Freda Scott Giles: On Claude McKay's Life

McKay, Claude (15 Sept. 1890-22 May 1948), poet, novelist, and journalist, was born Festus Claudius McKay in Sunny Ville, Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, the son of Thomas Francis McKay and Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards, farmers. The youngest of eleven children, McKay was sent at an early age to live with his oldest brother, a schoolteacher, so that he could be given the best education available. An avid reader, McKay began to write poetry at the age of ten. In 1906 he decided to enter a trade school, but when the school was destroyed by an earthquake he became apprenticed to a carriage and cabinetmaker; a brief period in the constabulary followed. In 1907 McKay came to the attention of Walter Jekyll, an English gentleman residing in Jamaica who became his mentor, encouraging him to write dialect verse. Jekyll later set some of McKay's verse to music. By the time he immigrated to the United States in 1912, McKay had established himself as a poet, publishing two volumes of dialect verse, Songs of Jamaica (1912) and Constab Ballads (1912).

Having heard favorable reports of the work of Booker T. Washington, McKay enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama with the intention of studying agronomy; it was here that he first encountered the harsh realities of American racism, which would form the basis for much of his subsequent writing. He soon left Tuskegee for Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas. In 1914 a financial gift from Jekyll enabled him to move to New York, where he invested in a restaurant and married his childhood sweetheart, Eulalie Imelda Lewars. Neither venture lasted a year, and Lewars returned to Jamaica to give birth to their daughter. McKay was forced to take a series of menial jobs. He was finally able to publish two poems, "Invocation" and "The Harlem Dancer," under a pseudonym in 1917. McKay's talent as a lyric poet earned him recognition, particularly from Frank Harris, editor of Pearson's magazine, and Max Eastman, editor of The Liberator, a socialist journal; both became instrumental in McKay's early career.

As a socialist, McKay eventually became an editor at The Liberator, in addition to writing various articles for a number of left-wing publications. During the period of racial violence against blacks known as the Red Summer of 1919, McKay wrote one of his best-known poems, the sonnet, "If We Must Die," an anthem of resistance later quoted by Winston Churchill during World War II. "Baptism," "The White House," and "The Lynching," all sonnets, also exemplify some of McKay's finest protest poetry. The generation of poets who formed the core of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes and Countée Cullen, identified McKay as a leading inspirational force, even though he did not write modern verse. His innovation lay in the directness with which he spoke of racial issues and his choice of the working class, rather than the middle class, as his focus.

McKay resided in England from 1919 through 1921, then returned to the United States. While in England, he was employed by the British socialist journal, Workers' Drednought, and published a book of verse, Spring in New Hampshire, which was released in an expanded version in the United States in 1922. The same year, Harlem Shadows, perhaps his most significant poetry collection, appeared. McKay then began a twelve-year sojourn through Europe, the Soviet Union, and Africa, a period marked by poverty and illness. While in the Soviet Union he compiled his journalistic essays into a book, The Negroes in America, which
was not published in the United States until 1979. For a time he was bouyed by the success of his first published novel, Home to Harlem (1928), which was critically acclaimed but engendered controversy for its frank portrayal of the underside of Harlem life.

His next novel, Banjo: A Story without a Plot (1929), followed the exploits of an expatriate African-American musician in Marseilles, a locale McKay knew well. This novel and McKay's presence in France influenced Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and other pioneers of the Negritude literary movement that took hold in French West Africa and the West Indies. Banjo did not sell well. Neither did Gingertown (1932), a short story collection, or Banana Bottom (1933). Often identified as McKay's finest novel, Banana Bottom tells the story of Bita Plant, who returns to Jamaica after being educated in England and struggles to form an identity that reconciles the aesthetic values imposed upon her with her appreciation for her native roots.

McKay had moved to Morocco in 1930, but his financial situation forced him to return to the United States in 1934. He gained acceptance to the Federal Writers Project in 1936 and completed his autobiography, A Long Way from Home, in 1937. Although no longer sympathetic toward communism, he remained a socialist, publishing essays and articles in The Nation, the New Leader, and the New York Amsterdam News. In 1940 McKay produced a nonfiction work, Harlem: Negro Metropolis, which gained little attention but has remained an important historical source. Never able to regain the stature he had achieved during the 1920s, McKay blamed his chronic financial difficulties on his race and his failure to obtain academic credentials and associations.

McKay never returned to the homeland he left in 1912. His became a U.S. citizen in 1940. High blood pressure and heart disease led to a steady physical decline, and in a move that surprised his friends, McKay abandoned his lifelong agnosticism and embraced Catholicism. In 1944 he left New York for Chicago, where he worked for the Catholic Youth Organization. He eventually succumbed to congestive heart failure in Chicago. His second autobiography, My Green Hills of Jamaica, was published posthumously in 1979.

Assessments of McKay's lasting influence vary. To McKay's contemporaries, such as James Weldon Johnson, "Claude McKay's poetry was one of the great forces in bringing about what is often called the 'Negro Literary Renaissance.' " While his novels and autobiographies have found an increasing audience in recent years, modern critics appear to concur with Arthur P. Davis that McKay's greatest literary contributions are found among his early sonnets and lyrics. McKay ended A Long Way from Home with this assessment of himself: "I have nothing to give but my singing. All my life I have been a troubadour wanderer, nourishing myself mainly on the poetry of existence. And all I offer here is the distilled poetry of my experience."

Bibliography

The bulk of McKay's papers is located in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University. Numerous letters are widely scattered; some sources include the Schomburg and H. L. Mencken collections at the New York City Public Library; the William Stanley Brathwaite Papers at Harvard University; the Alain Locke Papers at Howard University; the NAACP Papers in the Library of Congress; the Eastman Papers at the University of Indiana, Bloomington; the Rosenwald Fund Papers at Fisk University; and the Countee Cullen Papers at Dillard University. Selected Poems of Claude McKay, an extensive collection, was published in 1953. American Mercury, The Crisis, The Liberator, and Opportunity are among the wide range of periodicals in which McKay's poems, articles, book reviews, and short
stories appear. Early poems can be found in the Jamaican newspapers Jamaica Times and Kingston Daily Gleaner. Late poems appear in Catholic Worker. Extensive bibliographies can be found in several unpublished dissertations.


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