MONROE WORK: A BLACK SCHOLAR AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, 1908-1945

by

James Preston
Instructor of African History
Tuskegee Institute

Tuskegee Institute, Alabama
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TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, 1908-1945

Recent historical writing has clearly shown that extensive bonds have existed between Afro-Americans and Africans. Much interest in this area is now being directed toward considerations of the motivations involved in this contact, and the student who seeks to investigate the field has a fairly large body of secondary material at his disposal. An exhaustive bibliography of these materials is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a few of the significant, recent publications are noted below.

An article written by George Shepperson presents the best short survey of available materials.[1] The period from the late 19th to the early 20th century is more completely developed, with little discussion of the pre-Civil War era. Significant contacts with Africa during the earlier years is highlighted in an article by Hollis R. Lynch.[2] Pointing out the relative popularity of African immigration in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th century, Lynch explains the subsequent demise of the movement as coinciding with the rise of the Civil War and the renewed hope by Blacks that the War promised eventual citizenship rights equal to those accorded whites.

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[1]George Shepperson, "Notes on Negro American Influences on the Development of African Nationalism," Journal of African History, I (1960), 299-312.

[2]Hollis R. Lynch, "Pan-Negro Nationalism in the New World before 1862," in Boston University Papers on Africa, Vol. II, African History, ed. by Jeffrey Butler (Boston: Boston University Press, 1966), pp. 149-179.

One of the most disastrous eras in American history for the Afro-American was that preceding the Civil War to the late 19th century. C. Vann Woodward has shown that these years witnessed the formation of the racial caste structure of southern society. An intense racism, coupled with economic hardships, led Blacks to seek immigration from the South; they headed mostly to northern and western sections of the country. Edwin S. Redkey,[2] in a book examining nationalist and back-to-Africa movements during the end of the century, reveals that the African immigration movements that flourished before the Civil War were revived after the Compromise of 1877. In his book, Redkey calls attention to Henry M. Turner, a regrettably little known, but a most impressive Black leader whose stature as a Pan-Africanist is similar to that of Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois.

The dominant trend of the research in the field of Afro-American/African history would seem to indicate that Blacks who have shown an interest in Africa, outside the missionary field, are generally intense radicals that frequently also condemn American society and particularly the treatment of Afro-Americans.[3] It is

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[1]Rayford W. Logan, The Betrayal of the Negro, From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson, 3rd ed. (New York: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1968), pp. 131-146. The prevalence of immigration sentiment outside of the United States is discussed.

[2]Edwin S. Redkey, Black Exodus, Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910, Yale Publications in American Studies, 17 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

[3]See, for instance, Shepperson, "Notes on Negro American Influences."

surprising, therefore, to witness a relatively new interest by scholars in the African involvement of Booker T. Washington, the great accommodationist. Louis R. Harlan, in an article, views Washington's African interest as essentially stemming from his Christian self-help and politically subservient philosophy.[1] Harlan characterizes Washington as having ". . . thoroughly subscribed to the 'White man's Burden' of leadership and authority /and/ that, in seeming forgetfulness that he was Negro, he actually took up the burden himself."[2] Yet, this view of Washington, while it may offer a certain attractiveness for those who wish to see the Tuskegee President in a simplistic and one-dimensional framework, is, for serious scholars, incomplete and superficial. It particularly does not reflect the total outlook of his school towards Africa.[3] Professor Harlan has greatly added to our knowledge of Afro-American/African history by exposing Washington's extensive involvement in Africa. Yet, a closer examination of the activities of Tuskegee Institute with this region may offer an enlarged

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[1]Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the White Man's Burden," American Historical Review, LXXI (January 1966).

[2]Ibid., p. 442.

[3]Particularly interesting in this regard is Shepperson, "Notes on Negro American Influences . . .), pp. 205-206. Shepperson points out that, although Washington's views have been unfairly distorted by being juxtaposized with those of DuBois, his ideas nevertheless had, "profound effects on African nationalism," p. 205; few could believe that Washington had forgotten his race if the stinging rebuke that he administered to a white missionary in Liberia who attempted to convince him that he should assist in replacing a Black official with a white one is read; letter from Booker T. Washington to W. R. Funk, December 27, 1905, Booker T. Washington Papers, 969, hereinafter cited as BTW papers.

understanding of the image of Africa held by Afro-Americans during a significant stage of American history.

