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W. E. B. Du Bois

A Personal Memoir

THE NUMBER OF PERSONS who can speak with authority about personal recollections of W. E. B. Du Bois is becoming noticeably smaller by the year. I am fortunate to be among that small number, and I am pleased to share my recollections of him as a person and of our relationship. These days, when I remark casually that I knew Dr. Du Bois, young people, born since his death in 1963, look at me as though I am enjoying some sort of immortality; and I hasten to reassure them that I am not all that old, though most assuredly old enough. Then I tell them that it is easy to remember Dr. Du Bois because he was so memorable.

I was eleven years old when I first saw W. E. B. Du Bois. It was in February, 1926, and he had come to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to speak before the Oklahoma Negro State Teachers Association. My mother, brother, two sisters, and I had moved to Tulsa just two months earlier to join my father who had set up a law office there several months before the riot in 1921. Indeed, it was the race riot that had delayed the family move. The Du Bois visit was one more exciting event in weeks that were literally filled with excitement. The move to Tulsa from the tiny village of Rentiesville, population 193, was thrilling enough. But there were also the indoor plumbing, electric light, a bright and shining school—named Booker T. Washington of course—the motion picture theater (all black, of course), and more people than I had ever seen before. The total experience was, in a word, overwhelming.

My mother, who had been a teacher before and after I was born, and my father, a graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta, a city in which Dr. Du Bois had taught and worked, conveyed to us their own excitement about the impending visit of the distinguished editor of *Crisis* magazine and Director of Research at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. So we all trooped down to Convention Hall, where the teachers were meeting, to hear Dr. Du Bois.

I do not recall anything Dr. Du Bois said that February evening. I fervently hope it is the passage of time that has dimmed my memory rather than my inability at the time to understand what he was saying. And yet, I am not quite certain. I recall quite vividly, however, his coming on to the stage, dressed in white tie and tails with a ribbon draped across his chest, on which was pinned some large medallion, the kind I later learned was presented by governments to persons who had made some outstanding contribution to the government or even to humankind.¹ I had never seen anyone dressed in such finery; the image I had was more of dukes and princes than of an editor, scholar, and civil rights leader. I can also remember that voice, resonant and well modulated, speaking the lines he had written on note cards with a precision and cadence that was most pleasant to the ear. If I could only remember what he said! No matter, perhaps, because the impression he made on me was tremendous, and I would make every effort to hear him in the future wherever and whenever our paths crossed.

Tulsa made quite an impression on Dr. Du Bois, and I was pleased to learn later that he was as impressionable as I was, though on a somewhat different level. In *The Crisis* he wrote that “Black Tulsa is a happy city.” Referring to its recovery from the race riot, he added, “It has new clothes. It is young and gay and strong. Five little years ago fire and blood and robbery leveled it to the ground, flat, raw, smoking. It knew murder and arson and wild, bitter hatred. Yet it lived. It never died. It reeled to its feet blindly. . . . Scars are there, but the city is impudent and noisy. It believes in itself. Thank God for the Grit of Tulsa.”² I had my own reasons to be pleased with Tulsa, for in five short years I would be graduating from dear old Booker Washington, and then I would be going on to Fisk university, the alma mater of W. E. B. Du Bois. He would visit the institution more than once during my sojourn there.

I had not been at Fisk many months before I learned, as did my classmates, of the enormous influence Dr. Du Bois had exerted in the life of the University, especially in ridding it of what Du Bois called the “dictatorial president,” Fayette Avery McKenzie. In his speeches and writings Dr. Du Bois denounced the McKenzie regime and was instrumental in fomenting the uprising that led to McKenzie’s ouster.³ Of the incident, Du Bois said, “Many have done me the honor of suggesting that I instigated this and the former uprisings. I did not. . . . If I had been asked, I should have advised against the ‘riot’ because I doubted the stamina of the students to carry it through. But without waiting for me or anybody,

the students struck. They yelled, pounded ash cans, sang and broke windows. I thank God they did. I thank God that the younger generation of black students have the guts to yell and fight when their noses are rubbed in the mud.”⁴

For us, the next generation to attend Fisk after the uprising, Du Bois was our hero; and we did what we could to preserve the legacy of freedom and self-respect that Du Bois and his supporters bestowed on us. This did not mean we would always accept the positions taken by the administration that replaced McKenzie’s. And in “standing up to the new powers at Fisk” we felt we were maintaining the high standards that Du Bois had set. We were thrilled whenever he visited the campus, even if we were unable to meet him and express our gratitude. Somehow, he appeared to be some remote eminence, protected from us by the very administration into whose hands the students, faculty, and trustees had delivered the university after the uprising of 1924–1925.

