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Book Review (United States) - Hubert Harrison (1883-1927): A Giant Rescued from Oblivion

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Review of John Woodford, *Hubert Harrison: The Struggle for Equality, 1918-1927*. By Jeffrey B. Perry. Columbia University Press, 2021, 768 pages plus notes and index.

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*One hundred years hence, what change will be made,
In politics, morals, religion and trade...
Oppression and war will be heard of no more
Nor the blood of a slave leave his print on our shore.
Conventions will then be a useless expense,
For we'll all go free suffrage, a hundred years hence.
Instead of speech-making to satisfy wrong,
All will join the glad chorus to sing Freedom's song;
And if the Millennium is not a pretense
We'll all be good brothers, a hundred years hence.*

— from "One Hundred Years Hence," an early "protest song" with lyrics by the women's rights and abolitionist activist Frances Dana Barker Gage, and popularized by the Hutchinson Family Singers, circa 1850.

IT'S NOW ALMOST 100 years from the life of Hubert Harrison (1883-1927), one of the leading figures behind the emergence of the New Negro movement that propelled the advancement of Black Americans in all areas of life in the pre- and post-World War I era.

When I reviewed the first volume of Jeffrey B. Perry's monumental double-barreled biography of Harrison in 2011 (see "Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918," [1]) I said it was the best biography I'd ever read. But this massive second volume is even better.

And why shouldn't it be? Harrison had grown older and wiser, and the challenges he faced throughout most of the 1920s became increasingly more similar to those that we Black Americans and our compatriots face today.

Harrison's generation succeeded that of Frederick Douglass, whose main objective had been to rid the United States of slavery. The new battle for justice and equality required a multipronged attack on the continued racist practices preserved and refashioned by the Reconstruction era: Jim Crow segregation, lynching, denial of voting rights, inadequate educational and health facilities, limited access to jobs and lower pay levels for those Blacks who had jobs.

Born in St. Croix to impoverished parents when the Virgin Islands was still a Danish colony, Harrison benefited from the superiority of the colonial schools over their U.S. counterparts. He migrated to New York City's Harlem district in 1900 when he was 17 years old.

In Volume 1 of the biography, Perry, an independent scholar, covered the rise of the largely self-educated Harrison to prominence in what was called the "New Negro" movement: "Harrison played unique, signal roles in the largest class radical movement (socialism) and the largest race radical movement (the 'New Negro'/Garvey movement) of his era."

Harrison's writings, street corner oratory and extensive lectures were so wide-ranging in subject matter, so impressive in their artistry and logic, that someone described him in promotional material as having earned a doctorate in Denmark.

That led to his generally being referred to as "Dr." Harrison. He never claimed the title but took no great pains to set matters straight, much to the irritation of some intellectual rivals like scholars W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier.

As Volume 2 opens, Harrison, now 35 and a widely acclaimed writer, freelance educator, soapbox orator, editor and activist, was still living in a fifth-floor walk-up apartment with his wife, Irene Louise (Lin) Harrison and four daughters (a son was to come).

Harrison had been fired by the Post Office Department in 1911 and was never to gain a stable job or regular income for the rest of his life. Lin, a fellow West Indian who found herself increasingly in the role of the long-suffering, unloved wife, may well have out-earned her husband by taking odd jobs as a seamstress.

Nevertheless, Black and white radicals and activists of all sorts recognized Harrison as a comrade in arms in "a United States shaped by capitalism, imperialism and white supremacy," Perry writes.

"He had been a leader in the struggle against those forces, but he had found that the Left and labor movements in the United States put the 'white' race first, before class. In that context, he deemed it a priority to work at developing an enlightened race consciousness, racial solidarity and radical internationalism among 'Negro' people — especially the 'common people' in struggles for 'political equality,' against white supremacy, and for radical social change."

Garvey and Beyond

Harrison took on a co-editorship position on a short-lived publication, the New Negro, which was published by the Liberty League, then accepted the job of leading the Negro World in early 1920.

The Negro World was the mouthpiece of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Once reshaped by Harrison, the Negro World "was a real key to the phenomenal organizational growth of the UNIA in 1920."