The Tuskegee interest in Africa cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the philosophy upon which the school and its parent institution, Hampton, was based. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the founder of Hampton, bequeathed to Tuskegee through his protegee, Booker T. Washington, a basically missionary philosophical orientation. Armstrong's missionary philosophy, however, was different from most. The són of a missionary who also held a position as Minister of Public Instruction in Hawaii, young Armstrong was able to observe the influence of Christianity on the Hawaiian people. What he saw did not satisy him. The "Message," he observed, was thundered from the pulpit on Sunday to large numbers of eager listeners, yet these same people, ". . . lived pretty much in the old ways; all in one room, including the stranger within their gates . . ."[1] He, thus, concluded that despite the dedicated exertions of the missionaries, the people, ". . . seemed to have accepted, but not to have fully adopted Christianity."[2]

Armstrong decided that preaching the Gospel was only a portion of the task of Christianization--basic living habits had also to be

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[1]Samuel Chapman Armstrong, Twenty-Two Years' Work of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute at Hampton, Virginia (Hampton, Virginia: Hampton Normal School Press, 1893), p. 1.

[2]Ibid.

changed. He began with the firm belief that the Hawaiian was deficient in character, an assumption he also applied to the American Black man.[1] The Hawaiian, says Armstrong, ". . . is what his past made him."[2] The Armstrong philosophy, as it was passed to Tuskegee, became a definite factor weighing on Washington's ability to understand the non-westerner and particularly the African.

Washington also suffered severe limitations in his African involvement because of his ignorance of the continent during the early part of his career. Despite frequent invitations to visit, and a personal desire to see the continent, he was never able to make the trip.[3] His information, therefore, was ". . . largely . . . gathered from reports of missionaries and travelers, from the experiences of Tuskegee students in Togo and other parts of Africa in cotton culture, and their experiences in teaching the natives American methods.[4]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 6. The Armstrong influence on Washington can be detected here, and he appears to have been more firmly convinced earlier in his career (1900), than at a later date, that there is little in the Black heritage which can be useful. For he said: "Those who constantly direct attention to the Negro youth's moral weaknesses, and compare his advancement with that of white youths, do not consider the influence of the memories which cling about the old family homesteads," Booker T. Washington, "Up From Slavery," in Three Negro Classics: Up From Slavery, The Souls of Black Folk, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, ed. with an introduction by John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 49.

[3] Letter from Booker T. Washington to A. E. LeRoy, April 29, 1908, Washington, D. C., Library of Congress Manuscript Collection, Booker T. Washington Papers, 818, hereinafter cited as BTW followed by container.

[4] Booker T. Washington, "Industrial Education in Africa," in The Independent (1906), BTW, 969.

The Tuskegee Principal maintained his contacts with African missionaries and similar groups throughout his life, however, his knowledge of Africa did not always depend exclusively on this source, and he later moved toward more objective scholarship in his understanding of the continent. Contrasted to his early "missionary" and "traveler's" accounts of Africa, by 1909, he could write of a powerful king who ruled in West Africa:

> The greatest chieftain that ever ruled in West Africa, Mohammed Askia, lived in Kano. He became ruler in 1492 and held sway over a region probably as large as the German Empire. . . . Mohammed Askia was an example of the highest degree to which Negroes have attained in the way of political administration and control. His dynasty, which was entirely of native descent, is the more remarkable if we consider that this Negro king was held in the highest esteem and veneration by the most learned and rigid Mohammedans. Not only did he consolidate and even extend his empire, but went, in 1495, on a pilgrimage to Mecca accompanied by 1,500 armed men, 1,000 on foot and 500 on horseback, and founded there a charitable institution.[1]

Additional evidence for this new emphasis towards Africa can be seen later in Washington's career in the greater variety of his African interests. For instance, he became involved in the financial problems of the struggling state of Liberia;[2] carried on an energetic and successful campaign in opposition to a proposed African Immigration[3] bill that he had argued would practically exclude African students

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[1]Booker T. Washington, The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery, Vol. I (New York: Peter Smith, 1940), pp. 55-56.