We had no way of knowing of the agony that Dr. Du Bois was experiencing in the mid-1930s as he attempted to sort out his position regarding racial solidarity and even racial separation while serving as Director of Research and editor of *Crisis* for the interracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Whether the board liked it or not, American society was segregated and becoming more so. Du Bois, consequently, reached the conclusion that black people had to do certain things for their own survival, which involved working together for common goals. “You must evolve your own social institutions,” he said. “You must put behind your demands, not simply American Negroes, but West Indians and Africans, and all the colored races of the world.” In urging such an approach in 1934, Du Bois said that his plan “did not establish a new segregation; it did not advocate segregation as a final solution for the race problem; exactly the contrary; but it did face the facts and faced them with thoughtfully mapped effort.”⁵

It was my privilege to hear Dr. Du Bois make one of his most thoughtful statements on the subject, in which he advocated preserving and strengthening black institutions, including churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, and civic organizations. In June 1933, he celebrated the forty-fifth anniversary of his graduation from Fisk University by returning to his alma mater and addressing the General Alumni Association. He chose as his subject “The Field and Function of the American Negro College.” I cannot recall if I was sitting in the front row, but I was surely as close to the front as I could get.

At the outset he insisted that for the present there could be “no college for Negroes which is not a Negro college. . . . While an American Negro university, just like a German or Swiss university, might rightly aspire to a universal culture unhampered by limitations of race and culture, yet it must start on the earth where we sit and not in the skies whither we aspire.” In a passage reminiscent of what he had written in *Crisis* from time to time, he said: “Our education is more and more not only being confined to our own schools but to a segregated public school system far below the average of the nation with one-third of our children continuously out of school. And above all, and this we like least to mention, we suffer social ostracism which is so deadening and discouraging that we are compelled either to lie about it or to turn our faces to the red flag of revolution. It consists of studied and repeated and emphasized public insult of the sort which during all the long history of the world has led men to kill or be killed. And in the full face of any effort which any black man may make to escape this ostracism for himself, stands this flaming sword of racial doctrine which will distract his effort and energy if it does not lead him to spiritual suicide.”

Du Bois then gave his version of what Negro colleges and universities should be doing. They should recognize the indisputable fact that they were obliged to educate black people for the society that existed. They should above all, he insisted, be founded on a knowledge of the history of black people in Africa and in the United States. Then, he asked, how shall these young black people be trained to earn a living and live a life under the circumstances in which they find themselves! The beginning was with teachers and students. “With teachers who know what they are teaching and whom they are teaching . . . and with students who have the capacity and the will to absorb this knowledge, we can build the sort of Negro university which will emancipate not simply the black folk . . . but those white folk who in their effort to suppress Negroes have killed their own culture.”⁶

It was essentially this position, this emphasis on Negro schools for Negro students, that brought Du Bois and the board of the N.A.A.C.P. to a parting of the ways. The following year he left the organization he had helped found a quarter of a century earlier. Shortly thereafter he returned to Atlanta University where his dear friend John Hope was president, and where he became chairman of the Department of Sociology.⁷

In 1935, I went on to Harvard to pursue graduate studies in history, not altogether unmindful of the fact that Dr. Du Bois had gone the same route.

I was not so presumptuous, however, as to think that I could follow in the steps of this remarkable scholar whose doctoral dissertation, published in 1896, became the first volume in the celebrated Harvard Historical Studies. Although some forty years had passed since he graduated, he was still remembered admiringly at least by a later generation of Harvard professors. When Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., told the members of his seminar that Dr. Du Bois would be speaking at the Ford Hall Forum and urged us to attend, he seemed to relish telling us of *his* first meeting with Dr. Du Bois. It was at the end of a lecture Du Bois gave in Boston, shortly after Professor Schlesinger joined the Harvard faculty. Mrs. Schlesinger, proud of her husband's having broken the midwestern barrier, as it were, to become a Harvard professor, urged her husband to go down and introduce himself. So, Professor Schlesinger joined the line of admirers to greet Dr. Du Bois. "Congratulations, Dr. Du Bois, on your splendid lecture. My name is Arthur M. Schlesinger, and I have come to Harvard University as professor of American history." Du Bois' sole response was, "You have my deepest sympathy." I went to the lecture, as Professor Schlesinger had suggested, and I did admire Dr. Du Bois' brilliant lecture on the importance of preserving the culture and institutions of the Negro people and his handling of the questions from the audience, including one from Harvard professor Albert Bushnell Hart. I did not go down to the front to meet him. It seemed too far away, and he seemed too remote.

