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## Booker T. Washington Biography: The Making of the Making of a Leader

### Abstract

This article discusses the various biographies that have been written about Booker T. Washington and the social climates that these biographies have been written in.

**Booker T. Washington Biography:  
The Making of the Making of a Leader**

*Tim Mealiff*

"The life of Booker T. Washington cannot be written. . . .  
no human being can know its deep and beneficent influence,  
and no pen can describe it."

—J.L.M. Curry, 1901<sup>1</sup>

**B**riefly disregarding the irony of this quote from the introduction of Booker T. Washington's first autobiography, *The Story of My Life and Work*, Curry introduces one interpretation of the problem in writing a biography of Booker Taliaferro Washington. Other historians have reached similar conclusions as to the historiographical problems, but might very well scoff at the notion of a "beneficent" cause. Consequently, the large amount of published biographical material embodies an extensive range of interpretation into the life of this enigmatic character.

Washington has often been viewed as "a black Moses figure leading his people," from the bondage of slavery and the backlash of the southern white Redemption, "to the Promised Land" of economic, if not social, involvement in the American democratic system.<sup>2</sup> Praise for Washington stems from many sources: his rise from a child of slavery to national prominence in both Black and White America; his work in promoting a basic and useful industrial education for ignorant, disenfranchised Southern Blacks; and his inexhaustible efforts in advocating the causes of his race without agitating the inherent concerns of White society in an age of strong racial tension. Acknowledgment by Washington's applauders of his discrete political maneuvers is generally linked to his gracious work as a race leader, and often justified by his acute understanding of the fragile and explosive racial climate in which he worked.

Conversely, many historians, as well as contemporary critics, view Washington in less "saintly" a manner. Critics often portray him as a political entrepreneur, who rode the wave of industrial education into national prominence by the turn of the century. Washington actively promoted his program of White accommodation, while undermining the opposition to his race leadership, in an effort to retain political clout amidst the decline of the industrial education movement. Many of Washington's contemporaries, including his great rival W.E.B. Dubois, charge "The Great Accommodator" with slowing Black economic advancement, while simultaneously curtailing any attempts at political or social involvement in his public support of segregation.

Regardless of the tone in which they discuss the work of Washington, most critics and biographers credit him with having a strong perception of his audience. Washington was well aware of the inherent danger in being a Southern black man asserting himself for both the understanding and financial aid of Southern and Northern whites. Even Dubois, one of Washington's harshest contemporary critics, credits Booker's careful treading, for "in the South especially has he had to walk warily to avoid the harshest judgements,—and naturally so, for he is dealing with the one subject of deepest sensitiveness to that section."<sup>3</sup> Educated social activists were not the only ones to understand Washington's precarious situation, however, as Booker recounts the astute comment of a local farmer shortly before his famous Atlanta Exposition address in 1893:

Washington, you have spoken before the Northern white people, the Negroes in the South, and to us country white people in the South; but in Atlanta, to-morrow, you will have before you the Northern whites, the Southern whites, and the Negroes all together. I am afraid that you have got yourself into a tight place.<sup>4</sup>

In light of this remark, the success of Washington at the Atlanta Exposition exemplifies his ability of appealing to his audience.

The early success of his Tuskegee Institute was in many ways a direct result of Washington's aptitude in perceiving the attitude of his audience. He was heavily reliant upon all three of these groups in securing the success of his educational foundation: in order to start a black school in Alabama, Washington needed the support (or at least the acquiescence) of Southern whites; he required the financial assistance of Northern white philanthropists in funding the educational programs and facilities; and he needed the attendance of Southern black students in the classrooms if Tuskegee were to operate effectively. Washington's ability to present himself to each of these different audiences in the most suitable role allowed Tuskegee to get off the ground, and eventually gain national prominence as a thriving institution of industrial education.

Consequently, it is this same ability of role adaptation and representation upon his entrance into the public sphere that allows historians such a wide range of interpretation into the life of Booker Washington. His simple style in both speaking and writing, as well as the plainness of his message, often veil the complex and enigmatic man who maintained control over his image, even after his death in 1915. In the years since his death, Washington has forced biographers to pick through the available sources in the hopes of presenting a credible, if agenda-driven, portrayal of the "Wizard of Tuskegee." Whether his intention or not, Washington presented himself in so many varied forms as to

aid in a range of biographical interpretations that continues to grow eighty years after his death.