[2]BTW Papers, 394.

[3]BTW Papers, 77.

from coming to the United States. He was also indirectly involved with the African Union Company,[1] a scheme to develop an Afro-American/African business venture based on international trade; and he convened a Conference on Africa, an international gathering of missionary, colonial and scholarly interests[2] that met at Tuskegee in 1912.

Although it may be argued that this increased interest in Africa was a natural outgrowth of his earlier interest--and to a certain extent this was true--yet, there also appears to be a definite broadening of interest in Africa by the Tuskegee President. If this contention is correct it is probably equally valid to view Washington's involvement and his greater knowledge of Africa as probably not unconnected to his appointment of a new staff member at Tuskegee in 1908. The new employee was Monroe Work, a sociologist with a wide interest in Black culture and a specialist in African History.

*Work's career as a scholar in the field of Black history and culture had begun with his graduation from high school in Arkansas City, Kansas in 1892. Though faced with odds proscribed by his color, he managed to attend Chicago Theological Seminary, graduating in 1898. While attending the Seminary he enrolled in a course in "Christian Sociology."[3] Developing more of an interest in Sociology and less in

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[1]BTW Papers, 9.

[2]BTW Papers, 10.

[3]Jessie P. Guzman, "Monroe Nathan Work and His Contribution," The Journal of Negro History, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4 (October, 1949), p. 432. This pioneering effort by one of Work's associates at Tuskegee Institute is concentrated on his total career, including his extensive Afro-American interest, and therefore does not attempt to specifically examine his interest in Africa.

theology, he embarked upon serious study in the former field, receiving a Bachelor of Philosophy in 1902 and a Master of Arts in 1903.

While in graduate school, Work began traveling around to the city's Black neighborhood churches and holding debates with three other students. In these sessions, his scholarship and penchant for facts made him an outstanding debator. He delighted in his ability and he recalls how in debates he and his partner would ". . . always get the decision because the other fellows might say the facts we offered weren't so but they couldn't offer any against them. You can't argue with facts."[1] The collection of facts, particularly those relating to Black people, became the passion of his life.

After receiving his master's degree, Work was offered a teaching position in Oklahoma. The job was made more attractive because it carried with it the possibility of an eventual opportunity to become president of the small black school. He refused the offer, and instead went to Georgia State College.[2] This decision, one of the most crucial of his career, resulted in his working in Georgia for the next four years. There he energetically pursued the study of Black people. He was forced to continue this interest without the aid of a library, since the state government apparently did not believe Black

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[1]"Statement Made to Lewis A. Jones," May 15, 1932, Tuskegee, Alabama, Monroe Work Papers, 11, Tuskegee Institute, hereinafter referred to as Work Papers.

[2]Guzman, "Monroe Nathan Work . . .," p. 433.

students needed one. He decided, therefore, to sacrifice part of his meager earnings of eight hundred dollars a year to purchase duplicates of all the African reference card holdings at the Library of Congress. He also placed a standing order for all others that the library received.

Work's strong interest in Africa emerged at a time when historical writings on Afro-American history by Blacks was shackled with the memory of slavery and oppression. In contrast, just four years after Work entered the University of Chicago Theological Seminary, W. E. B. DuBois finished a major work dealing with Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade.[1] In his book, DuBois asserted in an unqualified manner that Africa possessed a proud past, a statement which must have greatly encouraged the young sociologist to pursue further research in the field.[2] But the immediate influence on him to study the African was William I. Thomas, a famous sociologist teaching at the University, who was interested in "social origins." Thomas's approach, Work deduced, could be applied to the study of Black people and he began writing his required sociology papers on African topics.[3]

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[1]W. E. B. DuBois, Suppression of the African Slave Trade to America, Harvard University Historical Series, Vol. I (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1896).

