

Review Essay.

“A Neglected American Philosopher: The Reissue of W. E. B. Du Bois’s Letters.”

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF W. E. B. Du BOIS: VOLUMES I-III, ed. Herbert Aptheker. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. 507pp, 442pp, 483pp. \$19.95 per volume.

As these volumes suggest, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (pronounced *du-boys*) is beginning to receive the serious academic scrutiny his life and work so richly merit. He is also making headway into American popular culture. In 1998, as part of its “Celebrate the Century” series, the U.S. Postal Service issued stamps in honor of two African American educators: the scientist and inventor George Washington Carver, and the prolific philosopher, author, editor, teacher, and civil rights leader, W. E. B. Du Bois.

This three-volume collection of Du Bois’s correspondence, complete with an introduction and extensive notes to each volume, is a reprint of the original cloth edition, published between 1973 and 1978 by the University of Massachusetts Press. These new, handsome, far less expensive volumes will surely make Du Bois’s writings more accessible and as a result likely spur further research.

In 1946, Du Bois (then age 78) asked his long-time friend, the historian Herbert Aptheker, to edit his letters and papers. Both realized that Aptheker would be undertaking a Herculean task, but neither could have known the project would become tougher still. Du Bois, who penned an article, letter, or column nearly every day of his adult life, would remain active another 15 years, before dying in Ghana in 1963 at age ninety-five. Aptheker, in sketching key aspects of Du Bois’s public life, gives some sense of the immensity of his correspondence.

He was a student at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin for ten years; a faculty member at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University for over twenty-five; the author of nineteen books of history, sociology, anthropology, and fiction and the editor of eighteen additional titles; a contributor of weekly columns to leading Black newspapers for more than twenty years, and of hundreds of articles and reviews to publications throughout the world. Over four decades, he edited five magazines . . . [and] was founder and leader of the Niagara Movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Pan-African Movement. He was, additionally, . . . a progenitor and participant in the so-called Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; a staunch opponent

of racism, colonialism, and imperialist war; [and] an advocate of independent political activity for the Afro-American people. (I: xxiii)

Because Du Bois's tens of thousands of documents made an unabridged collection neither physically nor financially feasible, Aptheker was forced to limit the correspondence. To do so, he made a number of key editorial decisions. First, he excluded purely personal letters, concentrating instead on "those having larger historical consequence" (II: xix). Of the latter, he generally chose only one or two representative samples. For instance, in January 1905 Du Bois accused segments of the black press of selling out their integrity for money supplied by Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee machine. In turn, Du Bois was deluged with caustic letters. Aptheker prints only one of these letters and Du Bois's reply. Additionally, as a prominent black leader, Du Bois occasionally received strikingly "obscene and disgusting letters, usually unsigned" (I: xxiv). These the editor generally excluded. Finally, rather than include excerpts, Aptheker wisely chose to publish all letters in full. The result is an impressive, reader-friendly work. Indeed, each volume reads like a coherent, captivating narrative.

Throughout each volume, Aptheker's extensive introductory notes stand out as strengths. In many instances these notes, which contextualize and thereby provide invaluable openings into the letters, are longer than the letters themselves. The notes simultaneously illuminate the historical circumstances (as with the above press controversy) and identify the thousands of persons, obscure as well as well known, mentioned in the correspondence.

Also making these somewhat lengthy texts helpful are the indexes, the layout, the tables of contents, and the several dozen portraits. The portraits span Du Bois's nine decades, beginning with a chubby infant Du Bois held by his mother (Mary Sylvina Burghardt Du Bois) at their Great Barrington, Massachusetts, home and ending with a slightly stooped Du Bois, decked in full-academic regalia, receiving an honorary degree from the University of Ghana on his ninety-fifth birthday, 23 February 1963. The tables of contents give a chronological list of each piece of correspondence, its date, to (or from) whom it was written, and a brief summary of the subject matter.