True to the subject at hand, the first historical interpretation of Washington to appear was that of Booker himself. The publications of *The Story of My Life and Work* in 1900 and *Up From Slavery* a year later present the first forty years of Washington's life, to the pinnacle of his work at Tuskegee. In the introduction to the former, Washington explains the early autobiography as the result of "many requests. . .to write something of the story of my life. . .to put something about my life in writing for the sake of my family, if for no other reason."<sup>5</sup> However, after what Louis Harlan calls the "pitfalls of . . . amateurishness and crass commercialism,"<sup>6</sup> involved in the writing and publishing of this semi-successful work, Washington decided to attempt another autobiography of similar content, this time with closer supervision over the ghost-writers and publishers, in the hopes that he "tell a simple, straightforward story, with no attempt at embellishment."<sup>7</sup> His result this time was *Up From Slavery*, which became an instant success around the world, and remains an influential work today.

The immediate and widespread praise of *Up From Slavery* caused many to question the true audience of Washington's work, and the real intentions behind his writing a biography at the zenith of his forty year existence. True to his stated intentions, Washington presents in simple and frank style the story of his childhood on the Virginia plantation, his first memories of freedom, his strive for work and education in West Virginia during Reconstruction, and the development of his work ethic, which allowed for his success at the Hampton Institute in Virginia.

Washington constantly reminds the reader, however, that he wrote *Up From Slavery* years afterward. From the first chapter of the book, Washington incorporates themes and ideas that most likely would not have occurred to a young child. His opening section, "A Slave Among Slaves," discusses the end of the Civil War, and his first memories of Emancipation. In this chapter, in which Washington would not have been ten years old, he makes several observations as to the "institution" of slavery, and the "victims" which it produced. Washington recounts his mother stealing food from the master's kitchen, but justifies it in stating that "taking place at the time it did, and for the reason it did. . .she was simply a victim of the system of slavery."<sup>8</sup> And in recounting his paternal heritage, Washington similarly refers to his white father as "simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time."<sup>9</sup> *Up From Slavery* presents a young Booker who had an uncommonly astute consciousness of the social circumstances outside of his plantation home. And with that understanding came a sense of forgiveness and complete absence of resentfulness that was arguably centuries ahead of his time.

Washington continues this style throughout the book. He incorporates into the memories of his early teenage years his famous Law of Individual Merit, in that "merit, no matter under what skin found, is in the long run, recognized and rewarded,"<sup>10</sup> as well as a keen observation as to the problems of the Reconstruction period, during which he "had the feeling that mistakes were being made, and that things could not remain in the condition that they were in then very long."<sup>11</sup> And though he does not state a direct connection between the two, his criticism of the Reconstruction period focuses upon the "two ideas [that] were constantly agitating the minds of the coloured people. . . the craze for Greek and Latin learning, and . . . a desire to hold office."<sup>12</sup>

The warm reception of *Up From Slavery* by a wide audience brought more success to Washington than merely his immediate thrust into national prominence. His ability to weave together the sentiments of Southern whites during post-Reconstruction with the basic tenets of his Tuskegee ideology paved the road for Washington's continued role as the president of a thriving institution and as the token leader of the black race. Southern whites could praise a man who recognized the misguided "agitations" of black political involvement, and who publicly argued for segregation, as "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>13</sup> Washington's Law of Merit assured that the continued racial tensions would remain a "Black problem," to which his proposed solution of industrial education not only abandoned the "craze for Greek and Latin learning," but promised little agitation of the lives of Southern whites.

Apart from the immediate success Washington achieved with his autobiography was his ability to regulate in large part the content of the work of his biographers for decades after his death. *Up From Slavery* serves as a primary source in the biographical work of Basil Mathews, Samuel R. Spencer, and Emma Lou Thornbrough, and in a significant part dictates the structure of Louis R. Harlan's first volume of biographical study. In the first biography to appear after Washington's death, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization*, authors Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe consciously do not review the same period of Washington's life as covered in *Up From Slavery*. Scott and Stowe clearly state in their preface that they "have not even touched upon [Washington's] childhood, early training, and education, because [they] felt the story of those early struggles and privations had been ultimately well told in his own words."<sup>14</sup> In the preface of his work, Mathews writes of Washington's autobiography as having "outstanding importance" and as being "authoritative."<sup>15</sup> Spencer also refers to *Up From Slavery* as the "principle source of information about Washington's early life."<sup>16</sup> Even Harlan's biography, the product of extensive research in the Washington papers, is loosely based on the structure that Booker formed seventy years earlier.

Not surprisingly, there exists relatively little discrepancy among biographies as to the early life of Booker T. Washington; it is likely that the influence of *Up From Slavery* played a strategic hand in this correspondence. Other possibilities exist, however, as to the relative clarity of young Booker in the historiographical sphere. The fact that the bulk of biographical work and discussion on Washington focuses more on his life after reaching public prominence suggests a couple of ideas as to Washington historiography. First, little information exists outside of what Washington reveals to his readers, so biographers have little option but to use his personal memoirs as their primary sources in discussing his early life. Second, Washington's early life plays a relatively small role in the interpretation of the man, so it is fairly unnecessary to squabble over the details of his childhood but instead focus on the more fruitful issue of his role in society after he left the Virginia plantation of his youth.

