

Hidden History

The Unsung Saga of the Black Man

as told by



John P. & C. Buck West

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(Second of a two-part series on the great post Civil War Negro Poet from Vol. II of historian J. A. Rogers' "World's Great Men of Color".)

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PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

Aframerica's First Great Poet
(1872-1906)

"PUBLISHERS WHO had ignored him sought him out. Orders poured in. Once, on returning home after a short absence, he found his table snowed under with letters with money orders and congratulations.

"On Independence Day, 1898, Dr. Tobey invited fifty influential friends to hear him. Dunbar recited his "Ships that Pass in the Night." The governor of the state, who was present, said: "Of all things I have ever heard I have never listened to anything so impressive."

"With his manager he started on a recital tour delighting and impressing audiences, colored and white, everywhere. Hospitality was showered on him, and being neither retiring nor exclusive he enjoyed himself. 'Wherever hearty, pleasure and music met he made a feast.' He drank heavily.

"HE WAS sometimes snubbed by the ignorant and the boorish on account of color, even by some of those whose battles he was fighting. Once a Negro waiter, trained in the school of white race prejudice, hesitated to wait upon him in one of the leading hotels of Albany, New York, where a suite of rooms had been reserved for him. Nevertheless some of the most stubborn Negrophobes, capitulated to his charm. At a meeting for the furtherance of Negro education, a white man who had come to oppose the project after hearing him donated \$1,000. Perhaps his greatest triumph was winning the praise of Jefferson Davis, defeated president of the Confederacy.

"With money pouring in, Dunbar paid off his debts and gave an unencumbered house to his mother. In 1897 he went to England where John Hay, the American ambassador, one of his warmest friends, introduced him into the leading literary clubs: At one of these, the Savage Club, which was noted for its critical and hostile attitude towards incompetent speakers, he scored a veritable triumph. Everywhere in England his appearance was a success. But the English tour ended unpleasantly. His manager, it is said, decamped with the funds, leaving him stranded.

"HE RETURNED to America and Ingersoll secured him a post in the Library of Congress at \$720.00 a year. He now attempted a novel, "The Uncalled." But it was poorly written. He wrote for the Washington dailies with better success. On March 6, 1898, he married his first love: Alice Ruth Moore.

"The same year he left the Library. Work in the day there and his literary work at night were undermining his health, which was far from robust. He made another recital tour of the Southern States and won even greater applause. One of his best poems, recited at Tuskegee Institute, was written in twenty-four hours. Theodore Roosevelt and Henry M. Stanley sent their congratulations.

"But his health continued to decline. An attack of pneumonia sent him to Colorado to recuperate, where as often as strength permitted

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the fuzz. Everybody in Harlem knew about the Bag Broad just as well as Adam knew about her activities. As a matter of fact, Adam got the news from people in the streets of Harlem.

Unfortunately, in a court of law, hearsay evidence is not admissible. The thousands of ordinary citizens who knew all about what was happening, could not help their Black Prince one little bit.

THOUSANDS OF Harlemites had talked about the Bag Broad's operations a million times everyday in Harlem. But, the persons involved on either the payoff or the receiving end of these deals were as quiet as a mouse tiptoeing in cotton when the time came to help the Harlem Dandy in the Court.

Adam Clayton Powell lost the civil suit in the New York courts because there were no legitimate witnesses available to testify as to his position of truth.

Powell only spoke the truth as it was being talked every day by ordinary people in Harlem.

he gave recitals, sometimes in wealthy homes.

"AMONG HIS admirers in Denver was a millionaire, Major W. C. Daniel, who aided him. Dunbar, feeling that 'all the favors were coming from one side only,' desired to end the acquaintance. He continued it only on the advice of his friends.

"Deciding to settle down, he bought a home in Washington, D.C. on his return. President McKinley, as proof of his esteem, made him a colonel so that he could ride in his inaugural parade but his health grew worse and he drank more heavily. This, as in the case of Poe and Baudelaire, alienated his friends and others dear to him, including his wife.

"Of his separation from her he wrote, 'Something within me seems to be dead. There is no spirit or energy left in me. My upper lip has taken on a droop.'

"He lingered on, hoping like Baudelaire for death. He wrote:

'Because I have loved so vainly
And sung with such faltering breath
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of death.'

"The end came two years later on February 9, 1906, at the age of thirty-four.