My time would come, nevertheless, and it came in a most unexpected way. In the spring of 1939, I went to Raleigh, North Carolina, to do research for my doctoral dissertation. The "arrangement for a proper place" for an African American to do research in the North Carolina archives, built with no thought that there would ever be such an eventuality, was the most difficult problem. After some deliberation the archivist solved it by stripping one of the exhibit rooms, in which he placed a table and chair, and assigning it to me for my exclusive use. Thus began the program of separate and somewhat equal facilities for research in the state archives. The second most difficult problem was finding a place to live. The Arcade Hotel, owned and operated by blacks, was not only filled but booked solid for weeks to come. The manager recommended a home where I could rent a room, and invited me to take my meals in the hotel dining room. The Arcade Hotel was the only place, as far as I knew, between Atlanta and Richmond, where a black person could get a comfortable room without imposing on friends, use toilet facilities, and get a cooked meal. As black

people went south to visit relatives and friends and returned to their jobs in the North, one could sit in the Arcade Hotel dining room and literally see the Negro world pass before his very eyes. I did just that many an afternoon, especially on weekends.

One evening, as I was about to have dinner at the hotel, I looked across the room and there sat W. E. B. Du Bois—alone. While I was not so presumptuous as to attempt to join him, I thought that I should not pass up the opportunity to introduce myself. After all, there were Tulsa, Nashville, Cambridge, Boston, where I had seen and heard him, but I had yet to speak a word to him. This was my chance, and I would not pass it up. It took a bit of courage, but I summoned up a sufficient amount to cross the dining room and approach his eminence, who was reading and making his way through his first course. “Pardon me, Dr. Du Bois,” I said timidly. “My name is John Hope Franklin,” certain was I that he would be immensely pleased I was named for one of his closest friends. There was no indication from him that he had even heard me. There was another ploy that I would try. “I am a graduate of Fisk University, class of 1935.” A statement like that usually elicited the warmest recognition and greeting from fellow Fiskites, and I thought this member of the class of 1888 would leap to his feet to greet me. There was not a word from this most articulate of men. I had one more “ace” and this would be my last chance. “I am a graduate student at Harvard University, and I am here in Raleigh doing research for my dissertation on free Negroes in North Carolina.” Without even looking up to see who or what I was, Dr. Du Bois dismissed me with a cool, “How do you do.”

I would not be truthful if I said that the experience was edifying. I wanted more from my hero, my leader, a warm greeting or a word of encouragement, and he gave me precious little. Many years later I reminded him of the incident, and he laughed it off, pleading that he was usually terribly preoccupied and, as a matter of fact, very shy. In *Dusk of Dawn*, he made reference to this side of his personality when he said, “My leadership was a leadership solely of ideas. I never was, nor ever will be, personally popular. This was not simply because of my idiosyncrasies but because I despise the essential demagoguery of personal leadership. . . . In my case I withdrew sometimes ostentatiously from the personal nexus, but I sought all the more determinedly to force home essential ideas.”⁸ In any case, on that evening in 1939, I had had at least a word with him. And I confidently believed that the time would come when I would have more than a word with him.

In the following year, while teaching at St. Augustine's College and completing my doctoral dissertation, the Association of Social Science Teachers invited me to read a paper. It gave me an opportunity to answer a question that had been on my mind, namely, to what extent were Negro colleges offering courses about Negroes. I decided to make a survey, and I wrote scores of professors at the black institutions of higher education. I received an unexpectedly large number of responses on which I based my paper entitled "Courses on the Negro in Negro Colleges."⁹ One of the most thoughtful letters I received was from Dr. Du Bois, who had become chairman of the Department of Sociology at Atlanta University when he left the N.A.A.C.P. in 1934. He said that while at Wilberforce from 1894 to 1896 he offered to teach a course on sociology that "would have touched on the race problem but the University did not accept it." He then explained that his work at the University of Pennsylvania became the basis of his studies of the Negro during the years at Atlanta University before he went to the N.A.A.C.P. There were, however, no courses on the history of the Negro in the United States or in Africa during those years. Finally, he hoped the information was what I wanted.¹⁰ At last I had elicited his attention in a matter that was of sufficient importance for him to respond generously and graciously.