As previously stated, the biography by Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe adheres to this structure in Washington historiography, as it resumes both chronologically and thematically the portrayal of Booker where *Up From Slavery* left off. Robert Moton, Washington's successor at Tuskegee, fittingly labels the authors of *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* "the two people in all America best fitted" to resume Washington's life story.<sup>17</sup> It comes with little surprise that Washington himself commissioned Scott, his personal secretary of eighteen years, and Beecher Stowe, the grandson of Harriet Beecher Stowe, to continue his biographical efforts after his death. Harlan's research into the Washington papers revealed the integral work of Scott in the "Tuskegee Machine." Scott wrote many of the speeches and articles generally attributed to Washington, so the notion that this first biography reads similarly to much of Washington's "own" writing invokes little wonder in the minds of historians; indeed, many view this work and *Up From Slavery* as resulting from a single mind.

Though the work of Scott and Stowe has never been as popular as that penned by Washington, and though Harlan claims Washington never saw any part of the draft before his death, *Builder of a Civilization* is arguably Washington's continued attempt at historiographical immortality. In the preface its authors openly state their intention to "produce what [Washington] wanted: namely, a record of his struggles and achievements at once accurate and readable, put in permanent form for the information of the public."<sup>18</sup> As a biographer Scott was able to address views on the ideology of Washington and the arguments of his most vehement opponents that Booker most likely would have never risked asserting himself. In the chapter "The Rights of the Negro," the authors address at length charges made "both by agitators in his own race and by a certain type of Northern white men," that Booker supported "a policy of submission to injustice on the part of his people."<sup>19</sup> The bulk of the chapter addresses this supposed policy of "acquiescence," presenting

evidence of Washington's work to the contrary of his opponents' claims. Scott and Stowe fail, however, to draw upon sources that were not already public knowledge, with the exception of a few personal correspondences between Washington and President Theodore Roosevelt concerning the appointment of blacks to public offices in the South. Indeed, the majority of their work reads in a similar fashion, defending and promoting the well-known work of Washington on behalf of his race, but understandably never addressing any of the more secretive of Washington's actions, to which only a few (including Emmett Scott) were privy.

Though critics might assert that *Builder of a Civilization* holds little more promise of historical objectivity or accuracy than *Up From Slavery*, portions of the biography—most notably the chapter entitled, "Leader of His Race"—serve well as a final response to Washington's contemporary critics, expressed in a tone only slightly less subtle and slightly more embittered than Booker would have used himself. One chapter opens by addressing the fact that Washington was the natural choice to succeed Frederick Douglass as America's black leader, for he was supported "everywhere, by leading whites, as well as blacks," one of the first of these being Emmett J. Scott.<sup>20</sup> Scott and Stowe go on to state that it was nearly impossible that Washington's "radically new note in Negro leadership could be struck without some discord."<sup>21</sup> What follows is an eloquent but frank discourse on a group of Washington critics whom the authors refer to as,

This numerically small and individually unimportant element of the Negroes in America [who] would hardly warrant even passing mention except that the always carping and sometimes bitter criticisms of these persons are apt to confuse the well-wishers of the race who do not understand the situation.<sup>22</sup>

These Washington opponents, whom Scott and Stowe only name as the "Talented Tenth" and describe as those who "make all or part of their living by publicly bewailing the wrongs and injustices of their race," found their argumentative basis more in the white praise Washington received than in his racial ideology, and they worked to undermine any attempts Washington made to compromise with his Southern white neighbors.<sup>23</sup> Scott and Stowe refer to the formation of the Committee of Twelve for the Advancement of the Interests of the Negro Race (although not by name) as an example of the radical agitators subverting Washington's efforts to achieve common ground within the black race. The committee was formed, "in spite of the fact that the chief exponent of this group [W.E.B. Dubois] opened the first meeting with a bitter attack upon Mr. Washington."<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, in August Meier's account of the meeting in his *Negro Thought in America*, he discusses the "confidential summary of the



conference's proceedings. . . reveal[ing] a wide range of agreement among the leaders," and he notes that Dubois' departure from the group resulted in his feeling that "the committee's activities were being dictated by the chairman, Booker T. Washington."<sup>25</sup>

Like with *Up From Slavery*, one could easily argue that Scott and Stowe wrote *Builder of a Civilization* as an expression of a political agenda rather than an objective attempt at biography. They devote much of the work to combating Washington's enemies' arguments after his death, rather than discussing the events of his life after 1900. In Booker-esque fashion, Scott and Stowe omit specific names, organizations and events—Washington's relationship with the Niagara Conference and the NAACP are never mentioned—and instead choose to reiterate the programs and public pronouncements which the American public had already positively associated with Washington. It seems unfortunate that the man most capable at the time of revealing new revelations into Washington's character failed to produce a work any more insightful than one who had read Booker's published writings. Future biographers, however, would not always feel the confines of the interpretations set forth by Emmett J. Scott on Washington's life upon reaching the public sphere.