Volume I, the lengthiest of the three, covers the years 1877-1934. It is divided into five sections: 1) Student, 1877-1894; 2) Teacher-Scholar, 1894-1904; 3) Organizer-Editor-Author, 1905-1920; 4) National and International Leader: The Era of Postwar "Prosperity," 1920-1929; and 5) National and International Leader: The Depression and Resignation from the NAACP, 1930-1934. In the opening pages of section one, twenty-two-year-old Du Bois's *raison d'être* or life goal emerges. "I have devoted most of my college work to Philosophy, Political Economy, and History, and wish after graduation [from Harvard] to study in the graduate department for the degree of Ph.D. I wish to take the field of *social science* under *political science* with a view to the ultimate application of its principles to the social and economic advancement of the Negro people" (I: 7).

Five years later, in the spring of 1895, having graduated *cum laude* from Harvard and completed further study at the University of Berlin, Du Bois received his Ph.D. from Harvard, becoming the first African-American to do so. Moreover, like the lion's share of his book-length publications, his doctoral dissertation (on the slave trade) laid important groundwork (just as he had promised) for advancing the African peoples. And thus as the new century was coming into full swing, William E. B. Du Bois, a self-described "Fisk and Harvard man" (I: 37), was by any objective yard stick among the nation's most well-trained scholars.

His new Ph.D. in hand, Du Bois set out, as he penned in his journal, "to make a name in science, to make a name in art and thus to raise my race."¹ Initially he held a number of academic jobs, at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and at Atlanta University. It was during this period, 1894-1910, that he published his favorite book, a biography of *John Brown*, his monumental sociological work, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, and his most celebrated work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, a brilliant montage of philosophy, history, autobiography, fiction, religion, and music. In 1903, the Harlem Renaissance novelist Jesse Fauset, then an undergraduate at Cornell, wrote: "Professor Du Bois I am going to thank you, as though it has been a personal favor, for your book 'The Souls of Black Folk.' I am glad, glad, you wrote it. . ." (I: 66). Two years later, similar praise came from the German social scientist Max Weber: "Your splendid work: 'The Souls of Black Folk' ought to be translated in German. I do not know whether anybody has already undertaken to make a translation. If not I . . . beg you for your authorization" (I: 106).

While a professor of sociology and history at Atlanta University (1897-1910, 1934-1944), Du Bois put his training to use studying such matters as the Negro Church, the Negro Artisan, and Negro Crime. In so doing, he laid the foundation for twentieth-century African American sociology. A May 1906 letter to philanthropist Andrew Carnegie outlines conference reports and empirical studies published by the Atlanta University Press and spearheaded by Du Bois during his early years at the school. "The object of this Conference," explains Du Bois, "is the systematic and exhaustive study of the American Negro, in order that in the future philanthropists and others who seek to solve this serious set of problems may have before them a carefully gathered body of scientifically arranged facts to guide them" (I: 121).

Clearly then Professor Du Bois's weapons of choice were the pen and reason. Yet in living in Atlanta, in the belly of the beast as it were, he often found the power of logic and reason inadequate. Consider the pogrom against Atlanta's black population in the summer of 1906, resulting in numerous deaths. "Du Bois was himself in Alabama," informs Aptheker, "but [he] hastened home and stood guard, shotgun in hand, at his porch; his wife and young daughter had been terrified, but not physically assailed" (I: 123). Afterwards, a friend from Columbia University wrote: "My dear Professor Du Bois, Like so many other of your well wishers, I was amazed & disgusted at the happenings in Atlanta. But perhaps I did not realize the horror of it all, until I read your beautiful poem

["A Litany of Atlanta"] in the Outlook. It must indeed be a tragedy for men like you—a tragedy all the greater because of the seeming impasse" (I: 123).