When the war came I was deeply troubled not only by the carnage that would take the lives of many hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians, but also by the hypocrisy of the United States. Our country was fighting racism and totalitarianism with a racist, jim crow military force. My personal experience with the armed services had been jolting and traumatic, even as a civilian; and I resolved not to serve a cause that would, at best, preserve the status quo. While I conducted my own personal battle with my draft board, I decided to write a piece about the role of history in society. The War Department's historical section had declined the offer of my services, although it employed a number of my white Harvard schoolmates who had not even completed their Ph.D. degree as I had done. I felt free, therefore, to write to suit myself. The piece I wrote was called "History—Weapon of War and Peace," and I sent it to Dr. Du Bois, then editor of *Phylon, the Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*, which he had founded when he left the N.A.A.C.P. for Atlanta University in 1934. Dr. Du Bois acknowledged receipt of the paper and said he would be happy to read it "with a view to publishing it." He added that if I was ever in Atlanta he would be "glad" to see me.¹¹ This almost personal letter from Du Bois put me in an expansive mood!

Today, as I read the piece I submitted to *Phylon's* distinguished editor, I get the feeling that I was "setting him up." If that was not the case, his influence over me was greater than I realized; and that should have pleased him. The article was wide-ranging, ostentatiously learned, written in a style that seemed imitative of Du Bois himself. I quoted John Fiske, the Count de Gobineau, Maurice Barré, Alfred Mahan, and dropped a few other names such as Johann Droysen, Thomas Macauley, Von Treitschke, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. I wrote movingly about Sargon and the Sumerians, and I denounced the way in which historians had, on too many occasions, prostituted themselves to narrow, selfish, nationalistic ends. I even asked the question "What is the field and function of history?" I wonder if upon reading that sentence Dr. Du Bois recalled that he had used a similar phrase, when he addressed the Fisk alumni in 1933 on "The Field and Function of the American Negro College." Perhaps he could praise my ingenuity if not my originality!

After he read the paper Dr. Du Bois notified me that he had meant to publish it but, alas, he had "been retired from Atlanta University and the editorship of *Phylon*. You can, of course, submit it again to my successor."¹² I was not surprised that Du Bois had accepted it for publication, for I had tried with all my heart to write a piece that Du Bois himself would have been pleased to have written. With no backlog of writings from his own authors, his successor was pleased to publish my piece.¹³

With the publication of "History—Weapon of War and Peace" I was elated beyond description. While I was exultant in 1944, however, Dr. Du Bois was devastated by his unanticipated, summary retirement from Atlanta University. Although seventy-six years old, he was in robust health, and had just embarked on an elaborate, scientific study of the Negro population in which he had the cooperation of the presidents of the Negro land grant colleges as well as that of many scholars, black and white. "Not only was a great plan of scientific work killed at birth but my own life was thrown into confusion," he later wrote. "I felt the world tottering beneath my feet and I fought back in despair." With less than \$5,000 in savings and no pension plan, the university's board finally granted him \$1,800 per year for five years and \$1,200 a year thereafter. Even had his financial situation not been a problem, his lack of a systematic program of study and work would have been unbearable.¹⁴

As he journeyed north from Atlanta in the spring of 1945, Dr. Du Bois must have been in a daze. En route to New York he stopped in Durham, North Carolina, at the invitation of his old friend James E. Sheppard,

president of North Carolina College for Negroes, where I was teaching. Shepard knew of his plight and seized the opportunity not only to offer him financial security, but also to seek the visibility and prestige he had always wanted for the institution he had founded in 1910. He invited Dr. Du Bois to join the faculty with the primary duty of launching a journal on the order of *Phylon*. Dr. Du Bois was attracted to the idea and was obviously grateful to Dr. Shepard for the invitation. He had no illusions about the difficulties involved and described the problems as he saw them.

A major problem, he was frank to say, was his age. He said that he would not even consider beginning a new journal unless it was done in collaboration with a younger person who would later assume full responsibility for it. Dr. Shepard said that would be no problem, and he told his guest of a twenty-nine-year-old aspiring scholar, John Hope Franklin, who should be able to work with him and, later, become the editor. Dr. Du Bois, perhaps remembering my piece submitted to *Phylon*, if not the encounter in Raleigh six years earlier, wondered if he could see me. Dr. Shepard said he would arrange it. When Dr. Shepard told me of his conversation with Dr. Du Bois and suggested that I call on him at the Shepard home, I would have become ill if I had been able to spare the time. My appointment was within the hour!

Dr. Du Bois greeted me warmly and immediately began to ply me with questions. Was I named for his close friend, the late John Hope of Atlanta University? Yes. How many books had I published? One. How many articles? Six. Including the one to *Phylon*? No. (He does remember, I exulted!) All in refereed journals? Yes. What was I working on at present? A study of the excesses of militancy in the antebellum South. Did I have any editorial experience? No. What journals did I read regularly? I named them, including *Phylon* and *Crisis*. He seemed to wince when I named the last two, both founded by him. The conversation then turned to general matters: the war still raging in its last months; the status of Negroes in the armed forces, in the economy, and in the South as well as the North. After about two hours, he thanked me for coming to see him and said he looked forward to seeing me again. I thanked him—not too gushingly, I hope—and floated back to wherever I went when I left the Shepard home.