The first of the more widely recognized biographies not written by someone within the Tuskegee circle is Basil Mathews' *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Interracial Interpreter*. Though written over thirty years after Washington's death, Mathews makes clear his attempt at incorporating his presentation of Washington into the on-going race struggle of the time. He states his agenda fairly clearly within the preface of the work as resulting from his "distress that the enduring significance of that inventive educator and interracial interpreter and of the full splendor of his gift to the world should be in danger of partial eclipse."<sup>26</sup> This statement raises the question of objectivity in his efforts, and when Mathews recognizes as "authoritative sources" of information *Up From Slavery* and the authorized biography by Emmett Scott, he further undermines his research credibility.

Mathews's acknowledged use of interviews with students, family and "leading constructive critics" of Washington cause one to question whether Mathews' agenda would permit objective research, or whether the historical climate under which he admits to writing would allow such objectivity.<sup>27</sup> The chapter entitled "The Man in His Family" offers promise as to what insights regarding Booker's personal life the "leisurely interviews" with Washington's family members produced.<sup>28</sup> One gains little new information in reading this chapter, however, as the majority of it closely resembles what pieces of his private life Washington chose to discuss in *Up From Slavery*. Some of the conclusions Mathews draws from the family interviews contrast those Harlan made after similar meetings years later. The "critical appraisal" Mathews hoped

to achieve from such encounters may well have skewed both his approach to and interpretation of the information gathered.

To his credit, Mathews does mention the use of the Booker T. Washington papers at Tuskegee, before their transfer to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. But even with access to his extensive records, Mathews apparently has little interest in a strictly historiographical effort, as he works to provide a more enlightened view of Booker T. Washington that Southern Whites have "fail[ed] to see."<sup>29</sup> What personal correspondence Mathews chooses to excerpt reveals a Washington little varied from his public persona, and works well to support his argument of Washington as a hero of racial advancement. In some sense, Mathews approaches his biography with the same pretense that Washington claimed in his policies: Mathews sees himself in the midst of ensuing race relations, and wishes to incorporate his interpretations into "the larger landscape of the present and the future."<sup>30</sup> To add to this sense of "eulogy," Mathews even states his accompanying efforts at writing an additional children's biography of Booker T. Washington.

Again to his credit, Mathews does reveal at the outset of his work a consciousness of the problems involved in writing an objective historical biography. But the main obstacle preventing him from writing with more historical objectivity is his refusal to allow Washington to remain in any concrete historical context. As he states in the beginning of the book, "the subject whose character and achievements he [Mathews] is portraying is not a puppet of circumstance but a creative person whose ideas, guiding his will in action, cause events that are a part of history."<sup>31</sup> Though this may be a fair assessment to some degree, it not only contrasts, but also fails to address, much of the popular opinion of Washington, and arguably works to shift his biography towards the other extreme of glorification. This character isolation would be forgivable, except that by the end of his book when Mathews finally gets around to discussing Washington's contemporary critics, he bases his whole defense upon placing Washington back *into* historical context as a justification of his criticized policies. Mathews' defense of Washington in regards to the criticism of his contemporaries largely resembles the arguments made by Scott and Stowe. In his discussion of the contrasting ideologies of Washington and Dubois, Mathews uses circumstance as an argumentative basis:

The one was born a slave in the South, the other free in a North at that time devoid of race discrimination; the one rooted in the soil and the Bible, the other saturated in the agnostic liberalism of *fin de siecle* Europe.<sup>32</sup>

Though historical context certainly does not devalue an argument, Mathews' original claim was that Booker Washington was *not* driven by such

circumstances as the social environment of his birthplace. In the chapter entitled "The Continuing Debate," Mathew's tone turns to condescension. He gives a brief summary of the childhood environment of W.E.B. Dubois which not only eliminates the notion of racial tension in New England, but at points starkly contrasts Dubois' childhood recollections in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Mathews' argument in dealing with Washington's critics infers that they served more as a nuisance to the work which Booker tried to accomplish, rather than a legitimate alternative to Washington's accommodationist theory. Indeed, Mathews states his growing conviction that Booker's racial ideology "was in accord with the meaning of the universe," and that Dubois and the other critics gained prominence only because they were "lifted and raised on high by the greatness of the giants."<sup>33</sup>

Mathews also waits until the very end to suggest the idea that Washington's ideology was, in fact, fifty years *ahead* of his time. Again, this would be a feasible argument and possibly worth incorporation earlier in the book, but his defense is short and is based upon current political agendas in countries with newly acquired political governments. Mathews cites examples in Africa and Asia where former European colonies were suddenly left to govern themselves, and had since employed economic methods similar to Washington's prescriptions.<sup>34</sup> Introducing this argument in the epilogue, Mathews fails to aptly expound upon this parallel and justify the weaker points of the analogy and its relationship to American racial history. All in all, Mathews presents a biographical work slightly more critical of Booker T. Washington than the previous works by Washington, Scott and Stowe, but one which is plagued from the outset by a limiting agenda.