Perry notes that the Negro World was a superbly edited newspaper with mass appeal. Harrison was

not only a “consummate race-conscious journalist,” but also, as an undercover agent from the Bureau of Investigation (it was not yet known as the FBI) reported to his higher-ups, a man “who knew every principle of Socialism.”

Before 1922 was out, however, Harrison quit working for the Garvey organization, which by then was embroiled in law suits and exposés from both external and internal sources.

Garvey was convicted of fraud. He barely managed to escape convictions for murders and assaults committed by his followers against men they considered turncoats for publicizing some of the unsavory qualities of the charismatic Jamaican immigrant.

Harrison described Garvey as a “paranoiac,” and elaborated further:

“Garvey is a worshiper of Garvey. On the ‘Yarmouth’* he had two life-sized oil-paintings of himself. ... He quarreled with every person he ever worked with unless they were willing boot-lickers and glorifiers of himself. His insane egotism and jealousy were boundless.”

So why had Harrison allied with Garvey in the first place? For the same reason a progressive Iranian couple my family met on a train from Chicago to Los Angeles in December 1979 ran out at every stop to see if their associates back home had succeeded in installing the Ayatollah Khomeini in place of the tyrannical Shah.

Khomeini appealed to the masses whose support was critical if the revolution were to triumph, the Iranians said. Once Khomeini had triumphed they could return home from exile and help establish a more democratic, modern and rational government.

Like my Iranian fellow travelers, Harrison knew that movements need masses of people if they are to succeed, and he felt Garvey developed “propaganda more shrewdly adopted to the cruder psychology of the less intelligent masses, the sensationalism, self-glorification and African liberation — although he knew next to nothing of Africa.”

Harrison thought he might as well try to use Garvey’s popularity because he saw no alternatives that suited him. Hundreds of thousands of Black Americans and more Blacks from Canada, the West Indies and beyond joined or contributed to the Garvey movement.

Even though Garvey was a reactionary, a hater of Jews, a willing collaborator with the Ku Klux Klan and a Red-baiter, Harrison felt most of his followers, numbering an estimated 750,000 worldwide, were not similarly tainted and could be redirected to loftier goals.

Furthermore, Harrison agreed with that part of the original program of the UNIA that was “based on the belief that Negroes should finance the foundations of their future and not go begging to the white race either for help, leadership or program.”

The short-lived Liberty League that Harrison had helped found had laid out a similar program, Harrison added, from which “Garvey appropriated every feature that was worthwhile in his movement.”

By 1924, Harrison had left the UNIA and even joined in efforts to convict Garvey of crimes and thereby end his influence. He launched the International Colored Unity League, declaring in the May issue of its publication, the Chronicle, Perry records, that “‘the Negro problem in America’ was ‘not insoluble,’ for ‘no human social problem ever was,’ and while it was primarily of the white man’s making,’ the ‘colored man must do most of the work because he was the one mainly concerned with it.’”

ICUL and “New Negro”

Although it was Harrison who started a publication named *The New Negro* in 1919, and turned it into one of the country’s best sources of reporting and commentary on national and international politics as well as on literary and other forms of culture, the credit for conceiving the rising generation of more militant Blacks as the “New Negro” has gone to Alain Locke.

It happened this way: In spring 1924, a White-run New York-based magazine, *Survey Graphic*, organized a planning meeting that would be led by the critic and scholar Alain Locke and culminate in a special “Harlem Issue” in March 1925. The project would serve as a “coming out party” for “the entire younger school of Negro writers.”

Perry pored through the notes for the project and found that Locke’s outline for the issue included a section “Black and White: Studies in Rough Contact and Reactions,” which was to include articles by four scholars: Melville J. Herskovitz, Walter White, Kelly Miller and Hubert Harrison.

The planning committee learned that Harrison would write a piece titled “The White Man’s War,” which, Perry discovered, had been described as an analysis of the “effect of [World War I] upon the Negro, and the analysis of the disillusionment of the treatment inconsistent with the principles of democracy and self-determination, reaction among the generation that took part in it toward the church, the state, and capitalism. The points of radical indictment and the forces of agitation and protest — the attitude of radical organizations toward the Negro and of the Negro to radical social programs.”