Dr. Shepard said that Dr. Du Bois had not committed himself one way or the other. He would seriously consider the invitation, however, and inform Shepard of his decision. He also had offers from Howard University

and Fisk University, he was to say later. Upon his return to New York, however, he received a totally unexpected offer to become Director of Special Research at the N.A.A.C.P. It seemed too good to be true, and he accepted. Thus began four of the most frustrating years of his life, without clearly defined duties, with inadequate office space, and with the expectation that he would do whatever the secretary, Walter White, asked him to do. He seemed relieved when the board dismissed him in 1948, after which he expressed regret that he had agreed to return to the N.A.A.C.P. in 1944.¹⁵ One can only indulge in futile speculation: what if Du Bois had turned down all the offers except the one from North Carolina College? What if he had launched the journal that Dr. Shepard fervently hoped he would launch? What if I had become the associate editor or some such thing? Dr. Du Bois' life would have taken a different direction but my own would have been drastically changed for the foreseeable future. As fate would have it, we went our separate ways. By the time Dr. Du Bois left the N.A.A.C.P. in 1948, I was already in my second year as professor of history at Howard University.

Fisk University was ever mindful that W. E. B. Du Bois was its most illustrious graduate, and it was lavish in its praise and recognition of him. He was invited to be the commencement speaker and to receive an honorary degree at the fiftieth anniversary of his graduation, and was later elected to its chapter of Phi Beta Kappa as an alumni member. One of the buildings bears his name, and a statue of Du Bois is the only one that graces the campus. No recognition could have been more timely or more welcome than the dinner at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York, given in honor of his eightieth birthday on February 23, 1948, by Fisk University and the New York Fisk Club. Du Bois' difficulties with the N.A.A.C.P. were rapidly approaching a critical stage, and he doubtless needed this expression of esteem and confidence. For the moment, however, all was peaceful, as Walter White, the executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., and Arthur Spingarn, chairman of the board, were among the two hundred and fifty who attended.

I had been asked to give the principal address. Speaking on the subject "The Ascent of Clio," I argued that historians, by succumbing to racial, national, and other narrow interests, had done a disservice to Clio, the muse of history. "A bright sign of hope for Clio was the effort of W. E. B. Du Bois, who learned well the work he was to do in behalf of his favorite muse. In his preparation there were Fisk, for the strengthening of a broad social consciousness; Harvard, for the inculcation of the spirit of scientific

inquiry; and Berlin, for the special techniques requisite to doing the work of Clio." I then briefly referred to his major historical writings, pointing out their significance in each case. For Clio, DuBois had "enhanced her prestige immeasurably. She knew more clearly on whom she could rely and on whom she could not rely. While lamenting the shameful performance of some, she could rejoice in the devotion and service of a faithful few. And she could point a finger of pride to one so responsible for her new ascent—poet and philosopher, inspirer of youth and social reformer, editor and historian—William Edward Burghardt Du Bois."¹⁶

In his prepared brief speech Dr. Du Bois made no reference to me or to anyone else on the program. At the end of the dinner, during a photo session, however, he clasped my hand and expressed admiration for what I said and how I had said it. I was both honored and flattered a few days later when, through his assistant, Dr. Du Bois requested a copy of "The Ascent of Clio." I sent it to him by return mail, of course.¹⁷

In the spring of that year, 1948, Dr. Du Bois conveyed to me the feeling that he regarded me as a colleague. Since he was leaving the N.A.A.C.P., he agreed to offer a course on "The Negro in American History" at the New School for Social Research the following autumn. In planning the course he invited me to give a lecture on "The Development of the Cotton Kingdom, 1815–1860." I accepted with pleasure, and on November 22, 1948, I went to New York to deliver the lecture to the class which Dr. Du Bois had described to me as "intelligent and interested."¹⁸ The class was indeed interested, and the members raised questions ranging from bibliography to interpretations regarding the profitability of slavery.

