

Books

# Why the Ideas of Pioneering African-American Radical Hubert Harrison Matter More Than Ever

Harrison's 'When Africa Awakes' has been reissued in an expanded edition.

By [Jeffrey B. Perry](#) / [AlterNet](#) December 22, 2015

*It was made clear that this "New Negro Movement" represented a breaking away of the Negro masses from the grip of old-time leaders....*

--HUBERT H. HARRISON, "Launching the Liberty League," *The Voice*, July 4, 1917

*The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line. But what is the Color Line? It is the practice of the theory that the colored and "weaker" races of the earth shall not be free to follow "their own way of life and allegiance," but shall live, work and be governed after such fashion as the dominant white race may decide. Consider for a moment the full meaning of this fact. Of the seventeen hundred million people that dwell on our earth today more than twelve hundred million are colored – black and brown and yellow. The so-called white race is, of course, the superior race. That is to say, it is on top by virtue of its control of the physical force of the world – ships, guns, soldiers, money and other resources. By virtue of this control England rules and robs India, Egypt, Africa and the West Indies; by virtue of this control we of the United States can tell Haytians, Hawaiians, Filipinos, and Virgin Islanders how much they shall get for their labor and what shall be done in their lands; by virtue of this control Belgium can still say to the Congolese whether they shall have their hands hacked off or their eyes gouged out – and all without any reference to what Africans, Asiatics or other inferior members of the world's majority may want.*

*It is thus clear that, as long as the Color Line exists, all the perfumed protestations of Democracy on the part of the white race must be simply downright lying. The cant of "Democracy" is intended as dust in the eyes of white voters, incense on the altar of their own self-love. It furnishes bait for the clever statesmen who hold the destinies of their people in their hands when they go fishing for suckers in the waters of public discussion. But it becomes more and more apparent that Hindus, Egyptians, Africans, Chinese and Haytians have taken the measure of this cant and hypocrisy. And, whatever the white world may think, it will have these peoples to deal with....*

--HUBERT H. HARRISON, "Our Larger Duty," *The New Negro*, August 1919 Diasporic Africa Press has just published a new, expanded edition of Hubert H. Harrison's *When Africa Awakes: The "Inside Story" of the Stirrings and Strivings of the New Negro in the Western World*. This new edition includes the COMPLETE TEXT of Harrison's original 1920 volume including his

“Introductory” and over fifty of his articles from publications that he edited in the 1917-1920 period.

Those publications include *The Voice* – “A Newspaper for the New Negro” (1917-1919), the first newspaper of the “New Negro Movement”; *The New Negro: A Monthly Magazine of a Different Sort* (1919), described as “A Magazine for the New Negro” (and “intended as an organ of the international consciousness of the darker races -- especially of the Negro race”); and the “Negro World” (1920), the globe-sweeping newspaper of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (which was a major component of the “New Negro Movement”).

This new edition, expanded from the original 146 pages to 274 pages, also offers a new introduction, a biographical sketch, a “Note on Usage,” a lengthy supplementary notes section, and an index that make it ideal for classroom use. The fact that Diasporic Africa Press has chosen to publish very reasonably priced paperback and Kindle editions (ISBN 978-1937306274, ASIN B0164QH0EW) of Harrison’s work makes possible outreach to a much wider domestic and international audience.

The book is divided into nine chapters on such topics as the beginnings of the “New Negro Movement,” “Democracy and Race Friction,” “The Negro and the War,” “The New Politics,” “The Problems of Leadership,” “The New Race-Consciousness,” international consciousness, education, and book reviews and it concludes with Harrison’s December 1915 poem “The Black Man’s Burden (A Reply to Rudyard Kipling).”

Articles treat such subjects as the Liberty League, the East St. Louis “pogrom,” labor unions, lynching, “The White War and the Colored World,” The Peace Congress, Africa, the Caribbean, the “Colored World,” The Grand Old Party, “white friends,” radicalism, the Socialist Party, “Negro women,” racial solidarity, and “A New International.” Among the individuals discussed are NAACP leaders Joel E. Spingarn and Mary White Ovington, W.E.B. Du Bois, J. A. Rogers, T. Lothrop Stoddard, and Woodrow Wilson, “whose protestations of democracy,” wrote Harrison, “were lying protestations, consciously, and deliberately designed to deceive.” The book reviews are especially noteworthy and they come from the Harrison-inaugurated book review section of the *Negro World*, which he later described as “the first . . . regular book-review section known to Negro newspaperdom.

Harrison’s role in the history of “The New Negro Movement” has unfortunately often been ignored or presented in a way that removes from view his seminal influence. These articles make clear his leading theoretical and organization role in that history. In his August 1920 “Introductory” to this work Harrison explains that for some time he had planned to write a book “on the New Negro,” which would “set forth the aims and ideals” of the new movement among American Negroes, “which has grown out of the international crusade ‘for democracy -- for the right to have A VOICE in their own government.’” *When Africa Awakes: The “Inside Story” of the Stirrings and Strivings of the New Negro in the Western World* is that ubert Harrison’s book. As suggested by its subtitle, it offers first-hand testimony to social, political, literary, educational, and internationalist aspects of this World War I-era “New Negro” movement and to Harrison’s role in its development. Harrison’s pre-eminence

