

As I Remember Woodson

By L. D. Reddick



*Reprinted from the February 1953 issue of THE CRISIS magazine,
official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of
Colored People, 20 West 40th Street, New York 18, N. Y.*

■ This man fought for "true facts" on the life and history of Negroid peoples

As I Remember Woodson

By L. D. Reddick

EACH year when February rolls around, we think of Carter G. Woodson. We should think of him at other times and some time we do. But it is almost impossible not to think of Woodson during Negro History Week.

When we see and hear the little children "reciting" their poems about "Brave Black Heroes" or "declaiming" Wendell Phillips' moving tribute to *Louverture* or when some "progressive" labor union or college presents a "distinguished scholar" in a lecture on "The Ruins of Zimbabwe" or "The Glories of Medieval Timbuctoo," our mind irresistibly slips back to the man who, above all, others, started it all: really, the "father" of Negro History Week itself.

I remember the first time that I saw Dr. Woodson. I was a small boy,

living at the time in Jacksonville, Florida. One of my teachers had said to our class that a "great man" would be speaking at Edward Waters College that evening. I lived nearby and went on over to hear him.

As he arose to speak, I was immediately taken in by the force of his personality. He seemed scarcely to recognize the chairman. There were none of the flourishes, digressions and repetitions of the average speaker. Here was a man who, quite obviously, had something to say. He came to the point. Every sentence counted.

As the light from the ceiling fell upon him, his face appeared to be light brown in color and altogether thoughtful. His prominent forehead to my child's eye signified "intellect," "brains"!

He handled himself well upon the platform, I thought, moving about very much like a skilled boxer: never hurried, never faltering, sparring skillfully for openings, driving home his blows deftly. As I recall it now, he seemed to be wearing a tweed

DR. L. D. REDDICK, formerly curator of the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, is chief librarian of the Trevor Arnett Library at Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia.

suit. Easily this was the most impressive speaker that I had ever heard up to that time in my life.

The next day — as a complete surprise — Woodson appeared at the assembly of the Stanton School, where I was a student. At first he was not nearly so impressive as he had been the night before. After he had been talking for a few moments he noticed that one of the students was asleep. Thoroughly aroused, Woodson pointed to him and said: "Wake him up, wake up that sleeping one." And then swinging around full-face to the whole audience, he exclaimed: "That is what we have been doing for decades; sleeping, sleeping away our rights!"

The effect was electric. Woodson was now inspired and went on to make another masterly speech.

This was the beginning of my interest in Dr. Woodson and the Negro History movement. During my high school and college days I read everything of his that I came across. Early in my teaching career, he had me on one of the programs of one of his annual conventions of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. From that I got to know him personally and through the years had many pleasant and a few unpleasant experiences with him.

GUARDED TIME

I believe that I enjoyed most and learned most from the informal chats that we had from time to time. While I was living and working in New York City it was often necessary for me to visit Washington, D. C. I would let Woodson know when I was coming to town. He would save the late afternoon for

me. Though he guarded his time like a soldier, he was always generous with it when it came to "young scholars."

On most of these trips down to the nation's capital, I found Woodson at 1538 Ninth Street, Northwest. This was the headquarters of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the home of the *Journal of Negro History* and the other publications. The first floor was given over to the mail-order work of the Association. Woodson's office was on the second floor — and what an office! Books and magazines were piled everywhere (almost as bad as mine these days). Papers and letters and galley proofs covered the desk. But there seemed to be actually no disorder. The editor probably did more high grade work at that desk than any editor I know. Woodson lived, that is, slept, on the third floor of the small building. He was a bachelor.

Upon my arrival, he and I would exchange a few quips and then get on down to business by discussing some scheme I had up my sleeve or some article or book review that the editor wanted me to do for the *Journal*. At times these "suggestions" of the good Doctor sounded more like commands than requests. If anything, Woodson was forthright. Much of his stimulation to others came by way of challenge. He had little more than contempt for pretences or excuses. Those who did not know him too well considered him to be a "hard" man — and, upon occasion, he could be as cantankerous and as irascible as they come.

He could be engaging, too; that is, when he wanted to be. Quite

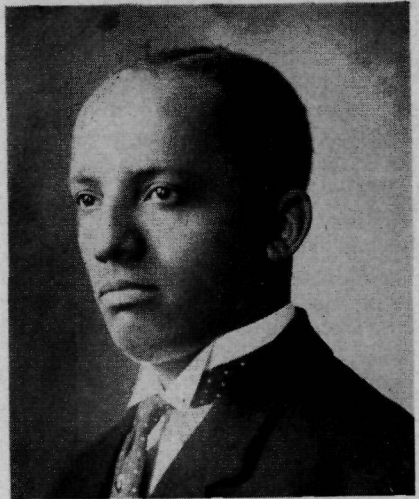
frequently, when we had finished talking about books and scholars, as such, he would tell me about some of his own adventures in the Philippines or in Europe or in this country. Woodson had quite a sense of humor and was filled with anecdotes.