The next major biographical effort to appear after Mathews is by Samuel R. Spencer, Jr. And like Mathews efforts, Spencer's *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* is representative of its time—appearing during the early resurgence of the Civil Rights Movement. Interestingly, Spencer addresses Mathews as having written "the best biography to date."<sup>35</sup> What becomes problematic is the fact that Spencer fails to assert any clear justification in improvement over Mathew's efforts.

Unlike Mathews, Spencer forms his work much less by some clear social agenda, but the omission of any specific source citations calls the credibility of his biography into question. Similar to Mathews, Spencer's notes on his sources indicate a strong reliance upon Washington's prepared articles, speeches, and autobiographies as factual basis for the work, but unfortunately he addresses the Washington papers as "yet largely untapped" material in the Library of Congress. He then gives little evidence of extensive research of those papers. He calls the papers "rewarding" for providing revelations of the private Washington, but the examples he states to support this claim starkly contrast Harlan's more extensive findings. Spencer states that Washington's closest

friends viewed him as "essentially the same man he was believed to be on the basis of public knowledge."<sup>36</sup>

The public view of Washington that Spencer portrays is still fairly favorable and arguably somewhat naive, and therefore raises the question as to his understanding of Booker T. Washington beyond his public portrayal. Similar to his predecessors, Spencer addresses Washington's critics in arguing that the establishment of industrial education was still Booker's "primary task," and that "his heart was always at Tuskegee."<sup>37</sup> To his credit, Spencer presents Washington in a far more objective style than previous biographers. *Negro's Place in American Life* marks a shift in Washington biography in the direction of more traditional historical writing. But in his removal of a blatant agenda, Spencer also fails to develop a valuable interpretation of Washington or a significant argument concerning Washington's role in the dynamic racial climate of the time. Spencer's work is neither innovative nor remarkable beyond its use in a study of the historiography of Booker T. Washington.

In 1963, soon after Spencer's work entered the historical field, August Meier published the first edition of his *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915*. Meier strayed from the biographical genre in an effort to present a racial history of America in the era in which Washington rose to national prominence. And though Meier never claims to address Booker in a strictly biographical sense, his work remains vital to any discussion of Washington in relation to his social climate and historical context. Unlike other Washington historians, Meier tends to treat Booker more as an ideological force closely connected with the dynamic racial climate of the period, rather than as the man who rose from slavery to become the leader of the Tuskegee institution.

Meier obviously understands both the structures of traditional historiography and the concerns of academic historians, as the introduction to his work frankly and systematically addresses most all of the critical points which historians include in a study of a work's credibility. In discussing the origins of his work, Meier relates his interest in "an interdisciplinary approach to the study of history," which incorporates both sociology and anthropology into an effort at demarginalizing the study of race relations.<sup>38</sup> Meier argues that historians largely ignored for some time this "unpleasant period between Reconstruction and World War I," and as a result "the views held by nearly all white historians... were highly generalized and stereotyped."<sup>39</sup> *Negro Thought in America* is Meier's attempt to dismantle these generalizations, and he does so with great effect.

Meier divides his work into five sections, beginning with a brief summary of Reconstruction, its effects upon the ideology of both Southern and Northern whites and blacks, Booker Washington's role as a focal point amidst these shifting attitudes, the rise of black social and economic organizations, and the impending breach between the various camps of Negro thought. Meier is one

of the first historians to address Washington's political maneuvering and interplay and to aptly discuss the multiple ideological paradoxes existing during the time, without throwing his support toward any single interpretation. And though Meier presents the possibility of an agenda within his introduction, his work serves more as an invocation of further academic study, rather than a personal crusade to vindicate a marginalized black "hero." Meier addresses these concerns, stating that this work "reflected my dual commitment to both social activism and the canons of detached scholarship," and that he hoped to relate "what appeared to be representative expressions of the varying points of view as expressed by the articulate members of the race."<sup>40</sup>

Meier wrote the introduction to his book twenty-five years after the work first appeared, so one might argue that it was simply Meier's effort at maintaining its relevance in a historical climate markedly different than the social milieu of the 1960s. Whether this is the case or not, Meier effectively connects the original text to an astute summary of the ideological shifts since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and Meier's main thesis still holds weight:

That nationalist tendencies tended to be salient during periods when conditions were becoming worse and white public opinion more hostile, while the integrationist became salient when the blacks' status was improving and white public opinion becoming more tolerant.<sup>41</sup>

Though not specifically a historical biography of Booker T. Washington, but a sociological work using him as a thematic focus, Meier's *Negro Thought* places Washington in the historical social context more effectively and objectively than any preceding biography.

