South and found the idea of living in Alabama particularly unappealing. A few years later, Du Bois included in *The Souls of Black Folk* what Wolters considers a balanced and measured critique of Washington’s approach to race relations. Still, the two men remained on good terms.

Their relationship took a decided turn for the worse in July 1903. A group of Bostonians, led by the perspicacious but unorthodox Monroe Trotter (the first black member of Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard), noisily interrupted one of Washington’s speeches, resulting in fistfights and a number of arrests. When Du Bois later expressed support for Trotter’s “single hearted earnestness,” Washington concluded mistakenly “that Dr. Du Bois is very largely behind the mean and underhanded attacks that have been made upon me” (65). Wolters shows that “Washington’s overreaction to the Boston Riot—his retaliation against Du Bois and others—was the final nudge that caused Du Bois to oppose Washington openly” (65).

Chapters three and four detail, respectively, Du Bois’s NAACP years and key experiences during World War I. Soon after the U.S. entered the war in 1917, Du Bois urged African Americans “to join heartily in this fight” (112). He believed, mistakenly, that honorable wartime service would ameliorate and eventually wipe out racism and white supremacy. The chairman of the NAACP’s board, the philanthropist Joel E. Spingarn, agreed with Du Bois and enlisted in the army. Afterwards, Spingarn arranged for Du Bois to receive a commission in the army’s Military Intelligence Bureau. To Du Bois’s great relief, however, he failed the physical exam.

While at the NAACP, Du Bois and another board member, “the beautiful, well-educated author and social worker from New York,” Mary White Ovington, began what became a lifelong friendship (91). During his frequent skirmishes with Oswald Garrison Villard, Walter White, and other NAACP officials, Du Bois could always count on Ovington’s support. The account of Ovington and Du Bois’s relationship is among the book’s most
interesting and leaves one wondering why there is virtually no discussion of his association with other activist women. For example, the author and educator Anna Julia Cooper (Ph.D., University of Paris, 1925) shared the rostrum with Du Bois at the historic Pan-African Congress in London in 1900. Later, she impelled him toward his monumental study of post-bellum America, *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Disturbed after reading Claude Bowers's virulently racist *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (1929), Cooper wrote: "My dear Doctor Du Bois: It seems to me the Tragic Era should be answered—adequately, fully, ably, finally, and again it seems to me Thou art the Man! Take it up seriously thro the Crisis and let us buy up 10,000 copies to be distributed broadcast thro the land. Will you do it?" Five years later, *Black Reconstruction* rolled off the printing press. Much like Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Frances E. W. Harper, and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander receive no mention yet merit extensive attention.

The book does shed valuable new light on a number of recent controversies, particularly regarding Du Bois's allegedly numerous amorous liaisons. David Lewis's two-volume Du Bois biography is both elegantly written and meticulously researched, as one would expect of Pulitzer Prize winners. Yet the books owe at least some of their success to somewhat prurient accounts of Du Bois's sex life. Lewis begins with a disclaimer, acknowledging that as a biographer one cannot "always know with sufficient certainty whether a friendship with a particular woman was anything more." He proceeds, nonetheless, to chronicle affairs between Du Bois and nearly a dozen women. In detailing these "serial affairs," he labels Du Bois a "priapic adulterer," and he suggests that during one period "his relationships with women, always vigorous and varied, became sexually ever more exuberant to such a degree that they resembled the compulsiveness of a Casanova."

The women, always prominent and sometimes married, were apparently attracted to Du Bois's intellect and appreciated that he treated them respectfully and as equals. For some however, Lewis adds gratuitously, the attraction was basically that "he was very well hung." In response, Wolters admits that there may indeed have been transgressions. But he convincingly notes, "it is difficult to keep such transgressions secret; the problem is that there are two parties that must never tell. The fact that none of Du Bois's alleged lovers ever admitted to such liaisons casts . . . doubt upon the supposed trysts" (295).
The penultimate chapters focus on the civil rights leaders Walter White, long a colleague of Du Bois at the NAACP, and Marcus Garvey, founder of a popular "back to Africa" movement in the early twentieth century. Where Du Bois initially admired Booker T. Washington, the same cannot be said of his relationship with either Garvey or White. After Garvey's deportation to Jamaica in 1927, following imprisonment in Atlanta for mail fraud, Du Bois reacted with relief. In his view, black Americans had survived two sincere but gravely misguided appeals. "The greater one, fathered by Booker T. Washington, . . . said, 'Let politics alone, keep in your place, work hard, and do not complain.'" "The lesser, fathered by Marcus Garvey, said, 'Give up! Surrender! The struggle is useless; back to Africa and fight the white world'" (170).

Walter Francis White is remembered as both a Harlem Renaissance novelist and a tireless political activist who made more than forty perilous forays into the South to investigate lynchings. Following his graduation from Atlanta University in 1916, twenty-two-year-old White helped organize a local branch of the NAACP. Two years later he was promoted to assistant secretary at the organization's New York headquarters. In 1931 he succeeded James Weldon Johnson as executive secretary. Almost from the start, Du Bois and White clashed. Although they differed in temperament, their more substantial difference (as it had with Du Bois and most of his rivals) concerned the best way to achieve progress for Blacks. Where White favored integration and assimilation, Du Bois, as Wolters convincingly shows, remained a pluralist, rejecting "assimilation and proposing instead that African Americans should celebrate their distinctive culture, build up the institutions of the black community, and develop a cooperative economy" (238). White managed to secure Du Bois's resignation from the NAACP in 1948, ushering him into retirement and bringing to an end his distinguished career as a civil rights leader.

Readers will find Du Bois and His Rivals clear, engaging, and informative. The book throughout throws special light on Du Bois's talent and milieu, and also conveys a complex sense of him as a scholar and activist. The Press and the author are to be congratulated for taking on this important new project.
Over the past sixty years or so, there have been a number of books that have surveyed the history and scope of American Philosophy, from Herbert Schneider’s *A History of American Philosophy* (1946) to Morris Cohen’s *American Thought* and Joseph Blau’s *Men and Movements in American Philosophy*, both published in the early 1950s, to the writings of John E. Smith and Andrew Reck in the 1960s. A now-classic survey is the two-volume *A History of Philosophy in America*, by Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphy, which came out in 1977. While these were all single- (or double-) authored monographs, in the mid-1980s Marcus Singer edited *American Philosophy*, a collection of essays written by many of the leading American Philosophy scholars of that generation, John McDermott, Vincent Potter, H. S. Thayer, T. L. S. Sprigge, Susan Haack, and Singer himself, among others. This volume consisted primarily, though not exclusively, on essays that focused