He always got a kick out of the ones about the jobs that he didn't get or keep. As a young man, Woodson was once interviewed by the school board of a Southern city for the position of principal of a school there. Apparently, he had satisfied the board but for one final question. This was: "What do you think of the philosophy of Booker T. Washington?" As we might expect, Woodson replied with characteristic tactlessness: "Not very much." The appointment never came through.

HARSH BUT FAIR

Again, Woodson says that his stay as Dean of a well-known university was short, for soon after he assumed this office "the President began to hit me like this and I began to hit him like that," Woodson chuckled while demonstrating by pounding his left fist into his right palm and his right fist into his left palm.

We would talk about other people, too. Woodson seemed to know or know about all the prominent Negroes of his generation. I would ask him about first this one, then that one. He would characterize each and often knew some intimate story to illustrate his judgment. On these long afternoons I would toss these balls (these names) up to him for hours. He would knock them over the fence every time. He was often harsh, but



DR. CARTER G. WOODSON
December 19, 1875—April 3, 1950.

fair. I was delighted to learn that he thought so well of W. E. B. DuBois, though each man plowed his own individual furrow.

Woodson did not think very much of the professional "inter-racialists." He was contemptuous of whites who climbed to fame on the backs of Negroes or of Negroes who collaborated with these "friends" and the so-called charitable foundations which were really seeking to control the thought of Negro leaders and institutions. Perhaps he was overly suspicious, but in nine cases out of ten he could prove his point.

In the early years of the Association Woodson sought and received financial support from several philanthropic "funds"; later on the Association's monies came largely from Negroes themselves. Woodson was most proud of that.

Woodson saw clearly what American culture was doing to the psyche of the Negro. Racist elements were strong whether one looked at American literature, newspapers, science or social science. Historically, most of the nation's scientists — social as well as natural — had gone along with the theory that the Negro was a more "animal-like" physical type and definitely inferior mentally. Actually, the whole context of this consideration was subjective; yet to the man in the street, the words of an eminent biologist, anthropologist or psychologist meant "scientific proof."

Likewise, a host of the nation's best known men of letters, song writers and journalists were in one degree or another anti-Negro. Ever so many American schools, libraries, movie houses and theatres could be described, insofar as this factor mattered, as agencies of anti-Negro propaganda.

The weight of the culture, through suggestion no less than by way of direct representation, has tended to make the average white person feel "superior" and the average Negro "inferior" — content to be a "nobody" or a servant, a clown or a criminal.

HAD THE ANSWER

Woodson, of course, was not the only one to see this. He, like others, realized that the racial stereotypes were nourished by racial discrimination and segregation and at the same time these images made discrimination and segregation more acceptable to blacks as well as whites. Woodson did, however, initiate and sustain (as almost nobody before him had done) a movement that was an an-

swer to the picture of the Negro that had been conjured up in the American mind. Woodson's answer is what we know in this country today as the Negro History movement.

The drive against the anti-Negro elements in American culture assumes two forms. On the one hand, there is the campaign to combat the stereotypes; to stamp them out wherever they appear in any of the media of communication. This means cleansing the culture of derogatory terms and caricatures on stage and screen, in comic books, in textbooks, on television; and removing the racial tags from sports and crime and so on. The civil rights organizations are quite active in all this and have won some notable victories. They lost out against "Amos and Andy," who "filthy rich" from decades of radio and television commercialization are now prepared to retire from the field.

The other phase of this fight is often stated in the form of a counter-thrust by some movie magnate who has been challenged. He may say in so many words: "If you contend that *The Birth of a Nation* or *Gone With the Wind* is not a true picture of history, remember that not only novelists but historians support our view. Where is your proof?" Very often the best answer to that, the "proof," is to be found in the pages of the *Journal of Negro History* or other publications of the Association.

Woodson's point in setting up the organization was to build up a body of "true facts" on the life and history of Negroid peoples. He would use the method of the trained scholar in digging up and assembling these

facts. Without this ammunition the social action groups would not have much of a chance in the struggle to get a more truthful picture of the Negro presented through our channels of communication, entertainment and education.

Woodson devoted full time to the Negro History movement during the latter part of his adult life. He founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, the *Journal of Negro History* (January 1916) for scholars and the *Negro History Bulletin* (October 1937) for teachers and school children. He inaugurated the annual observance of Negro History Week in 1926. This turned out to be a most successful avenue for bringing the history movement to the general public. Woodson was unquestionably one of the most influential historian-educators that this nation has produced.