Besides the work done by Meier, the fifteen years between Spencer's efforts and the publication of Emma Lou Thornbrough's biography produced a large amount of historical work on Booker T. Washington, and Thornbrough is evidently aware of the efforts of her colleagues. She divides her *Booker T. Washington* into three basic parts: excerpts from Washington's public writing, published views from Washington's contemporaries—both white and black—and biographical excerpts from various historians since Washington's death. Like her biographical predecessors, Thornbrough relies heavily upon Washington's autobiographies, the Atlanta Exposition address, and his prepared articles in presenting "insight" into his character. She discusses the vast correspondences present in the Library of Congress collection, but she fails to use any of them in her excerpts of Washington's own writing.

In the section of contemporary views, Thornbrough does provide a wide representation of various critics, but the excerpts are too small and sparse to adequately support her claim that Washington faced considerable opposition during his lifetime. Her use of biographical excerpts is effective, however, as

she presents nearly a dozen different published excerpts ranging from the praises of Carter Woodson to early work done by Louis Harlan.

Thornbrough's work becomes especially problematic when one searches for a clear thesis or any sufficient amount of her own biographical efforts. Her introduction gives a brief overview of the post-Reconstruction period in the South, but fails to make any direct correlation between this and Washington's life. She then presents a seven-page biography of Washington, which serves as a basic summary of *Up From Slavery*, focusing on the same points that Washington chooses himself. She essentially gives no real insights into his character which are not already known by the masses who have read Washington's autobiography.

Thornbrough goes into lengthy discussion of the biographical work done by other historians, making it evident that she has read much of the Washington biographical work. Nowhere in the twenty-five page introduction (nor within the rest of the text), however, does she state any sort of thesis or give any indication of presenting her own arguments concerning Washington's character. The only real claims Thornbrough seems to make are that Washington was a diverse character and the writings about him are also diverse. She states and restates these claims in the introduction, in the preface of each section, and in the afterward and bibliographical notes of the book. She presents no arguments of her own and no real critical commentary on the work she chooses to excerpt. It would be up to others to fill the voids in the biographical literature on Washington.

It seems that Louis R. Harlan's extensive two volume biography, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader* and *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee*, brought much relief to those historians unsatisfied by even their own fumbling work. Most biographers preceding Harlan address the idea that no definitive biography has yet been written, but they make no claim at accomplishing this feat. Those works published after Harlan all note his two-volume work as being the most thorough attempt at a biography of Washington to date. In comparison to the earlier biographies, one can express Harlan's work no more simply than being "impressive." It seems fairly clear that Harlan himself was aware of his undertaking, as the tone of his work from the first to last page of both volumes expresses a confidence in addressing the multiple interpretations and presentations of Washington clearly missing in earlier attempts. From the outset Harlan portrays a thorough understanding of Washington, most likely resulting from the extensive research and editing work on the Washington papers performed conjunctly with both volumes of his biography.

Through this undertaking Harlan is able to argue clearly many points of Washington's character towards which previous biographers could only hint. His tone throughout his work is much more objective than other biographies,

as he seldom makes any claim that he has not meticulously researched both within the writing of Washington, and through sources outside of Washington's control. As with other biographers, Harlan's first volume necessarily relies somewhat upon Washington's autobiography in describing some detail of his early life. But where earlier historians accepted Washington's word, Harlan researched further to find external factual evidence, going so far as to check National Park Service records as to the accurate dimensions of Washington's boyhood cabin on the plantation.<sup>42</sup> His citations are meticulous and numerous in each chapter.

In his second volume Harlan backs off in his attempts to explain definitively the innerworkings of Washington's mentality, and, like his predecessors, claims that Washington had a "complex personality" too problematic to state succinctly. But instead of simply leaving it at that, Harlan chooses to express as many facets of that personality as possible, often referring to Washington's private correspondence and conversations. Harlan places Washington firmly within the historical context, not simply as a justification for his personality, but in an attempt at some explanation of his actions and ideology. He discusses Washington's role as a black leader, an accommodator of Northern and Southern whites, and as a power-monger strongly driven by personal gain. Harlan consciously chooses not to focus on Washington as an educational innovator, possibly reflecting the views of his editor, August Meier. He also admits a continued ignorance of Washington's family life, due either to the removal of family correspondence from the archives, or simply from the fact that few ever existed. Harlan is also the first biographer to devote much attention to the role of Emmett J. Scott in Washington's "Tuskegee Machine."