Harrison's "Introductory" was written at a time when much national attention was being paid to "The Rising Tide of Color" and when his growing differences with Marcus Garvey would soon lead him to stop serving as principal editor of the *Negro World*. It provides important insights for understanding the militant "New Negro Movement" that grew in the 1917-18 period of U.S. involvement in World War I and the ensuing post-war years of 1919-20. It opens with an internationalist perspective describing how, during the war, "the idea of democracy was widely advertised . . . as a convenient camouflage behind which competing imperialists masked their sordid aims." Harrison then discusses how "those who so loudly proclaimed and formulated the new democratic demands never had the slightest intention of extending the limits or the applications of 'democracy'; how "subject populations" put forth their own demands for democracy and this led to "great unrest"; how "black, brown and yellow peoples" were "insisting that democracy shall be made safe for them"; and how the "race-consciousness" of the "Negro people" in the United States quickened as they put forth new "domestic and international" demands in politics, education, culture, commerce and industry "on themselves, on their leaders and on the white people in whose midst they live."

### **Brief Background**

St. Croix, Virgin Islands-born, Harlem-based, Hubert Harrison (1883-1927) was a brilliant, class- and race-conscious, writer, educator, orator, editor, book reviewer, political activist, and radical internationalist. Historian J. A. Rogers in *World's Great Men of Color* described him as an "Intellectual Giant" who was "perhaps the foremost Aframerican intellect of his time." Labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph described him as "the father of Harlem radicalism."

Harrison played leading roles in the largest class radical movement (socialism) and the largest race radical movement (the "New Negro"/Garvey movement) of his era. He was a major influence on the class radical Randolph, on the race radical Garvey, and on other militant "New Negroes" in the period around World War I and he is a key link in two great trends of the Civil Rights/Black Liberation struggle – the labor and civil rights trend associated with Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr. and the race and nationalist trend associated with Garvey and Malcolm X.

From 1911 to 1914 Harrison served as the leading Black theoretician, speaker, and activist in the Socialist Party of America. When he left the Party he offered what is arguably the most profound, but least heeded, criticism in the history of the United States left -- that Socialist Party leaders, like organized labor leaders, put the "white race" first, before class, that they put the ["white'] "Race First and class after."

Beginning in 1916 he served as the intellectual guiding light of the militant "New Negro Movement" -- a race conscious, internationalist, mass based, autonomous, militantly assertive movement for "political equality, social justice, civic opportunity, and economic power." He then founded the first organization of that movement, the Liberty League, in 1917. This Harrison-led "New Negro Movement" involved many outstanding activists, viewed itself as consciously breaking from the "old time leaders," fertilized the soil for and laid the basis for the growth of the Garvey movement, and was a precursor to later developments including the Black Power movement, anti-war and anti-imperialist movements, and (with its calls for enforcement of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments and for federal anti-lynching legislation) the Civil Rights movement. With Harrison's literary influence (including important book review and "Poetry for

the People” sections in the publications that he edited), the “New Negro Movement” also contributed significantly to the climate leading up to Alain LeRoy Locke’s 1925 publication *The New Negro*.

Hubert Harrison died unexpectedly on December 17, 1927, at Bellevue Hospital in New York from an appendicitis-related condition. At his massive Harlem funeral two pallbearers and important Afro-Caribbean bibliophiles familiar with his extraordinary contributions as a radical activist offered insightful perspective on his intellectual contributions. Richard B. Moore, a noted Harlem activist, independent historian, and bookstore proprietor whose collection of books and manuscripts is at the University of the West Indies in Cave Hill, Barbados, described Harrison as the “Black Socrates” and emphasized the importance of his pioneering intellectual work. Puerto Rico-born Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, whose extraordinary collection of books and materials pertaining to people of African descent would serve as the basis for Harlem’s internationally famous Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, presciently eulogized that Hubert Harrison “was ahead of his time.”

Seventy years later historian John Henrik Clarke emphasized that:

New interest in the life and work of Hubert Harrison is appropriate. In his lifetime, he was an advanced thinker and a prophet. Carefully read today, *When Africa Awakes* shows that Hubert Harrison is even ahead of our time.... [in] *When Africa Awakes*, the strong and clear voice of Hubert Harrison is speaking to us again.... Let us try to complete the theoretical work he started.

That need for new interest in the life and work of Harrison is even more pronounced today. The gap between rich and poor has reached record proportions, while white supremacy, war and militarism continue to shape the domestic and foreign policies of the United States. At the same time, growing numbers of people seek meaningful insights and analyses to make sense of our contemporary reality and pursue fundamental social change. The insights and analyses offered by Harrison can make a crucial contribution towards these aims.

*In When Africa Awakes: The “Inside Story” of the Stirrings and Strivings of the New Negro in the Western World* Hubert Harrison is “speaking to us again.” He is offering insights through his words and through the struggles that he and others waged. Hubert Harrison has much to offer people whose “stirrings and strivings” -- like those of the “New Negroes” of his day -- insist on challenging injustice and seeking a better world.

Jeffrey B. Perry preserved and inventoried the Hubert H. Harrison Papers (now at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library). He is the editor of *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001) and the author of *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (Columbia University Press, 2008). He is currently working on Volume II of the Hubert Harrison biography and preparing a new edition of Harrison’s *When Africa Awakes* for Diasporic Africa Press.