[2]In terms of the study of Black people, Work himself mentions that DuBois, ". . . was the first man in the field." Work Papers, 11, "Statement made to Jones." It may be of some consequence to mention that although Work exhibits a great interest in Africa, he, like Washington, never visited the continent.

[3]Work Papers, 11, "Statement to Jones."

At Georgia State College, Work utilized to best advantage his isolated and intellectually arid environment. He worked diligently on his African notes, even though there was little opportunity to put his knowledge to use in teaching. Life at the small Black institution must not have been among the happier years of his career, and the contrast between his challenging experiences at Chicago must have seemed painful to him. One indication of his disenchantment can be seen in the fact that it required only fifteen minutes of conversation before he decided to leave the school and accept another position.[1] The opportunity to move came because of unusual difficulties now experienced by the President of Tuskegee Institute.

By 1908, Washington was at the peak of his fame. His itinerary involved an enormous amount of traveling and speaking engagements. This demand for speeches was far beyond his ability to adequately fulfill them. Those which he found time to fill made increasing demands of preparation and many of his speeches reflected a carelessness uncharacteristic of the man who demanded such a high standard of excellence from others. Following a speech made at Hampton Institute, a faculty member and personal friend, Dr. Thomas Jones, approached Washington's aide and pressed him to make the Principal aware of the situation. Washington apparently responded well to the advice and agreement was reached that a person would be sought to assist him.

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[1]Work Papers, 11, "Statement to Jones."

By chance, Jones had met Monroe Work at Georgia State while traveling to various Black schools in the South. He had been unable to meet the institution's president, a planned oversight on the part of President Wright who apparently did not want to be bothered,[1] and he was consequently left with the young Work who carried on a lengthy conversation with him. Jones, in fact, was so impressed that when the opening at Tuskegee was established, he remembered the young man at Georgia State. A relationship was thus established providing Washington with a greater appreciation of the history and achievements of Africa. For Work, it provided one of the most prestigeous platforms available to a Black scholar within the Black community.

Work could barely hide his enthusiasm for Tuskegee and his awe of its Sage. From his personal recollection, he described his first meeting with Washington as a brief conversation lasting hardly more than fifteen minutes and consisting of a couple of questions concerning his background. He was then told to come to Tuskegee and his appointment would be confirmed.[2] Within a few months, Work was deeply involved in his new job at Tuskegee. At first, no one, not even Washington himself, had a clear idea of the exact nature of his duties although there appeared to be a vague concept in Washington's mind

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[1]Work Papers, 11, "Statement made to Jones."

[2]Work Papers, 11, Memo on Mr. Work's Conference with Mr. Washington concerning the establishment of the Department of Records and Research (n.d.).

that his new employee would initiate a history department of the Negro.[1] But even Washington's influential personal secretary, Emmett Scott, was unsure, and erroneously thought that the sociologist would establish a placement bureau to keep records of Tuskegee graduates.[2]

Disregarding the opinions of others concerning his duties, Work answered only to the Tuskegee Principal; on December 21, 1908, he submitted his Plan for Making Tuskegee a Greater Center for Information Relating to the Negro.[3] In a short memo, he summarized his objectives. They consisted of organizing the existing materials which the school possessed relating to Black people, compiling a comprehensive list of publications dealing with the Afro-American, and making available to the public a bibliography of information on Black people. He also outlined several additional projects to be completed during the following year. These included plans to prepare a history of Africa to be used in schools, a book of African folklore, and other works dealing with Afro-American topics.

