

RECORDER OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

A Biography of

Monroe Nathan Work.

By Linda O. McMurry.

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By Allen B. Ballard

IN this fine introduction to Southern history in the first decades of this century, Linda O. McMurry describes the life and times of the sociologist Monroe Nathan Work.

Born on a North Carolina plantation, Work (1866-1945) was raised in Illinois and in Kansas, where his father became a homesteader in the 1870's. In "Recorder of the Black Experience," we read that Work, because he had to help his aging, invalid parents run their farm, was only able to finish high school at the age of 26. He served briefly as a frontier minister but resigned his post because his scholarly deportment did not suit the congregation, which wanted a more emotional pastor. He then entered onto a path that led, in 1903, to a master's degree in sociology from the University of Chicago.

In 1908 Booker T. Washington hired Work to do research at Tuskegee Institute, "to collect and classify data which will be of general value and interest." The young sociologist pursued what became his life's work — using sociological facts as a weapon against the fierce oppression visited upon blacks in the South. Work thus abandoned the active protest used by W. E. B. Du Bois, with whom he had once been allied against Washington, the moderate accommodationist. Work was certainly aware of the ambiguities surrounding his revised stance — from 1880 to 1930 over 3,000 blacks were lynched in the South.

His monumental and still essential "Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America,"

Allen B. Ballard, a professor of government at City College, is the author of "One More Day's Journey," an account of black migration from the South to Philadelphia in the early 1900's.

which has more than 17,000 entries, was published in 1928. Work also produced several editions of the "Negro Year Book," a popular annual among blacks. He preserved Booker T. Washington's papers and conveyed them safely to the Library of Congress. He emphasized the richness of the Afro-American heritage by writing on such topics as the black origins of Egyptian civilization. This "quiet, reserved man who could only rarely be stirred to display fierce anger" was also the driving force behind the inauguration, in 1915, of National Negro Health Week, important in a context in which poverty and poor sanitary conditions undermined the health of black people.

Finally, from Work's office at Tuskegee came forth a yearly drumbeat of statistics — a record

"He used sociological facts as a weapon against oppression."

of the lynchings, state by state, county by county. From 1914 on, these widely accepted "Tuskegee Lynching Reports" became the factual basis for the struggle against lynching (although Du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P. often challenged the narrowness of Work's definition of "lynching," which excluded, for example, the victims of race riots).

Mrs. McMurry, who teaches history at North Carolina State University, seems at times to downplay the importance of Work's version of political agitation against lynching. And the reader would like to know more about the subject's personality. But as it is, Mrs. McMurry has let Work's labors speak for themselves, and the sheer weight and meaningfulness of his efforts shine through. His research and writing represented nothing less than a disciplined and concentrated love for his people in a time when, as he wrote, "little value was placed on the life of an individual Negro." □