

# William Edward Burghardt DuBois

Historian,  
Social Critic,  
Activist

## PERHAPS THE MOST

brilliant and influential African American intellectual of the 20th century, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Mass. He was the son of Alfred DuBois, a Haitian-born barber and itinerant laborer, and of Mary Silvina Burghardt, a descendant of a freed Dutch slave who had fought briefly in the American Revolution. DuBois attended a racially integrated public high school and graduated with a classical college preparatory education. With scholarship funds provided by Great Barrington citizens, he then enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn, a southern college founded after the Civil War to educate freed slaves. While at Fisk, DuBois had his first extended encounters with African American culture and southern American racism.<sup>1</sup>

After graduating from Fisk in 1888, DuBois enrolled as a junior at Harvard, received a BA cum laude in 1890, an MA in 1891, and a PhD in 1895. He was deeply influenced by historian Albert Bushnell Hart and the philosopher-psychologist William James. His PhD dissertation, *The Suppression of the Afri-*

*can Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*, was published in 1896 as the inaugural volume of the Harvard Historical Studies series. From 1892 to 1894, DuBois traveled in Germany and completed a monograph on the history of southern US agriculture. In 1896, the University of Pennsylvania invited him to conduct a detailed sociological study of African Americans in Philadelphia, which was published in 1899 as *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>2</sup> This study combined advocacy and careful empirical scholarship, emphasizing historical and circumstantial rather than hereditary explanations for the conditions of the African American community.

In 1897, DuBois moved to Atlanta University in Georgia, where he taught history, sociology, and economics and became corresponding secretary and editor of the annual Atlanta University conferences for the “Study of the Negro Problems.” The proceedings of the 11th such conference, held in May 1906, were published as *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*, the source of this reprinted excerpt. One of DuBois’ major goals in this publication was to discredit the theories of Black

racial inferiority—their extreme vulnerability to cold northern climates, for example—recently advanced by statistician and insurance company executive Frederick L. Hoffman.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, DuBois argued that the genuine health disparities between Whites and Blacks were a consequence of the poorer economic, social, and sanitary conditions facing African Americans.

DuBois had long been committed to social reform by means of social science. But he now became more directly engaged in advocacy and political action, especially in response to the rising tide of southern racial violence. He helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, and in 1910 he left Atlanta to become an officer of the NAACP, its only Black board member, and the editor of its monthly magazine, the *Crisis*.

DuBois served as editor of the *Crisis* for 24 years, taking on such issues as legal and political rights, discrimination and race relations, African American cultural and intellectual advancement, and Pan-Africanism. He also became increasingly interested in the Soviet Union, Marxism, and racially based Black

of the total deaths; then come marasmus, whooping cough, consumption, inanition, pneumonia, inflammation of the brain, child birth, typhoid fever, epilepsy, cholera infantum, still births, premature births, inflammation of the kidneys, dysentery, heart disease and Bright’s disease.

The diseases below the line, i.e., of which the Negro population die to a less proportion than they form of the entire population are anemia,

erysipelas, diphtheria, cancer, alcoholism, old age, diabetes, apoplexy, sunstroke, fatty degeneration of the heart, fatty degeneration of the liver, softening of the brain, scarlet fever, scrofula; that is, in the deaths from 17 out of about 50 diseases the Negroes form more than the percentage they form of the total population. For most of these diseases the same is general in all the Northern cities of which I have information. . . .

The diseases of consumption and pneumonia, infantile marasmus, cholera infantum, inanition, heart disease are the diseases which take the Negroes away. From these diseases during the years of 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 3,284 persons died, or 51.1 per cent of the total deaths for these four years (6,424). Each year they constituted over half of the deaths.

If deaths from these causes had been at the same rate as the

whites, the Negro general death rate would have been much less than the rate for the city.

Consumption is the chief cause of excessive death rate. One out of every six Negro persons who die in Philadelphia, dies of this disease, and probably five out of every seven who die between 18 and 28 die of this disease. It attacks the young men and women just as they are entering a life of economic benefit and takes them away. This disease is probably

economic initiatives. This led to conflict with his more moderate NAACP colleagues and to his resignation from that organization and return to Atlanta in 1934. In 1944, DuBois rejoined the NAACP, acknowledging that it had become more aggressive in the pursuit of economic and legal rights. But by 1948 his overt radicalism and public support for the Soviet Union during the Cold War forced him out of the NAACP a second time. In 1951, he was indicted as an “unregistered agent of a foreign power.”<sup>4</sup> At trial, he was acquitted but denied a passport to travel abroad. When the State Department finally lifted the travel ban in 1958, he left for an extensive trip to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China, receiving the Lenin Peace Prize in 1959.

In 1961, DuBois accepted an invitation to move to Ghana and become a citizen of the first newly independent African post-colonial state. Renouncing his American citizenship, he moved to Ghana and died there on August 27, 1963, just as American civil rights leaders were assembling for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. DuBois was the author of 17 books, including 5 novels, the

founder and editor of 4 journals, and he had reshaped forever how the experience of African Americans in America could be thought about and understood. ■

Theodore M. Brown  
Elizabeth Fee

**About the Authors**

Theodore M. Brown is with the Departments of History and of Community and Preventive Medicine at the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY. Elizabeth Fee is with the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Theodore M. Brown, PhD, Department of History, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627 (e-mail: theodore.brown@urmc.rochester.edu).

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the greatest drawback to the Negro race in this country.

In 1900 there were 1,467 babies born in Philadelphia and 25 per cent died before they were one year old. Of every five persons who die in a year two are children under five years of age. The disease of cholera infantum, inanition and marasmus, which are simply the doctor’s way of saying lack of nourishment and lack of care, cause many unnecessary deaths of children. . . .

The undeniable fact is, then, that in certain diseases the Negroes have a much higher rate than the whites, and especially in consumption, pneumonia and infantile diseases.

The question is: Is this racial? Mr. Hoffman would lead us to say yes, and to infer that it means that Negroes are inherently inferior in physique to whites.

But the difference in Philadelphia can be explained on other

grounds than upon race. The high death rate of Philadelphia Negroes is yet lower than the whites of Savannah, Charleston, New Orleans and Atlanta.

If the population were divided as to social and economic condition the matter of race would be almost entirely eliminated. Poverty’s death rate in Russia shows

a much greater divergence from the rate among the well-to-do than the difference between Negroes and whites of America. In England, according to Mulhall, the poor have a rate twice as high as the rich, and the well-to-do are between the two. The same is true in Sweden, Germany and other countries. In Chicago the death rate among whites of the stock yards district is higher than the