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William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is one of the most intriguing personalities that has appeared on the American scene. He was the first Negro scholar to receive the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Harvard University. This was conferred in the field of history in 1895.¹ His unusual ability had been recognized throughout his academic career. During his teaching days at Atlanta University, he is said to have been "the deepest scholar and most gifted writer" in Atlanta.² Of those persons born after the period of slavery, none had a more varied career than he. His activities have provided topics for much discussion and investigation. He not only wrote history but contributed greatly toward making it. This paper summarizes his two major historical works, presents the views of critics as to their merit and evaluates Du Bois as historian.

The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870 (1896) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935) are his major works in history³ but several of his other publications have historical significance; namely, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), his autobiography, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), and *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939). Besides being a study in classic English, *The Souls of*

Black Folk is the volume that made him famous. The chapter on the Freedmen's Bureau and the one challenging the leadership of Booker T. Washington are of special historical significance. In fact, *The Souls of Black Folk* has been called "one of the few genuinely great books written in America in the first quarter of this century."⁴ In his only biography, *John Brown*, Du Bois emphasized the materials which others had collected, for the purpose of treating it "from a different point of view, that of the little known but vastly important inner development of the Negro American," he stated.

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

The Suppression of the African Slave Trade was begun as a master's thesis during Du Bois' residence as Roger's Memorial Fellow at Harvard. At the December, 1891, annual meeting of the *American Historical Association* held in Washington, D. C., he read a preliminary paper on "The Enforcement of the Slave Trade Law," which appeared in the annual report of the association for that year.⁵ Using German standards of scholarship, Du Bois completed the work as his doctoral dissertation, later rewriting it to make it readable literature.⁶ This dissertation was published as the first volume in the *Harvard Historical Studies*.⁷

¹Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought. The Nadir 1877-1901*. New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1944. p. 331.

²Edwin R. Embree, *13 Against the Odds*, New York: The Viking Press, 1944. pp. 153-65.

³Michael Kraus, *The Writing of American History*, Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944. pp. 310-11.

⁴New York *Herald Tribune*, Je 13. 1935.

⁵W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn, An Essay Toward a Race Concept*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940. p. 49.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 269.

The first six pages relate to the slave trade as carried on by the British. Three chapters describe the attitudes of the North American colonies toward this traffic before the War of Independence in terms of their economy. The rest of the volume shows that during the early part of the National period the Southern States apologized for slavery, the Middle States denounced it and the Eastern States tolerated it; yet all three sections considered it a temporary institution, the cornerstone of which was the slave trade. It reveals that in the face of unanswerable proof, slave trade laws were systematically violated and the Federal Government remained apathetic. Even when not actually negligent, official judgment "was prone to" construe the law in favor of the slave traders and the courts could not be depended upon to punish clear cases of violation. Du Bois shows that it was not until Lincoln's administration that "uncompromising suppression" took place.

He wrote that the Constitutional Convention compromises on slavery and the slave trade were a great political mistake; that it was the plain duty of the Convention in founding a new nation "to compromise with a threatening social evil only in case its settlement would thereby be postponed to a more favorable time . . . There never was a time in the history of America when the system had a slighter economic, political and moral justification than in 1787," he says, "and yet with this real, existent, growing evil before their eyes, a bargain largely of dollars and cents was allowed to open the highway that led straight to the Civil War."

Du Bois held that the revolutionists of 1776 would have been surprised and horrified by the thoughts of there being a Civil War over what appeared to be a dying institution, but from which "arose

the walled and castled Slave Power." From this, he concluded, "it behooves nations as well as men to do things at the very moment when they ought to be done."

Du Bois was the scientific historian when he wrote *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*. Irrelevant matter was rigidly excluded from this work. He approached his subject with objectivity, although subjectivity was not absent. A critic in *The Independent* of November 17, 1904, called attention to this when he stated that while "he uses an impersonal and judicial attitude of the traditional author . . . one who is born with a cause is predestined to a certain narrowness of view and at the same time to some clearness of vision within his limits with which the world often finds it well to reckon. . . ." This publication also said the work loses "something of that breadth of view which the more cosmopolitan races have, and with this goes an intensity of feeling and conviction which both wins and repels sympathy, and now enlightens now puzzles."