Meanwhile, the Council on African Affairs named Dr. Du Bois its honorary vice-chairman and provided him with a secretary and rent-free office. Du Bois was not disturbed by the fact that the council was on the attorney's general's list of "subversive" organizations, because he fully endorsed its efforts on behalf of Africa and because he disagreed completely with the "witch hunt activities" of the Department of Justice. For his eighty-third birthday in 1951, the council planned a dinner celebration that would pay tribute to its distinguished vice chairman and raise some much-needed funds for the council's work. Two weeks before his birthday Dr. Du Bois was indicted by a federal grand jury for not registering as an agent of a foreign power in the peace movement. Many of us were outraged and rallied to his support. Sad to say, there were many who did not. A week before his birthday I sent the chairman of the planning committee my check "as a token for . . . a great scholar and courageous,

fearless leader.”¹⁹ Even after his acquittal, Du Bois never regained the popularity he had once enjoyed, because by 1951 the air had been so poisoned by suspicion, hatred, and fear that even crusaders for peace were suspect.²⁰

Dr. Du Bois seemed undaunted by the humiliating experience of indictment and trial for the alleged crime of working for peace. Once the trial was over and he was acquitted, he resumed his scholarly work. One of his continuing interests was the state of race relations. In *Crisis* his editorials frequently treated this subject. He also dealt with it in “Opinion of W. E. B. Du Bois” and “As the Crow Flies.” In *Phylon* there was his quarterly “A Chronicle of Race Relations.” It was natural for him to pursue the matter, even where he had no journal to which he regularly contributed. In 1956 he wrote, in the same vein, a piece called “Color-Line in the United States.” I have no way of knowing its distribution, but he sent me a copy with the request that I share with him my reactions to his summary. I attempted to compensate for my belated reply by sending him a birthday greeting ten days before the event. I said, “May you continue to live and thrive and be an inspiration to all of us who try to maintain high standards of truth. . . .”

I felt that our relationship by this time was truly collegial, and I responded with candor. I indicated that in his discussion of “Courts and Police” it was dangerous to make sweeping generalizations. There were some towns even in the South that could not be described as places merely of “tyranny and mob rule” and in some of them Afro-American jurors could be found. While the situation was “as desperate” as he described it, I suggested some qualifying words such as “largely” or “mostly.” Churches, I added, were no longer one hundred percent segregated in the South, and I provided examples of interracial congregations. I concluded by saying that “the whole thing is a dark picture, and I fear that you have described most of it quite accurately.”²¹

The reason for my delay in commenting on “Color-Line in the United States” was that, as I indicated to him, the previous weeks had been “especially difficult both personally and professionally,” with little or no time for correspondence. I had just been appointed professor and chairman of the Department of History at Brooklyn College, with an extraordinary amount of publicity and personal attention following the announcement. In his letter expressing gratitude for my comments on “Color-Line,” Dr. Du Bois said, “Let me congratulate you upon appointment as Chairman of the History Department of Brooklyn College. It

is a great opportunity for a man with scholarship and courage.”²² I very much hoped he saw those qualities in me.

By the time I moved to Brooklyn in 1956, Dr. Du Bois was well settled in a commodious home in Brooklyn Heights. On several occasions, he and his second wife, the distinguished writer Shirley Graham, invited my wife and me to dinner in their home. They made it clear that they did not expect us to reciprocate, for they almost never went to the homes of other people for dinner. Indeed, he said he could not control his schedule if he was in someone else’s home. Even in his own home, he could say to guests at ten o’clock that he was compelled to retire—on doctor’s orders. Then, with a wry smile, he said he did not reveal that it was Dr. Du Bois’ orders!

On such occasions Dr. and Mrs. Du Bois regaled us with accounts of their travel experiences. Following the ordeal of the indictment and trial in 1951, they were under constant surveillance, and their movements in and out of the country were monitored with great care. At times they were asked not to leave the country. At other times, their passports were seized. One amusing story told of their arrival in New York after a visit “behind the iron curtain.” The immigration official who had gathered up the passports of all passengers on that flight called out their name. They said to each other, “This is it.” Du Bois went up to the official and told him who he was, whereupon the immigration official merely said that as the line was rather long, and due to his advanced age, he should take a seat until his name was called. Surprise, surprise!

On February 23, 1958, Dr. Du Bois reached his ninetieth birthday. This time the celebration, held on Sunday, March 2, was not sponsored by Fisk University, which had a new president, or by the N.A.A.C.P., where he was *persona non grata*. Numerous so-called respectable people steered clear of him as though he was tainted by the rantings of the McCarthyites and the Cold War hawks. Angus Cameron, the publisher, and Eslanda Robeson, the wife of Paul Robeson, sent out the invitations. When I received mine, I sent a check to cover the per capita cost of the reception as well as a contribution to a purse which was \$7,500 by the time the organizers presented it to the honoree. Eslanda Robeson was so surprised to hear from me that she called to ask if I was *really* coming. When I told her that I would not miss it for the world, she invited me to speak for Fisk University and for historians. I told her I would be honored to do so. The celebration was quite informal, and the ninety-year-old man was in good form, despite the tribulations he had recently

suffered. Virtually all the celebrants and speakers were well-known left-wing activists or known communists; and I was all the more pleased to be there as a participant. There were greetings from the deputy foreign minister of the Soviet Union, the children of Hungary, the Nigerian leader, Nnamdi Azikiwe, the premier of British Guiana, the president of the Academia Sinica of the People's Republic of China, and many, many others, all of which were dutifully read and cheered.²³