From this small but auspicious beginning, Work immersed himself in the study of his people--becoming one of a handful of true Africanist and one of an even smaller company of Black African scholars. His work prospered, and before his death in 1945, he suggested a budget for the Department of Records and Research of two hundred fifty

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Work Papers, 11, Memo from Monroe Work to Booker T. Washington, December 21, 1908.

thousand dollars, with forty-five thousand of this amount set aside for the purchase of books relating to Black people, and three thousand earmarked specifically for materials on Africa.[1]

Although Work's interest and early publications on African topics were begun previous to his coming to Tuskegee, his most significant materials were published after settling in Alabama. Between 1908 and 1910, several articles appeared in the Southern Workman,[2] a Hampton Institute periodical. In 1916, he published an article in the Journal of Negro History[3] in which he examined the development of African civilizations. With the publication of the latter article he then concentrated his African interest on two projects which dominated his later life. These were: the Negro Year Book, published from 1912-1938, and the monumental Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America. Although the Negro Year Book was only peripherally concerned with Africa, providing a background for Afro-American topics, the Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America was comprehensive in its treatment of the African. With the

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[1]Work Papers, 7, Memo by Work on "Suggestions Relative to the Expenditure of Money Requested for Research at Tuskegee Institute (n.d.). Although the date of this proposed budget request has not been pinpointed, there is little reason to believe that Work's department would not be dealing with such large allocations by the early 1940's.

[2]Work, "An African System of Writing," Southern Workman, XXXVII (October, 1908), pp. 518-526; Work, "The African Family as an Institution," Southern Workman (June-July-August 1909), pp. 343-353; 391-397; 433-440; Work, "African Agriculture," Southern Workman, XXXIX (November-December), 1910, 681-688.

[3]Work, "The Passing Tradition and the African Civilization," Journal of Negro History, I (January, 1916), pp. 34-42.

assistance of a grant from the Phelps Stokes Fund, Work was able to undertake research in Europe and he collected several thousand references on African subjects.[1]

Work's publications are an elegant testimony of his dedication to African scholarship, yet even more impressive are the voluminous notes from his lectures and speeches. His lectures were begun soon after his arrival in Tuskegee. They covered African culture, and the rise and fall of ancient African civilizations. Scholarly and well-written, the lectures were continued until shortly before his death. Work was unequivocal concerning his objectives in these lectures, for he believed that it was imperative to change the attitude of Blacks toward themselves. It seemed to him that ". . . the sentiments and attitudes of the race concerning itself will largely determine what it will ultimately achieve."[2] Work perceptively noted that, "The majority of Negroes do not think well of the race, they are ashamed of their past; they know the past only as a period of slavery in this country, and back of that degradation and savagery in Africa."[3]

The African scholar set out to revise the image the Black man held of himself, and in so doing, he followed Washington in the belief that his efforts must be directed in two directions: On the one hand, the essential requirement was to revise the self-image of

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[1]Guzman, "Monroe Nathan Work . . .," pp. 454-455.

[2]Work Papers, 1, "The Negro's Attitude Toward Himself," address delivered at Wilberforce University, 1916.

[3]*Ibid.*

Blacks; and on the other hand, to change "the adverse sentiments and attitudes of the white race."[1] He believed that articles and extensive correspondence would provide the white public with greater knowledge of the past achievements of Blacks, and he hoped that using such methods, in addition to his lectures at Tuskegee and elsewhere, he could assist Blacks to develop a positive self-image.[2]

Work told his people that their own image of themselves had been manufactured for them by whites and they had believed it. Black inferiority, he said, was a product of slavery and the assumptions by whites that Africans taken from their homeland were heathens. Using his broad knowledge of the best scientific information of the day, he countered these charges by pointing out that whites and Blacks were indeed different, but such differences are not proof of superiority or inferiority amongst the two groups and are merely, "differences in kind not in value."[3] Echoing the Separate-nationalist ideology evident throughout Afro-American history, Work challenged Blacks to develop along their own lines, reaching their full potential as a people.[3] To accomplish this, he firmly believed that ". . . it is necessary that the Blacks shall have an extended knowledge concerning

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Work Papers, 1, "The Negro Attitude. . ."