Harlan receives much praise for his extensive work with Booker T. Washington, and credit is most certainly due. But interestingly, the amount of lengthy material on Washington written since Harlan's major publications drops considerably. Many biographers returned to portraying Washington with a specific agenda, explaining the recent rise in children's biographies of the "Booker hero," or they place him abstractly within the whole of twentieth century racial history, as is the case with John White's *Black Leadership in America*.

In this work White presents a survey of modern black leadership beginning with Washington and progressing to the recent work of Jesse Jackson. Though he places Booker at the foundation of modern race leaders, White very much associates Washington's ideologies and accomplishments within the social context of the early twentieth-century. In his assessment of Washington, White uses phrases like "in the circumstances of his time and place" and "in tune with his age," which would indicate a consciousness of criticism of Washington's value as a black leader. White never chooses, however, to openly address any of these criticisms.<sup>43</sup> Instead, White chooses to remain strictly objective—or

aloof—in discussing all of his historical subjects, presenting each without any strong opinions or interpretations. Even in the conclusion to his survey, White fails to make any strong connections between these leaders, nor does he argue for any significant trend in twentieth-century black leadership. Instead White places them firmly within their respective historical contexts.

Like John White, David Howard-Pitney chooses to perform a comparative study of black leaders—Douglass, Washington and Dubois—in an article that closely resembles the work done by August Meier. In surveying the methods and themes of their public addresses, Howard-Pitney incorporates a sociological study into his argument concerning the “changing patterns of black messianic rhetoric” over a similar time structure as Meier’s work.<sup>44</sup> And though his efforts focus less upon the persona and accomplishments of Washington and the others and more upon the social shift between the Civil War and World War I, he is more effective than White in identifying a trend in the shift of black leadership. Ultimately, Howard-Pitney’s article serves as a summary of Meier’s discussion of the relationship of the black leaders, as he comes to a conclusion quite similar to that introduced in Meier’s work in that:

Washington seems to have been reacting to a situation when white society showed more concern for the private interests of the marketplace than for the public interest of a just and virtuous democracy.<sup>45</sup>

And also like Meier’s introduction, Howard-Pitney ends his article with a transference of this conclusion to the current social climate, warning that because the “tradition of private self-interest has been gaining strength. . . it may be difficult for black leaders in the future to believe that they can appeal to the conscience of white America.”<sup>46</sup>

It seems that most of the current work within the traditional historical field confines itself to the structure of the journal article, and that Harlan’s “definitive” historiographical work continues to reduce the efforts of his critics to nitpicking seemingly insignificant details. Donald Gibson’s article, “Strategies and Revisions of Self-Representation in Booker T. Washington’s Autobiographies,” offers much promise in its title in regards to an academic study of Washington’s use of biography. Besides the critical attention Harlan gives Washington’s autobiographies, this remains a fairly untapped subject which might well justify at least a journal article. Gibson indicates in his introduction that he intends to draw attention to Harlan’s interpretations of Washington’s self-representation in an effort to “reveal the disparities, the lacunae, and the exaggerations and enhancements” present in a comparison of Washington’s two autobiographies and the biography of Louis Harlan.<sup>47</sup>



The premises of Gibson's argument, however, become so inflated and exaggerated as to discredit any legitimate claims that he introduces. Gibson chooses to focus his study of Washington upon "the treatment of a single crucial event . . . [serving as] a moment of extraordinary import because it signals his representation of the initial step in his rise to preeminence."<sup>48</sup> The reader eventually discovers that Gibson's "crucial event" is, in fact, the story in which Booker apparently chooses the last name "Washington." Gibson continues this discussion excessively for over five pages, noting in almost tragic tone the public's blind acceptance of Booker's account:

We accept as fact that he did this because, on more than one occasion, he tells us so; because his biographers have repeated the fable of his self-naming; and because there is no apparent reason to doubt him. I doubt him, however, and I believe his version and all subsequent repetitions of it are implausible. It is possible to reconstruct a far more likely rendition.<sup>49</sup>

Gibson then, in fact, does reconstruct the scene from *Up From Slavery*, comparing it to similar sections of *The Story of My Life and Work* and Harlan's biography, presenting a multiple-page interpretation based on nothing more than his own pessimistic opinion. He attacks Harlan for "too easily offer[ing] Washington the benefit of the doubt," and favors his own rendition "because, in my opinion, it answers more questions than Harlan's."<sup>50</sup> Gibson inflates the importance of these "questions" that he answered as revealing significant insight into Washington's character.