When I was called on to bring greetings from Fisk University and the historical profession, there was an audible buzz that went through the audience, as though the next speaker represented a decided change of pace. The point I wanted to make, without being too belligerent or assertive, was that W. E. B. Du Bois belonged to all of us, especially the black people of the United States and Africa; that he had done so much for all of us that we would be ever in his debt; and that it was an honor to salute him as he entered the tenth decade of his life.

When I had finished my talk and the reception was concluded, a man walked up to me and said he was surprised the president of Brooklyn College had *permitted* me to attend the reception for Dr. Du Bois. I told him I had asked no one's permission, not my father nor the president of the institution where I worked, and that his remarks were insulting in the extreme. That, unfortunately, was the temper of the times in the late fifties, when liberalism was in retreat and when the only people who seemed to take a stance against the extreme right were the extreme left. Since I belonged to neither camp, I very much resented one group's appropriating Dr. Du Bois as its very own. Du Bois later wrote a friend that "John Hope Franklin was invited by the committee to speak and did a courageous thing in doing so in the face of his situation and his president, Gideonse."²⁴ I was unaware of my "situation" and therefore did not regard my participation as "courageous." The reference to Harry D. Gideonse doubtless had to do with the president's generally anti-communist stand at Brooklyn College. I never felt threatened or intimidated at Brooklyn College and went wherever I pleased and said whatever I pleased during my eight years there.

Two years later, in June 1960, Dr. Du Bois and I received honorary degrees from Morgan State College in Baltimore. Since I had agreed to deliver the commencement address, I had the opportunity not only to speak to the graduates about their responsibility to society as they went down from Morgan, but also to say a word about the courageous and constructive career of Dr. Du Bois. I called attention to what he meant to

all of us, how much we were indebted to him for his many contributions, and how important it was to express our appreciation even as the forces of reaction attempted to destroy him. He said he was pleased with what I had said, as we congratulated each other upon becoming classmates. It was the last time I would see him. Thirty-four years had passed since an awestruck Oklahoma lad had gazed upon the great man for the first time. I was as awestruck in 1960 as I had been in 1926.

There was one final exchange of letters, this time as friends and colleagues. In the fall of 1960, in a "dear Franklin" letter, Du Bois shared with me his plan for an encyclopedia of the people of Africa and the diaspora. He said he was sending it to "various historians and sociologists throughout the world." He honored me by requesting my advice and an indication that "you would be willing to cooperate in case the plan goes through."²⁵ For a man almost ninety-three years old, this was a most remarkable display of scholarship, energy, commitment, and optimism. I expressed great sympathy with the proposal, but reminded him that my knowledge of Africa was "shamefully limited." I told him I had just returned from Nigeria, where I was impressed with some of the things going on, especially at the University College in Ibadan. I expressed the hope that a cooperative arrangement could be worked out that would facilitate the work on the encyclopedia. I even suggested the University Colleges in Sierra Leone and Ghana, as well as Ibadan. I asked him to keep me informed of developments and expressed the hope that I could be of some assistance.²⁶ I did not hear from him again.

On August 27, 1963, the eve of the historic March on Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois passed away in Accra, Ghana, a country to which he had pledged allegiance as a citizen a short time earlier. In November of that year, there was a memorial honoring Dr. Du Bois at Carnegie Hall in New York City, and I was asked to deliver the principal address. Speaking to an overflow crowd, this among other things is what I said: "The manner in which the death of W. E. B. Du Bois was reported in some quarters here in the United States is itself a curious commentary on the extent to which the country of his birth was out of touch with him. One reputable newspaper reported that he was survived by his wife, Nina, and a daughter. As a matter of fact he had survived both of them and, more than a decade ago, had remarried. One of the great learned journals merely reported that he had died, thus indicating its own inability or unwillingness to come to terms with the impact of Du Bois on the field represented by that journal.

“We all have our personal memories of Dr. Du Bois, if we had the good fortune to know him. My own most cherished memories are the quiet words of encouragement he passed on to me on numerous occasions and the privilege he bestowed on me to regard him as a friend. . . . I wish I could erase from my memory the picture of Dr. Du Bois at eighty years of age handcuffed like a common thief, accused of being the agent of a foreign power. Even his subsequent exoneration cannot obliterate . . . the impression that, perhaps, will always remain: that he was the victim not merely of the fanaticism that characterized those years, but that he was being punished for what he had represented for more than half a century. When we see the accused slayer of Medgar Evers enjoying the freedom of the court and the murderer of the president’s alleged assassin being treated as a member of the court, I cannot resist the temptation to make some comparisons that reflect discredit on the administration of justice and, indeed, on our very sense of justice.