The research was exhaustive and the results well synthesized. Du Bois was even meticulous. For example, on page 105, footnote 2, when referring to a bill introduced on December 12, 1805, by Senator R. Bradley of Vermont "to prohibit the introduction of slaves after 1808," Du Bois writes: "On account of the meager records it is difficult to follow the course of this bill. I have pieced together information from various sources and trust that this account is approximately correct." And he cautions: "The collection of laws available for this research was . . . nearly complete; on the other hand, facts and statistics bearing on the economic side of the study have been difficult to find, and my conclusions are

consequently liable to modification from this source."⁸

At the time *The Suppression* was written, reviewers felt it was not only a critical account but it was a definitive account of the subject and that the author "had produced a book by which every judgment on the subject of which it treats must be tested, at least for many years to come." It was also predicted it would "long remain the authoritative work on the subject,"⁹ which it has.

Bernard C. Steiner of Johns Hopkins University felt Du Bois was too severe in his condemnation of the founders of the Constitution for their slave-trade compromise. He stated the advantages of union were so great and the margin by which it was finally secured so narrow, it is easily understood how the Federalists "made all things bend to the one object." He also thought Du Bois' indictment against the United States which did not tax the slave trade, when it was in its power to do so, and which scarcely attempted to enforce the prohibitory Act of 1807, is just.¹⁰

Another critic noted Dr. Du Bois' "moralistic attitude" and spoke of it as "his hortatory application," which seemed to "disclose a lack of appreciation of the subject in its historical proportions." He said Du Bois had shown good judgment in the choice of his subject and had been "most industrious in gathering and arranging his material" but "the substance of his monograph may be reached more

succinctly in Lalor's Encyclopaedia of Political Science."¹¹

BLACK RECONSTRUCTION

Long before its publication, Du Bois had been working on his Reconstruction study. In 1910, as he had previously done with phases of his first book, he presented a paper before the American Historical Association on "Black Reconstruction and Its Benefits" which "greatly exercised Ulrich B. Phillips, protagonist of the slave South," but it brought praise from Dunning of Columbia, Hart of Harvard and others. He was convinced at that time and has been more certain since, he wrote, "that the reason for certain adjectives applied to Reconstruction is purely racial. Reconstruction was 'tragic,' 'terrible,' a 'great mistake,' and a 'humiliation' not because of what actually happened [but] because here an attempt was initiated to make American democracy and the tenets of the Declaration of Independence apply not only to white men but to black men."

In *Black Reconstruction*, he set out to revise the concept of the whole Reconstruction period and in doing this centered his attention on the Negro. The book has several themes and sub-themes. Summarized, they are as follows:

First, Reconstruction was an attempt to restore to America the democracy which slavery had threatened to destroy.

Second, the slaves won the war by a general strike, which transferred their labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader. Further, that the North could not have won the war had the Negro remained in slavery and that "arms in his hands and the prospect of arms in a million more . . . brought peace and emancipation."

⁸See Preface to W. E. B. DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870*. New York: London, Longman's Green & Co., 1896.

⁹*Nation*, 63:468 D 31, 1896.

¹⁰*Annals, American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 9:432-4 My 1897.

¹¹*Atlantic Monthly*, 79:No. 479, 560-62 Ap 1897.

Third, the Freedmen's Bureau was "the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted," being a dictatorship intended to curb landowners and capitalists "in the interest of a black and white labor class."

Fourth, the greatest opportunity for a real labor movement which the nation had ever seen or is likely to see was found in the South after the war; but the labor movement did not realize it.

Fifth, Negro legislators "were ordinary men who according to their training and experience and economic condition did extraordinarily well" and do not deserve the abuse that they usually have been given, because they were no more responsible for waste and corruption in the South than the laboring class was to blame for greater waste and dishonesty in the North; and they were not proved incapable of self-government. He refutes the misrepresentations of Reconstruction Governments, and concludes that what happened was a "perfectly normal development."

Sixth, Negro suffrage failed, in his opinion, because it was overthrown by force. Never having been thoroughly converted to the idea of equality, the North accepted the doctrine of the survival of the fittest as proof that what it had attempted in the South was impossible.

In the last chapter, entitled "The propaganda of History," historians of the Reconstruction Period receive the full blast of Du Bois' revision. He called inexcusable the interpretation of United States history between 1866 and 1876 as something about which the nation ought to be ashamed; or that it retarded the American Negro more than anything that had happened to him, while at the same

time it wounded again a part of the nation already "hurt to death."