[3] An excellent discussion of this ideology is found in Harold Cruse, Rebellion or Revolution (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), passim, Chap. XIII.

the Negro in Africa. He should know what degree of culture the primitive African has attained and of the glory of bygone Negro civilizations."[1]

Through lectures and public addresses, Work took his people through past ages and allowed them to revisit ancient civilizations of splendor where "the real African need by no means resort to the rags and tatters of bygone European splendor."[2] For he could show them that their ancestors had, ". . . precious ornaments of his own, of ivory and plums, fine plaited willow wear, weapons of superior workmanship."[3]

Work's lectures on Africa were suprisingly thorough considering that it was not until the 1950's that American colleges began to offer African history courses on a relatively large scale. Yet, most of these courses were not histories of Africa, but vaguely related offerings with a heavy European emphasis, such as the "Colonization of Africa." Indeed, there were historians who would not acknowledge that Africa had a history previous to the European involvement.[4]

In the face of indifference from the American scholarly establishment and a generally negative attitude toward Africa by the

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[1]Work Papers, I, "The Negro Attitude . . ."

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]This attitude was prevalent even as late as the 1950's, see for example, Boniface Obichere, "African History and Western Civilization," in Armstead L. Robinson, Craig O. Foster, Donald H. Ogilvie, ed., Black Studies in the University: A Symposium (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 34.

American press,[1] Work's efforts in introducing to his students an entirely different perspective of Africa than that which was currently in vogue seem all the more remarkable. He reminded his students of great African leaders such as Mansa Musa, Sonni Ali, and Askia Mohammed Abu Bekr. It must have amazed them to learn that there were great educational centers in ancient Africa located in such places as Timbuctu, Mali, Jenne and Katsina. He introduced them to historians who had traveled throughout the world and written extensively about Africa, and they must have with difficulty attempted to pronounce such names as Bekri, Leo Africanus, Baba and the Black poet, Essadi.[2]

Work's interest in the ancient states of Africa included the kingdoms of Northeast Africa as well as those in Sub-Saharan Africa. He seems to have been particularly interested in the kingdom of Kush which he designated Ethiopia, a term used generically by many Afro-Americans during the late 19th century in reference to the whole continent.[3] He referred to modern Ethiopia as Abyssinia, a name also frequently used by historians of the period. Work wrote little of the Egyptians, apparently accepting the judgment of his day that they were

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[1]Logan, "The Betrayal of the Negro," passim, pp. 242-275; pp. 371-392.

[2]Work Papers, 11, "The Kingdoms of the Sudan," (n.d.).

[3]See for an example, J. E. Casely Hayford, Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation, Africana Modern Library, ed. by E. U. Essien-Udom, No. 8 (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd. 1969).

whites, a contention no longer unequivocally accepted by a large number of African historians.[1]

But if Work accepted Egypt as a brilliant white culture, he seemed to have fully believed that Kush, the southern Black state, matched Egypt's glory. He emphasized to his students that two thousand years before the birth of Christ, the kingdom of Kush prospered, defeating and occupying mighty Egypt in the eighth century B.C. One of the Kushitic kings, he reminded them, was mentioned in the Bible because he defeated the Assyrian invaders of the Holy Land.[2] Work also suggested that the Abyssinians were a composite racial strain, a conclusion with which modern Africanist would concur. He quotes an anonymous source in describing the Abyssinian king, reigning in 64 A.D., as, "a prince superior to most and educated with a knowledge of Greek."[3]

The Black scholar did not omit recent African history. He began research into colonialism at the time European powers were entrenching themselves in Africa. He viewed the overall colonial impact as essentially negative: the introduction of European laws

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[1]One of the most read and objective African historians, Basil Davidson, in discussing the view that Egypt was a white nation believes that, "The old racial categories of 'white' and 'black' can indeed make little sense in this or perhaps any other connection," Africa in History: Themes and Outlines (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 22.

[2]Work Papers, container 5, "An Ancient Negroid Nation." (n.d.)