Four years later, perhaps spurred by the impasse, Du Bois left Atlanta for New York City. There he assumed the position of Director of Publicity and Research for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The remainder of Volume I chronicles his labors at the NAACP. Particularly noteworthy are the scores of eclectic essays he authored while editor of the organization's official organ, *The Crisis*. As editor of *The Crisis*, he also helped launch the career of many of America's most talented writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Countee Cullen, Jesse Fauset, and Langston Hughes. In the summer of 1941, Hughes sent Du Bois the following handwritten note: "Dear Dr. Du Bois: This marks for me twenty years of publication, my first poem ["The Negro Speaks of Rivers"] having appeared in *The Crisis* under your editorship in June, 1921. I send you my gratitude and continued admiration" (II: 284). Still extant, *The Crisis* is now in its 88th year. The July 1997 number is dedicated to "Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois [who in 1910] founded *The Crisis* as the premier, crusading voice of civil rights."

In 1934, having completed twenty-four years of distinguished service, Du Bois left his post at the NAACP and returned to his first love, teaching and scholarship, at Atlanta University, this time for ten years. Volume II, the slimmest of the three, focuses on this single decade, 1934-1944. Here we gain insight into Du Bois's views about such matters as the Great Depression, colonialism, Marxism, World War II, and the New Deal. With respect to communism, he wrote in 1938 that though "I am not a communist . . . I appreciate what the communists are trying to do and endeavor always in my classes and elsewhere to give a fair and balanced judgment concerning them" (II: 170). About the impending end of World War II, he said: "in the various peace proposals which envisage the end of this war, there is no coming to grips with the problem of the future relations of Africa and Europe. One can see in these proposals the persistence of old patterns: the need of raw material from Africa; and the assumption that this raw material must be made cheap by land monopoly and low wage; and that the object of the whole African economy must remain primarily the economic advantage of Europe" (II: 302-03). Appreciative of Du Bois's long fight against injustices, on both sides of the Atlantic, in 1941 the Liberian government awarded him one of its highest medals, the Liberian Order of African Redemption (II: 289, 312).

The correspondence in Volume II also wonderfully illustrates Du Bois's incredible energy. Reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's daily walks from Cedar Hill across the Potomac to Washington, Du Bois in a warm letter to Alice Dunbar reveals that "I arise here mornings with the sun, getting my mile walk by half-past seven, and I am sitting in my office bright and perky by eight" (II: 43). Comfortably ensconced in his Atlanta University hilltop office, Du Bois taught countless classes while chairing the department of sociology. In addition, he somehow found time to write a weekly newspaper column, to make an annual lecture tour through the U.S., to found and edit the quarterly journal *Phylon*, and to pen three additional books: his initial autobiography, *Dust of Dawn*

(1940), the history, *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939), and his monumental study of post-bellum America, *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

The seeds for *Black Reconstruction* were laid in December 1929 by Du Bois's friend and sister educator Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964). Disturbed after reading Claude Bowers's virulently retrograde *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (1929), the principal of Washington's famous M Street High School proclaimed: "My dear Doctor Du Bois: It seems to me that the *Tragic Era* should be answered—adequately, fully, ably, finally, & again it seems to me *Thou* art the Man! Take it up seriously thro the Crisis & let us buy up 10,000 copies to be distributed broadcast thro the land. Will you do it?" (I: 411) Five years later, we now know, *Black Reconstruction* rolled off the printing press.

The final volume, Volume III, spans the years 1944-1963, the final two decades of Du Bois's life. The summer of 1944 found the seventy-six-year-old leaving Atlanta University and returning, once more, to New York City, this time to serve as Director of Special Research for the NAACP. From his NAACP offices, Du Bois continued the flurry of activities that would leave an indelible mark on the twentieth century. Concerned foremost with human liberation, he lobbied for anti-lynching legislation, worked to outlaw Jim Crow, helped found the United Nations, struggled against colonialism as chair of the Pan-African Congress, served as vice-chair of the Council on African Affairs (Paul Robeson chaired the Council), and worked to outlaw atomic weapons as head of the Peace Information Center.