For reasons never disclosed, Locke agreed with the *Survey Graphic* editor’s suggestion that Harrison’s article should be eliminated for space reasons, even though it fit in the proposed space.

Furthermore, when Locke published what is now accepted as the seminal New Negro anthology in 1926, a book that expanded the *Survey Graphic* issue and is generally described now as having launched the Harlem Renaissance, he again omitted Harrison’s article even though it was available to him.

Harrison’s commentary on WWI had been rejected by Black and White self-styled radicals before. He published a version in his *New Negro* in October 1919 and in the *Negro World* in February 1920.

A version also appears in his book *When Africa Awakes* (1920), where he argued that the “underlying explanation which it offers of the root cause of the war has not yet received treatment (even among socialist radicals) and partly because recent events in China, India, Africa and the United States have proved the accuracy of the forecasts.”

Race and Imperialism

His thesis, which Perry quotes, was that:

“[T]he war in Europe is the result of the white governments of Europe to exploit for their own benefit the lands and labor of the darker races, and, as the war continues, it must decrease the white man’s stock of ability to do this successfully against the wishes of the inhabitants of those lands.”

His prediction that the conflict would also result in not only the end of colonial rule but also in the flowering of “industrial democracy to the twelve hundred million black and brown and yellow people of the world” has turned out, however, to be either overly optimistic or premature.

Although he had started out in his activist career aligned with Blacks and whites who were in the Socialist Party or in groups that would soon (in 1919) form the Communist Party USA, Harrison felt that the whites in those organizations were unreliable allies and that the Blacks who joined them could not act on "Race First" principles.

This hardening of his Black nationalist impulses was tactical and may have been temporary, we'll never know for sure, but he clearly had a dialectical, rather than dogmatic, sensibility. Yet by 1927, the year of his untimely death at 44, his disappointment with American radicals was leading him into some contradictory positions.

In the April 1927 issue of *Voice of the Negro*, the publication of his ICUL, Harrison wrote in "Rockefeller and the Reds" that the Red "comes blowing about the necessity for teaming up with our 'white brothers of the working class' against the 'boorjwahzee' or the hated capitalist in the great 'class war.'"

But "everyone above the level of a moron knows," he continued, "that we Negroes have never taken one single step away from the white workers: it is they on the contrary who turn their backs upon us, who have refused and do refuse to let us live with them, eat with them, work with them or even organize with them. ...

"[So] if our 'red' friend were sincere he would preach his great sermons on solidarity not to us but to them. The splendid doctrine that 'the lion shall lie down with the lamb' is not denied by the lamb; but the fellow to whom it should be preached is the lion — not the lamb."

Harrison, however, pursued his argument all the way into the lion's den, advocating a tactics of accommodationism, opportunism and racial chauvinism:

"[A]s between Rockefeller and the 'red' — personal or symbolic — we prefer Rockefeller, and on the simple materialistic, Marxian and common-sensible ground that in THE PAST we have got more, IN THE PRESENT, we are getting more, and IN THE FUTURE, we are likely to get more, from that side than from the other."

Contradictions

Although Harrison declared in his "Program and Principles of the International Colored Unity League" that "the New Negro has come forward, neither to whine, to wheedle, nor to make petitions or vain demands; but to take his future in his own hands and mold his own destiny by mobilizing his manhood and his money," the ICUL program included a call for a Black American homeland.

His language prefigured the rhetoric of later Black separatist organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Republic of New Africa:

"America is ours and we are hers. This is the founding principle of all our racial strivings. ... It is on that principle that we urge as a final solution of the graver aspects of the American race-problem the setting up of a state, or states, in the Union as a homeland for the American Negro, where we can work out the ultimate economic and racial salvation as a part of the American people."

Harrison failed to address the irony and contradiction between his endorsement of a separate Black state for the USA and his condemnation of similar "programs" in South Africa, where the white settler government had established the "reserves" for Blacks that later came to be known as Bantustans.