[3]Work Papers, 7, "Abyssinia." (n.d.)

and customs were aspects of European rule that Work believed had, ". . . for almost 400 years . . . worked injury to the African."[1]

African political history, the chronicle of the rise and fall of states and the imposition of foreign rule, was not Monroe Work's sole concern. He was vitally interested in Africa's cultural heritage. He utilized his training as a sociologist to study the African family, religion and folkways. With a sensitivity to the traditional African way of life all too rare, he set himself the task of presenting, ". . . the African in a dignified manner and not from the Uncle Remus standpoint."[2] In his search for the "real" African, Work gave great emphasis in his lectures to African handicraft industries, and presented his students with the day-to-day life of the people as contrasted to the more glamorous events surrounding nation building. Work must have also seen in these handicrafts a parallel to the Tuskegee system, for his school placed heavy emphasis on this very kind of industry and it must have pleased not only Work, but Washington and others at the Institute to be able to draw similarities in the working habits of African ancestors for the benefit of their own students.

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[1]Work Papers, I, "The Partition of Africa." (n.d.)

[2]Work Papers, 4, Letter from Work to Carter G. Woodson, July 23, 1927.

Armstrong's and Washington's "education for life" philosophy could be seen in the Africans' wood-working abilities; carving stools for furniture, constructing pestles or troughs for oil pressing and fashioning flails and other implements important in preparing grains. Work also discussed the boat building abilities of the Waganda peoples, and the ancient arts of pottery making and basket weaving which the Africans are acknowledged masters. Work must have amazed his audience when he informed them that African cotton goods were at one time exported to Portugal and that it was only in the late eighteenth century that Europe began to export these goods to West Africa. He pointed out that Africans were also particularly adept at using dyes and working in leather.[1]

The sociologist believed that the best example of African handicraft was found in his use of iron. Lecturing in 1916, he concluded that the Africans had made, ". . . one of the most important contributions to civilization of mankind, through his discovery of iron smelting."[2] Almost thirty years later, and less certain of African primacy,[3] he nevertheless continued to marvel at the ability of Africans to work with the metal.

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[1]Work Papers, 1, "African Handicrafts."

[2]Work Papers, 1, "The Negro's Attitude toward Himself," Address given at Wilberforce University, 1916.

[3]Work Papers, 1, "African Work in Iron," February, 1944.

Work's wide ranging African preoccupation included lecture notes on African literature, and newspaper clippings of African exploits during the first World War. He also collected a large number of photographs; some of these are individual pictures of members of the South African National Congress.[1]

In attempting to evaluate Monroe Work's impact, there is always the danger of attributing too much to his career as a scholar. But there is also the error of underestimating the influence that he exerted in educating his students and the larger public through his publications and lectures. At the very least, it may be said he introduced a new orientation toward Africa at Tuskegee, infusing a pride in African achievements as against the traditional Christian/paternalistic outlook inherited from Hampton Institute. This new emphasis, as previously shown, led to other African involvements beyond missionary/industrial education, and the capstone of Washington's African interest, the International Conference on the Negro held at Tuskegee in 1912 should probably be viewed as a partial result of Work's new influence.[2]

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[1]Work Papers, 5.

[2]This, of course, should not be taken to suggest that this meeting was not heavily laden with missionary types, for this was its dominant characteristic. However, the fact that a significant group of "radicals" and scholars were either in attendance and spoke or were invited and could not attend is probably an indication of Washington's broader outlook. See BTW, 917; also, "International Conference on the Negro," Tuskegee Student (April 20, 1912), pp. 1-3.

In evaluating Work, it must be kept in mind that he, like Washington, was a "race man."[1] That is, he felt a pride in his race, no matter their present or past accomplishments, and a belief in their ability to progress. He expressed these sentiments best in an address at Wilberforce University in 1916 when he voiced his conviction that Black people "were . . . a coming race. Unlike the old colored woman, 'we has not done been whar we gwine,' we are," said Work,". . . now [just] arriving."[2]

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[1]August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), p. 216. Those who label Washington as an "Uncle Tom" have difficulty explaining the respect shown his views by well-known West Indian and African nationalists. Hollis R. Lynch, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Negro Patriot. 1832-1912 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 134-136.

[2]Work Papers, "The Negro's Attitude Toward Himself."

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