“Happily, W. E. B. Du Bois will be remembered long after the indignities to which he was subjected are forgotten. He will be remembered by a grateful people who realize . . . that the March on Washington began with the drive that Du Bois made for full citizenship sixty years ago. . . . This is the meaning of the Credo of Du Bois published in 1904. It was full of meaning then and it has great significance for us who pay tribute to him today. He said, ‘I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through Time and Opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and in the possibility of infinite development. I believe in Liberty for all men; the space to stretch their arms and their souls; the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoying the sunshine . . . uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of God and love . . .’”²⁷

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NOTES

¹In 1923 Du Bois had received the Spingarn Medal, awarded annually “for the highest or noblest achievement by an American Negro.” In the following year he was decorated by the Liberian government when he represented President Calvin Coolidge at the inauguration of President Tubman. Perhaps he wore one of these medals on that occasion.

²*Crisis* 31 (April 1926), 269.

³A summary of the charges that Du Bois made against McKenzie appear in *Crisis* 28 (October 1924), 251–252.

⁴*Crisis* 29 (April 1925), 247–251.

⁵The argument is summarized in his *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward the Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), pp. 304–5.

⁶“The Field and Function of the American Negro College,” *Fisk News* 6 (June 1933), 1ff.

⁷See the article, “Dr. Du Bois Resigns,” *Crisis* 41 (August 1934), 245–246.

⁸Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 303.

⁹John Hope Franklin to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 26, 1940, 18–33–47, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, cited hereinafter as Du Bois Papers. I am grateful to Kenneth Fones Wolf, the university archivist, for making available my correspondence with Dr. Du Bois as well as other relevant materials. The paper was published in *Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes* 8 (July 1940), 138–144.

¹⁰W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, April 11, 1940, 18–33–48, Du Bois Papers.

¹¹W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, April 29, 1944, 19–38–114, Du Bois Papers.

¹²W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, May 4, 1944, 19–38–115, Du Bois Papers.

¹³See John Hope Franklin, “History—Weapon of War and Peace,” *Phylon* 5 (Third Quarter 1944), 249–259.

¹⁴Dr. Du Bois writes bitterly of his “retirement” from Atlanta University in *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of the First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), pp. 321–325.

¹⁵*Autobiography*, pp. 326–329.

¹⁶John Hope Franklin, “The Ascent of Clio,” manuscript in the possession of the author.

¹⁷Hugh H. Smythe to John Hope Franklin, March 1, 1948, 230–33–9, Du Bois Papers.

¹⁸Regarding the arrangements for my lecture, see John Hope Franklin to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 14, 1948, 22–37–34; Hugh H. Smythe to John Hope Franklin, August 17, 1948; John Hope Franklin to Hugh H. Smythe, August 24, 1948, 22–37–35; W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, October 7, 1948, 22–37–37; W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, October 8, 1948, 22–37–38; and John Hope Franklin to W. E. B. Du Bois, October 9, 1948, 22–37–36, Du Bois Papers.

¹⁹John Hope Frankin to Walter N. Beekman, February 17, 1951, 24–37–3, Du Bois Papers.

²⁰For his own account of his work for peace, his indictment and trial, see *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois, Part Three*, and his *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday, with comment by Shirley Graham* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1952), p. 427.

²¹John Hope Franklin to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 13, 1956, 27–17A–74, Du Bois Papers.

²²W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, February 17, 1956, 42–2A–160, Du Bois Papers. There was a front page article in the *New York Times* announcing my appointment two days before Dr. Du Bois sent his message of congratulation.

²³In his *Autobiography*, pp. 397–99, Dr. Du Bois said that two thousand people attended the 90th birthday celebration, and that he was presented with a purse of \$7,500. The *New York Times*, March 3, 1958, said that one thousand people attended and the purse was \$5,000.

²⁴W. E. B. Du Bois to Lee Lorch, March 28, 1958, 42–5A–105, Du Bois Papers.

²⁵W. E. B. Du Bois to John Hope Franklin, October 31, 1960, 27–30–82, Du Bois Papers.

²⁶John Hope Franklin to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 14, 1960, 27–30–196, Du Bois Papers.

²⁷John Hope Frankin, “William Edward Burghardt Du Bois,” manuscript in the possession of the author.