His work with the Peace Information Center triggered a rather ominous series of events, beginning in the summer of 1950. Accused of acting as agents for the Soviet Union, Du Bois and his Center colleagues were publicly attacked by Secretary of State Dean Acheson and subsequently investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. "I am sure that the American people will not be fooled by the so-called 'world peace appeal' . . . now being circulated in this country for signatures," charged Acheson. "It should be recognized for what it is—a propaganda trick in the spurious 'peace offensive' of the Soviet Union" (III: 303). By February 1951, Du Bois and four others had been indicted by a Washington grand jury for allegedly violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act. At his arraignment, eighty-three-year-old Du Bois suffered the indignity of being searched, fingerprinted, and handcuffed. Afterwards he read the following statement: "It is a curious thing that today I am called upon to defend myself against criminal charges for openly advocating the one thing all people want—Peace. For 83 years I have worked and studied hoping that in some way I might help my people and my fellowmen to a better way of life, free of poverty and injustice." He closes, poignantly anticipating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I am confident that every American who desires peace, Negro and white, Catholic, Jew and Protestant, the three million signers of the World Peace Appeal and tens of millions more will join us in our fight to vindicate our right to speak for peace" (III: 310-11). On 20 November 1951, just after the prosecution finished presenting its case, Judge Matthew McGuire directed the acquittal of Du Bois and all other defendants. And as we might expect, an elated Du Bois was soon flooded with letters of congratulation.

Before closing, I would be especially remiss were I not to shed some additional light on Du Bois's philosophy, a subject no doubt of particular interest to *SAAP* members. He expounds on the matter in a January 1956 letter to Aptheker. Yearning for more after taking a senior-level philosophy course at Fisk, Du Bois reports that he journeyed north to Boston and joined the Harvard Philosophical Club, where he studied with the university's finest minds. I quote at length Du Bois's ringing endorsement of Peirce's notion of a community of inquirers converging upon truth:

For two years I studied under William James while he was developing Pragmatism; under [George] Santayana and his attractive mysticism and under [Josiah] Royce and his Hegelian idealism. I then found and adopted a philosophy which has served me since. . . . Several times in the past I have started to formulate it, but met such puzzled looks that it remains only partially set down in scraps of manuscript. I gave up the search for "Absolute" Truth; not from doubt of the existence of reality, but because I believe that our limited knowledge and clumsy methods of research made it impossible now completely to apprehend Truth. I nevertheless firmly believed that gradually the human mind and absolute and provable truth would approach each other . . . nearer and nearer and yet never in all eternity meet.

His letter concludes with a Jamesian humanistic meliorism:

For myself I set out in 1896 on the task of studying human action in exhaustive detail by taking up the Negro Problem. . . . I assumed that human beings could alter and re-direct the course of events so as to better human conditions. . . . I did not rule out the possibility of some God also influencing and directing human action and natural law. However I saw no evidence of such divine guidance. I did see evidence of the decisive action of human beings. (III: 395-96).

Obviously another look at Du Bois's work for its philosophical content is in order. Doing so should be rather easy now that the Library of America has published an extensive collection of Du Bois's writings, edited by Nathan I. Huggins. Helpful secondary works include Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (The Univ. of Wisconsin P, 1989), David Levering Lewis's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race* (Holt), and Shamoan Zamir's *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought* (The Univ. of Chicago P, 1995). A review of Zamir's book is in the *SAAP Newsletter* No. 77 (June 1997).

I would also be remiss if I failed to state that the correspondence repeatedly shows one of enormous warmth. No grumpy old Professor, Du Bois's grace and kindness shines through in his dealings not only with family members and associates but in his correspondence with literally hundreds of people throughout the world. Editor Herbert Aptheker, then, is to be commended for expanding our knowledge of this remarkable life. Indeed, what emerges when the volumes are read as a whole is a strikingly rich portrait of

the scholar Donald B. Gibson aptly terms “one of the greatest, most versatile intellectuals ever to emerge from the American cultural soil.”ⁱⁱ

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Notes

i Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. 606.

ii Gibson, “Introduction.” *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin, 1989. vii.