No historian or institution was too sacred for his criticism. He accused James Ford Rhodes, Columbia and Johns Hopkins Universities, John W. Burgess, William A. Dunning, their works and their students with producing volumes which for the most part were one-sided and partisan. He particularly condemned Hamilton's *Southern Legislation in Respect of Freedmen* for characterizing the Black Codes "not only . . . on the whole reasonable, temperate and kindly, but in the main necessary." Garner's *Reconstruction in Mississippi* and Simkins and Woody's *Reconstruction in South Carolina* and some others while influenced by the same general attitude have more "scientific poise" and cultural background, he said.

He named others who did not try to falsify the picture—Frances Butler Leigh, Susan Smedes, McPherson, Oberholtzer, Nicolay and Hay, as well as foreign travelers such as Sir George Campbell, Georges Clemenceau and Robert Somers. Some other personal reminiscences were also exempt. But Beale in his *Critical Year*, he said, did not even take the Negro into account. The worst sin of all, according to Du Bois, was the fact that the "chief witness" in Reconstruction, the emancipated slave, was "banned from court," his written Reconstruction record largely destroyed and nearly always neglected—only three or four states having preserved debates in Reconstruction Conventions. The result was that unfair caricatures of the Negro have been carefully preserved while serious speeches, successful administration and upright character have been almost universally ignored and forgotten.

In addition, Dr. Du Bois castigated the

writers of history textbooks for not setting forth the real facts, saying such a state of affairs would permit American children "to complete their education without any idea of the part which the black race has played in America; of the tremendous moral problem of abolition; of the cause and meaning of the Civil War and the relation which Reconstruction had to democratic government and the labor movement today." He held this omission was more than "difference of emphasis." It was the way in which American historians as scientists treated the period. From this accusation, neither the Beards nor the Encyclopedia Britannica were exempt.

Some critics thought *Black Reconstruction* one of the most controversial books that had come from the press in a long time. While none denied the validity of its hypothesis, there was pretty general agreement that many of the author's interpretations were questionable. Sterling D. Spero said that if the writer had been content to present the Negro as "an average and ordinary human being who under a given environment develops like other human beings," and had stopped there, the book would have been an important contribution, but his "old race consciousness and new Marxism" would not permit him to remain content with his major thesis. Spero objected to Du Bois' turning the Negro plantation slaves into a "revolutionary working class," to his making "the Reconstruction legislatures dictatorships of the proletariat," to his assigning the Negro a "conscious and deliberate role in his own emancipation," and to his assuming that the addition of Negroes to Northern armies was "a decisive factor in winning the war." Nevertheless, he called the work a "literary event."¹²

Charles S. Johnson called it "a brilliant

¹²*Nation*, Jl 24, 1935.

brief" against "a vast conspiracy of silence," and agreed that "the one opportunity for a dictatorship of labor in the South collapsed before organized triumphant capital." The great and positive value he saw in this "impassioned outburst of a sensitive scholar's long brooding over the miswritten and unwritten history of a people" was that it would "demand a new accounting."¹³

Stating that the publication was one which defied classification, and one which possessed an "unyielding passion for a 'wider beauty' and a greater justice than history affords," Howard W. Odum thought that Du Bois' thesis centered primarily on a sociological problem, rather than on an historical epoch. To him, the volume was a catalogue of the phenomenon of "race conflict and exploitation of minority peoples, with its long train of resulting processes and cumulative conditioning . . . visible the world over." So grave, he felt, was the situation that society "must reconstruct the motives and techniques of race relations."

The second significance of the book to Odum was its revelation that race is not an entity in itself—"a purely physical product" but "the result of long developed regional folk culture." And finally, he said, it is false to assume that Negroes are an inferior race and must continue to develop in certain ways because under regional and cultural conditions they have in the past developed in these ways. But while Du Bois did not tell all of the injustices, it was asking too much to expect a single generation to change the powerful folkways of the centuries.

Concerning motives assigned by Du Bois to planters, poor whites and slaves, Odum thought "the planters were scarcely wise enough to measure up to his

¹³*Survey Graphic*, 25:48 Ja 1936.

assumption of their motives, the poorer white folk were not so articulate in their ideals of education as he makes them" and "the slaves fled for refuge toward the Northern armies, but was it true that they wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantation?"¹⁴ He thought not.

In addition to some of the criticisms already mentioned, Avery O. Craven said *Black Reconstruction* was not even history but simply bitterness against the injustices of slavery and racial prejudice. He charged Du Bois with ignoring source materials "so essential to any rewriting of history," and with using "abolition propaganda and the biased statements of partisan politicians." Then he called Du Bois to account for his "temper," which, according to Craven, was as bad as his sources.