"AS A LYRICIST, Dunbar ranks with the best. His "When Malindy Sings," or his "Angelina," are as ecstatic as Shelley's "Skylark," with the added merit of being more realistic. For those who understand dialect, his "When the Cone Pone's Hot," is as mouth-watering as Lamb's "Dissertation on Roast Pig." His "Cabin's Tale," and "The Soliloquy of a Turkey at the Approach of Christmas," are as humorous, fresh and sparkling as anything of its kind in English poetry.

"Few phases of life escaped Dunbar. Even Shakespeare did not note more thoroughly the little things of life. And, like Shakespeare, his genius illuminated them.

"Dunbar loved his people as did Burns. Like Burns he idealized the lives of the so-called common people and gilded their humble tasks until they felt it a joy to live. His was the supreme gift of taking the drab and commonplace and evoking joy, beauty and content from them. His verses seemed to take the burden from the shoulders of the weary and leave them refreshed. As Professor Scarborough said,

"EVERY PHASE of Negro life has been caught by his pen as by a camera. The simplest and homeliest life threw upon his brain indelible pictures that he transformed to liquid notes of song, sparkling with grace and vivid imagination. The life of the fireside, the field, the cabin, the wood, the stream, all gave him happy themes for his gift to play upon. The peculiar traits of his people, their quaint characteristics, their propensities and inclinations, all received a loving tender tribute at his hand as he wove them into immortal verse."

"Howell says of his dialect poems: 'There are divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people, whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretations of a very artistic completeness.'

"DUNBAR IS often spoken of as a 'Negro poet.' But this is true only in the sense that Burns was Scotch, Shakespeare was English or Omar Khyyam was Persian. In his sympathies

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If Powell is guilty of maligning this broad, there are at least 10,000 other people of Harlem just as guilty as Adam.

We are not concerned about the 10,000 others because they have no value, as individuals, in the Civil Rights movement. We are concerned about the one man who has done more for our cause than any other person ever elected to the House of Representatives. That man is our Black Prince, Adam Clayton Powell.

ADAM IS JUST as innocent of the charges of libel against that woman in Harlem, as is any reader of these writings.

Justice has not been done. We must do something to right the injustice to Adam Powell.

Powell's problems could perhaps be dissolved if every Negro in America would contribute one thin dime to a fund to pay the Bag Broad and keep that female Judas quiet. She does not deserve one dime, but we need Adam Powell, and a dime won't hurt any of us.

THIS WEEK IN NEGRO HISTORY

AN "NPI" FEATURE

THIS WEEK

Jan. 26, 1939	Major John R. Lynch, lawyer-Congressman from Mississippi (1873 and 1877), died in Chicago.
Jan. 26, 1788	Andrew Bryan, ordained as first pastor of African Baptist church, Yamacraw, Savannah, Ga.
Jan. 26, 1928	Eartha Kitt, singer-actress, born in South Carolina.
Jan. 26, 1869	Fifteenth Amendment proposed in Congress, giving former slaves the right to vote.
Jan. 27, 1913	Negro priest, J. J. Plantvigne, at St. Francis Catholic church, Baltimore; died.
Jan. 27, 1918	George Henry White, last of Negro Congressmen (of Reconstruction era) from South Carolina, died in Philadelphia.
Jan. 27, 1934	Mathilda Dunbar, mother of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, died.
Jan. 28, 1863	H. C. Smith, journalist, Cleveland Gazette and Ohio legislator, born in Clarksburg, W. Va.
Jan. 28, 1901	Richmond Barthe, contemporary sculptor, born in Bay St. Louis, Miss.
Jan. 29, 1839	Gen. S. C. Armstrong, pioneer in Negro education, named principal at Hampton Institute.
Jan. 30, 1942	Catholic Sisters of the Holy Family established by gifts of property and funds by four Negro women.
Jan. 30, 1865	Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery passed by Congress.
Jan. 31, 1931	Ernie Banks, of the Chicago Cubs, born in Dallas, Tex.
Jan. 31, 1948	Larry Doby became first Negro to play in the American League.

NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

FEB. 12 - 18

LAS VEGAS Voice

A WEEKLY NEWSPAPER (Published every Thursday) DEDICATED to the INTERESTS and ASPIRATIONS for a BETTER LIFE of the NEGRO CITIZENS of the STATE of NEVADA

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958 West Owens Ave. (Golden West Shopping Center) Las Vegas, Nevada
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ADVERTISING RATES FURNISHED UPON REQUEST

Price per copy - 15¢ * One year - \$6 * Two years - \$10
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