In his article “The Wider World: A Bird’s Eye View (Voice of the Negro, May 1927), Harrison denounced South Africa’s Union Native Council Bill, which removed, with the approval of chiefs and their hangers-on, Black South Africans from areas whites wanted, set up Blacks-only settlements and established “a plaything parliament FOR NEGROES, which, it is supposed will satisfy the aspirations of the educated natives and colored people.”

How, I wonder, could he have assumed that the formation of a “Black State” in the USA would yield significantly better results?

But let no one think Harrison was “anti-American,” and his defense of his “Americanization” may have played a role in the spite he received from certain quarters of the Black radical petty-bourgeoisie.

The Pittsburgh Courier, the nation’s top Black newspaper, challenged him to debate in print another West Indian immigrant and fellow journalist, Arnold Malliet, over the topic of why Malliet said U.S. race prejudice prevented him from being “Americanized” and why Harrison took the opposing position.

In his final installment in a series of arguments, on August 13, 1927, Malliet concluded that neither he nor any “colored foreigner” could become Americanized so long as “very damaging falsehoods” and “dangerous ideas which have degraded his race in the eyes of humanity” prevailed in the country.

Harrison responded on October 22:

“I have watched American race prejudice fluctuate in its incidence; seen lynchings decrease, and inter-racial committees increase even in the South, have observed the multiplication of social contacts between black and white. ... I am more in love with America than with any other place on earth. I have found here the full measure of manhood not in a nice, fat place prepared for me, but in the opportunity to battle for any place.

“... [W]e are participants in the greatest democratic experiment the world has ever seen. It is not the American of today that fascinates me but the American which is evolving out of it. The ‘cracker’ may yelp as much as he pleases, but his descendants and mine will make the future America; they will either live together in peace and prosperity or their conflicts will crack both democracy and America wide open in the presence of the enemies of both. Personally, I bet on democracy — and that’s why I prefer to be here. ... [L]ike the white people of England, four-fifths of whom were slaves (serfs) down to the 18th century, I and these darker millions must take our places in the rising ranks of color and carry on as we have been doing, striving for, and achieving by our struggles, an increasing measure of the world’s respect and consideration.”

Death and Legacy

Readers of this review should know that there is much more in this volume —especially in Harrison’s commentaries on literature, theater, sexual mores, poetry, international politics — than I can do justice to here. The book also brings on stage many fascinating and brilliant Black Americans and white allies who would otherwise still be consigned to oblivion.

See, for example, James W.H. Eason — who was assassinated by Garvey’s henchmen — Edgar Grey and Hodge Kirnon among many others Perry has rescued from the historical dustbin fashioned by our nation’s increasing reliance on an anti-democratic electronic archive governed by marketing

impulses, fads and political biases.

That it took an independent scholar inspired by progressive politics and humanistic principles, to honor Hubert Harrison, rather than a well-heeled tenured academic, is something worth reflecting about.

Hubert Harrison entered Bellevue Hospital's surgery unit with either chronic appendicitis, peritonitis or some other or additional ailment on December 13, after a week of torment at home. He never left the hospital, dying of a widespread infection on December 17. Fifteen days later, the U.S. government released Marcus Garvey from prison and deported him as an undesirable alien.

Harrison's widow Lin and their five children received many condolences, and many newspapers published extensive obituaries in Harrison's honor.

The worker, writer and activist Hodge Kirnon complained in a letter to the New York News on February 17, 1928, however, that publications run by W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph and the Urban League had neglected to note Harrison's death. DuBois's Crisis lamented the passing of the boxer "Tiger" Flowers, Kirnon observed, but failed "to record the services of a man who was a lecturer for the Board of Education and of whom [NAACP field director] William Pickens says 'can speak more easily, effectively and interestingly on a greater variety of subjects than any other man I have met, even in the great Universities.'"