Despite his devastating criticism, this historian did see some value in Du Bois' work, particularly in the sketches of Reconstruction in the separate states, which give "a needed emphasis" to the Negroes' part there; and he agreed that too much emphasis had been placed on the evils and not enough on the good done "by Negro-carpetbag-scalawag governments." He admitted too that Du Bois made "a real contribution when he placed the struggle over Reconstruction in the larger drive for democracy and larger social-economic justice." But his final thrust was that Du Bois distorted facts, although he did not enlarge on this.¹⁵

Craven was incorrect in stating that Du Bois did not use source materials. Among such materials listed in his work are the *Charleston Daily Courier*; the *Congressional Globe*; *Testimony Before Reconstruction Committee Feb. 21, 1866*,

Part II; *New Orleans Tribune*; *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Held in Syracuse, New York, October 4-7, 1864*; *Proceedings of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, 1866, Part II*; *Ku Klux Klan Report. South Carolina, Parts I and II*; *42 Congress, 2nd Session, House Report II, No. 22, Part I*, and others.

The criticism of this work by Abram L. Harris was just as severe as Craven's, if not more so. Besides reviewing defects already indicated, Harris brought new ones to bear. He declared that Du Bois' "discovery of Marxism as a critical instrument [was] too recent and sudden for it to discipline his mental processes or basically to change his social philosophy," fundamentally that of a racialist, and which comes very near being "racial chauvinism." And if the Negro's political power and organization represented an experiment in Marxism, the socialistic character of the experiment was wholly unappreciated by Marx.

The "dictatorship of black labor" rested upon the military power of the government, and was therefore compelled to serve the interests of Northern capital, which controlled the government," Harris said. "Had Negro control of the Southern states during the Reconstruction been of a different character, it would never have been supported by Stevens and Sumner . . . members of the capitalist class. There was no fundamental conflict between them and the less radical representatives of Northern finance and industry, as Dr. Du Bois thinks. The Civil War completed our bourgeois revolution and, like all such revolutions, produced its . . . left and its rights. Sumner and Stevens were simply . . . the radical exponents of the liberal democratic traditions that had triumphed with the economic success of

¹⁴*Yale Review* n.s., 25:214 Autumn 1935.

¹⁵*American Journal of Sociology*, 41:535 Ja 1935.

the revolution. They knew that equal citizenship was meaningless without property, the basis of the democratic rights of man. Thus, in addition to their advocacy of Negro political equality and suffrage rights they sought to make Negroes small land owners. But neither Sumner nor Stevens would sanction confiscation of land in order to assure the Negro his 'forty acres and a mule.'

"Moreover, the fact that the dominant ideal of Negro life was that of the American Common Man makes Dr. Du Bois' interpretation all the more fantastic. This ideal which Abraham Lincoln expressed as the right of every man to 'look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterwards, and finally hire men to work for him,' was simply re-echoed in Negro life by such leaders as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney. Belief in their ability to realize this essential middle-class ambition prevented any 'Marxian experiment' among the Negroes or, for that matter, among the white workingmen of that day."

Harris concluded that "the persistence of the Negro's belief in the possibility of economic and social advancement by means of business enterprise and the accumulation of property by individual members of the race, not to mention his abiding faith in the good will of the wealthy white man has until this day confined his radicalism mainly to militant civil liberalism."¹⁸

According to Howard K. Beale, Du Bois' use of the revolutionary thesis as applied to the Civil War was valid, as many had accepted it since its pronouncement by Beard. But Du Bois failed in its application "because he did not comprehend the importance in Southern life

¹⁸*New Republic*, 83:367 Ag 7 1935.

of the yeoman farmer, who was neither slave-owning nor 'poor white.'" Beale declared that with proper reservations and qualifications, "it is still true for many parts of the South that control by large property holders of political, economic and social life, based on slave labor, was displaced by a more democratic way of life based on free labor, and that this change not only emancipated Negro slaves but gave poor white men a chance to seek more political power. It is in terms of this two-fold revolutionary hypothesis that the period needs to be re-examined."¹⁹

THE HISTORIAN

Du Bois is under no delusion concerning his bias as historian. He is openly and belligerently pro-Negro. He admits that his "Negro descent and narrow group culture" have predisposed him to interpret his facts too favorably for his race. He realizes, he states, "that the truth of history lies not in the mouths of partisans but rather in the calm science that sits between. Her cause I seek to serve, and whenever I fail, I am at least paying Truth the respect of earnest effort."¹⁸

One may doubt that Du Bois has ever been objective since writing *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*. His partisanship was one of the reasons for his becoming a propagandist. He was selected for the post as Director of Research and Publicity of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People because of "his independence of judgment, his fearlessness in expressing his convictions, and his acute and wide-reaching intelligence."¹⁹ Nevertheless, no one can

¹⁸*American Historical Review*, 45:813-14 JI 1940.