What gave the man his drive, his point of view, his unshakeable devotion to this single idea? It is, of course, impossible to be precise about this. Something of an answer may be suggested by his background.

Woodson was born December 19, 1875 in New Canton, Buckingham County, Virginia. Actually he grew up in West Virginia where Jim Crow was not so overwhelming. After high school in Huntington, he attended Berea College in Kentucky. Here students of various creeds and colors studied together in an atmosphere of Yankee equalitarianism until the infamous Day law broke it up. Woodson left Berea in 1898, just two years before the State enforced racial segregation on the educational institutions within its borders.

Education was interspersed with

hard work — much of it laborious coal mining. Woodson earned both his A.B. (1907) and M.A. (1908) at the University of Chicago. Here he met such great minds as William E. Dodd, A. C. McLaughlin, and Ferdinand Schevill. His Ph.D. came from Harvard which, at the time, had the strongest department of history in the United States.

WIDELY TRAVELED

Education was also interspersed with travel. Woodson, between times, had seen much of Europe and something of Asia and Africa. This, obviously, helped give him a world point of view which was characteristic of him. For a number of years, he spent a part of each summer in Paris.

Other qualities of a more intimate nature, no doubt, helped give shape to the basic personality of the man. His health was rugged; his mind perceptive and extraordinarily retentive. I never saw him use notes for a lecture. There was something of the Yankee about him. He was altogether uncompromising when it came to a question of principle. With his talents he could have made money, taught at a great university and/or married. Woodson felt that each of these would have hampered his mission.

Though Woodson never had any children of his own, figuratively he "fathered" a brood of younger scholars (and some not so young) who have done significant work in this field. Two of his earliest disciples were A. A. Taylor and Charles H. Wesley. At one time, Rayford W. Logan was Woodson's chief understudy. Lorenzo J. Green, C. A. Ba-

cote and Luther P. Jackson were highly esteemed "sons." William M. Brewer and Louis R. Mehlinger were almost brothers. Woodson praised John Hope Franklin's textbook though it was sure to compete against Woodson's own best seller, *The Negro in Our History*. Nobody could introduce a political argument that would lessen his regard for the scholarship of Herbert Aptheker. And there were, naturally, others. I can testify personally to the valiant way he stood by me when I tore the hide off a pro-Southern professor of history at one of our greatest universities.

Woodson could inspire the so-called common man, too. One evening he and I were in a taxi on the way up to my class at New York's City College. Woodson talked so interestingly during the ride that when we arrived at the College, the taxi driver said that he would park his cab, if he would be permitted to come inside the classroom and hear Dr. Woodson speak. Anyone who knows New York cab drivers knows that this was a supreme compliment.

MELLOWED WITH AGE

In the last year of his life, Woodson noticeably mellowed. For the first time he seemed to be more willing to listen than to talk. He was less caustic in his criticisms. He appeared to be trying to learn to delegate important tasks, to let others lift some of the load from his individual shoulders.

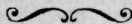
As a matter of fact, "father time" was exacting his toll. The rugged constitution was weakening. Another mortal man was slowing down. This should have been expected, for Woodson was over seventy.

Some of us saw what was coming on. We wanted to put on a real show for "the old man." We wanted to let him know that the work that he had "so nobly advanced" was in good hands and would be continued if he should ever retire or ultimately pass on. We wanted to begin, at least, to "modernize" the movement.

Woodson never lived to see this. The annual meeting for that year, 1950, was scheduled for October 27-29; Woodson died April 3, 1950.

The rude shock of his death came before plans to carry on the work of the Association had been perfected. In many ways the convention in Atlanta was a huge success, yet it failed to make the transition smoothly. Since then the organization has had its ups and downs, principally because no one has been found as yet who can afford or will afford to run the risk of making the work of the Association his full-time job. Many capable and willing hands will help with this or that part-time duty but the Association requires a full-time Director.

What a wonderful opportunity for some young scholar! What a great chance to continue the work of a truly great man! What a strategic moment in history to help American culture become more democratic!



Subscribe to

The Crisis

**Official Organ of the National Association
for the Advancement of Colored People**

- THE CRISIS is the oldest continuously published Negro magazine in the United States. It has not missed an issue since November, 1910.
- THE CRISIS gives you each month timely discussions of racial problems in their national and international aspects.
- THE CRISIS keeps you informed through articles and pictures of Negro achievements in the field of business, labor, and the professions. It offers monthly summaries of college and school news as well as an annual Educational Number.
- THE CRISIS keeps you abreast of the activities of NAACP branches through reports and pictures.

\$1.50 a Year

FA03-7