Why the rejection, scorn and shunning by the Black superstars of the era? Edgar M. Grey, a friend who served as general secretary of Garvey's UNIA before leaving it and joining Harrison and others in supporting the effort to convict and oust Garvey, wrote an article for the December 31 New York News, titled "Why Great Negroes Die Young," to suggest, Perry says, "a deeper cause" of Harrison's untimely death:

Calling him "the mightiest brain of the race" and describing him as a man constantly "fighting for his right to recognition," Grey claimed that Harrison was "permitted by the Negroes to talk, talk all night, burning up his energies."

He added that in 15 years of street talking Harrison received nothing, and the honors he did receive "were given him by those who had nothing to give...."

The "big Negro newspapers and business houses, schools and other organizations who had positions allowed themselves to be so hateful that they would not hire him."

According to Grey, he "died for his convictions, but he died at 44, starved, underpaid, abused, hated by jealous men who feared the force of his mind and the immensity of his information."

Indeed, earlier in 1927, in deft and convincing arguments, Harrison had trashed the prevailing views of both the Harlem Renaissance and the "New Negro" that prominent Black and white culture mavens were promoting. In the March 12 Pittsburgh Courier, Harrison declared that

"[T]he matter of a Negro literary renaissance is like that of the snakes of Ireland — there isn't any. Those who think that there is are usually people who are blissfully ignorant of the stream of literary and artistic products which have flowed uninterruptedly from Negro writers from 1850 to the present."

He named DuBois as among the blissfully ignorant!

Caustic Critic

As for the “New Negro,” in the May 28, 1927, Pittsburgh Courier, he declared: “Cabaret School of Negro Writers Does Not Represent One-Tenth of the Race.”

Stating that until a decade earlier a “cabaret” was a French term equivalent to a “dive,” a place where “no respectable young woman” would be found “even with an escort,” Harrison noted that the most high-toned “advancement organizations” were holding benefits and other entertainments in such places.

Similarly, the writers now ballyhooed as New Negroes were being rewarded for presenting the lower depths of Black communities as representatives of the ethnic group as a whole, Harrison charged.

Equating capitalist modes of cultural appropriation, marketing and profiteering with the white race, a concept that I see as a damaging flaw in his analysis, Harrison nevertheless accurately delineated the emergence of New-Negro hype, a process now repeated, in an even fouler example of historical “rhyming,” in the financial success of the most debased forms of Rap/Hip-Hop.

Perry quotes Harrison’s observation that “when whites, seeking local (and other) color, first ‘discovered’ the Negro, they came to Harlem” with “certain ‘fixations’ about the Negro in their minds, the most basic of which was the characteristic American one that he existed to furnish entertainment to others.”

Then “whatever about him was quaint, queer, odd, bizarre and different was seized upon as essential . . . the ‘real’ Negro, the thing for which white editors, publishers and readers had been waiting for all these years.”

Not only whites, however, were enjoying the New Negro boom, so Harrison was stomping on a lot of toes with such criticisms. But he was even-handed in his caustic commentary.

In his Americanization article he noted that “baser elements” in the country were handicapped by “ignorance, stupidity and cowardice,” while “our own inferiority complex and the snobbishness of some of our own people” hurt the Black cause. But, he summed up, “these handicaps also exist in Jamaica and elsewhere” and he doubted “that remaining a West Indian would remove them anywhere from my path.”

The length and detail that compose Perry’s masterly biography are fully warranted, given the breadth and complexity of the subject matter embraced by Harrison’s great mind. Following the book slowly and patiently, looking up and reading about the multitude of new or unfamiliar events and persons, will give any interested reader insight into how bountifully the obscured past can, upon revelation, provide lessons for the present and future.

History-as-revelation was what inspired Jeffrey Perry to produce this biography. In the last paragraph of this colossal project, he writes that his hope at the outset was that Hubert Harrison’s “extraordinary life of activism and his brilliant writing and thinking will increasingly be made available — and be of use — to current and future generations.”

* The Yarmouth was one of four run-down ships for which Garvey sold bonds to followers in a scam that promised them relocation to a fantasied Garvey-ruled nation state in Africa.

John Woodford

P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 219, July/August 2022:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc219/a-giant-rescued-from-oblivion/>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/biography-of-hubert-harrison-one-of-america-s-greatest-minds/>