¹⁹See Preface to W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Folk Then and Now. An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1939.

²⁰DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 314.

read his works without profound respect for his scholarship, nor can one deny the sensitiveness of his feeling, the "passionate earnestness of his conviction" and the "uncompromising sharpness of his thought and expression." Without doubt, he tipped the scale in favor of the Negro in *Black Reconstruction*. It is equally true that only with such over-emphasis could he call attention to the over-balance in the other direction of those who had previously set out to rewrite Reconstruction from the Southern point of view.

This scholar restored a balance that was lacking in the writings of the Reconstruction period,²⁰ as his was the first and only version of the period written and interpreted from the point of view of "the efforts and experiences of the Negro" and in which he put the struggles of this group in a world setting. In turning revisionist, he made an original contribution to American historiography and "boldly established" his own new version of it. Beale declared he is one "to whom we must turn for re-interpretation" because "his race and social philosophy give his work, *Black Reconstruction*, freshness, [and] in describing the Negro's role Du Bois has presented a mass of material formerly ignored, that every future historian must reckon with."²¹

As historian, Du Bois is a crusader. In *Black Reconstruction*, his language "shows the devotion of the zealot for a cause,"²² and he gives no quarter to those at whom he strikes. Also as a crusader, he stands in judgment upon those whom he exposes. This is evident in the conclusions of both *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* and in *Black Reconstruction*. His

mastery of the English language and his "uncommon" ability as a writer are skillfully used in this connection. His prose has been called impassioned with an "intense, fragile beauty," which "takes on almost poetic form."²³ One writer stated he is so brilliant "that at times the wizardry of his words almost blinds one. Because he is a passionate and bitter pleader . . . he does not always qualify as an impartial interpreter of facts, but as a scintillating lawyer for the defense, he is magnificent."²⁴

The development of Du Bois' style is most apparent when one compares that of his *Suppression* with *Black Reconstruction*. In the first book, it is simple and direct. In the second, it is complex and florid. In the last chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, he repeats several times the idea that Negroes have been mis-represented by writers of history. Had he expressed this thought once with some elaboration, the whole chapter would have been far more effective.

Du Bois at times disregarded some of the tenets required of good scholars. In the matter of quoting sources, he was not always careful. On page seventy-seven of *Black Reconstruction*, for example, he quotes from Ficklin, who used the words "d— fool," with the first word omitted. Du Bois writes out both words. On page fourteen, in quoting from Woodson, he changes "crowned headed tyrants" to "crown headed tyrants" and makes the capital "D" in "Democrat" small. In some of his other works, there are more serious errors of quotation.

Despite this, Du Bois, has been for

²⁰New York *Herald Tribune*, Je 13, 1935.

²¹Howard K. Beale, "On Rewriting History," *American Historical Review*, Jl 1940, p. 809.

²²*American Journal of Sociology*, 41:535 Ja 1936.

²³See Ralph W. Bullock, *In Spite of Handicaps*, New York: Association Press, 1927, p. 140; *Current History*, 42:4 Ag 1935; Edwin R. Embree, *Brown America*, New York: The Viking Press, 1943, p. 195.

²⁴*The Catholic World*, 142:245 N 1935.

more than sixty years militant theorist of the Negro's struggle for equal rights. His main historical works substantiate his position. At no time during his long career has his sincerity been questioned; and although those whom he sought to lead have not always agreed with all of his theories or with all of his methods, he has retained their respect. He states that his life has had its significance and its only significance because it has been a part of a problem.²⁵ Negro intellectuals owe more to him in terms of literary values and scholarly achievements than to any other person. "He created what never existed before, a Negro intelligentsia". The ideas he promoted and the con-

²⁵DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. vii.

troversies into which he projected himself have had perceptible effect on the relations between whites and Negroes in the United States. He stands as a notable example of achievement not only for Negroes but for all Americans.

One can only speculate on what great works may have come from this historian's pen had he seen fit to devote full time and effort to scientific history for which by preparation and temperament he is so eminently equipped. As editor, sociologist, teacher, lecturer, historian, publicist, one can well understand that he spread himself much too thin for greatness as a writer of history, although his contributions in the field are by no means negligible.