Gibson devotes the remainder of his article to addressing Harlan's summary of the publication of Washington's auto-biographies and to the minute differences between *Up From Slavery* and *Story of My Life and Work*. He argues that "all the revisions are noteworthy," and continues in a tedious line-by-line study of several sections of these works, continually nitpicking Harlan's brief interpretations, but never really justifying his own argument as to its vital importance in Washington study.<sup>51</sup> Gibson exaggerates the significance of his comparisons of Washington's auto-biographies and ends his article with the warning that if historians continue to fail "to work out the relations between them," the public's insight into Booker Washington will always be a limited one.<sup>52</sup>

A look at the various attempts by scholars to expound upon the thorough historical and biographical work done by August Meier and Louis R. Harlan raises the question as to the future of any extensive writing on Booker T. Washington, as well as the possibility of a redress of the those biographies preceding the Washington "authorities." This discussion might also examine the notion of the structure and limitations of biography, and whether a non-

traditional attempt at recreating specific events in Washington's life—as performed by Donald Gibson—should be discredited by biographical critics. The current debate over Edmund Morris' controversial memoir of Ronald Reagan might very well appear irrelevant, but the premises of the various arguments call into question the “rules” of biography and therefore apply the debate more directly to a discussion of Booker T. Washington.

In his recently published book *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, Edmund Morris uses fictional characters as narrators at various periods of Reagan's life, occasionally recounting events that apparently have no factual basis. In doing this Morris sparked debate over the notions of biography and the credibility of using fictive methods in a genre that generally adheres to traditional historical guidelines. Scott Richardson's interview with Eureka College professor Junius Rodriguez introduces some of these concerns. Rodriguez, who teaches a class on historiography, questions the credibility of Morris' work, arguing that:

‘If an author takes the liberty of creating fictional characters and creating a fictional life for these characters, it makes you wonder where the truth begins and the fiction ends. . . . If he takes that liberty with his fictional characters, are we confident that his factual portion of the narrative is indeed fact and not fiction?’<sup>53</sup>

Rodriguez goes on to differentiate between the notions of “fiction” and “interpretation,” arguing that every historian is forced to interpret facts in historiography, and this interpretation becomes the focus of historical criticism. Apparently Morris over-extends that interpretive liberty in *Dutch*, as he goes “well beyond the level of what we might call the tolerable limits of weaving fiction into historical narrative.”<sup>54</sup>

In a similar debate concerning Morris' work, Carolyn Alessio and Julia Keller argue the credibility of *Dutch* as a truly biographical effort. Alessio takes a stance similar to Rodriguez (though better articulated), putting forth the idea that Morris “conflat[ed] fact and fiction, inserting himself as a character in a work many may mistake for truth.”<sup>55</sup> She further argues that “Morris' narrative method tends to mock both the subject and author,” and that the publishers should have “reclassified the book as a historical novel.”<sup>56</sup>

Julia Keller takes a different stance than Alessio and Rodriguez, poking fun at the traditional historical critics in claiming that “instead of simply telling the tale, arranging one fact neatly after another like a row of dominoes, Morris created a fictional persona who served as patient witness to the events of Reagan's life. . . .”<sup>57</sup> She goes on to scoff at the notion of strict biographical guidelines: “Rules are for volleyball. Rules are for preschool. Rules aren't for artistic endeavors.”<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the whole debate over Reagan's biography stems from the varied perceptions as to the notion of biography, whether a biography is a literary art form or an historian's tool. Keller concludes her discussion by stating that "the biographies of historical figures are not just gray documents, as the Biography Police would have you believe; they are our best chance to understand ourselves by virtue of whom we allow to lead us."<sup>9</sup> One could apply this same argument to Donald Gibson's attempt at shedding light upon Booker's last name, and this criticism might well arise with the publication of Gibson's upcoming book.

This debate also introduces possibilities to the future of Washington biography. If Harlan portrayed Washington in so definitive a manner that little more strictly historical work will be introduced, writers might well turn to more postmodern or artistic methods of portraying the inner character of Booker T. Washington. Arguably Booker himself took "interpretive liberties" in presenting himself in his auto-biographies, and his work remains both informative and influential one hundred years later. Whatever the future of Washington historiography holds, most certainly it will continue to reflect the historical and social context in which it is written.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, with an introduction by J.L.M. Curry (Toronto: J.L. Nichols and Company, 1901), 3.

<sup>2</sup>David Howard-Pitney, "The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois and Changing Patterns of Black Messianic Rhetoric, 1841-1920," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6 (Fall 1986), 53.

<sup>3</sup>W.E.B. Dubois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," in *Booker T. Washington and His Critics: The Problem of Negro Leadership*, ed. Hugh Hawkins (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1962), 34.

<sup>4</sup>Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 143-44.

<sup>5</sup>*Story*, 13.

<sup>6</sup>Louis R. Harlan, *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 1:xxii.

<sup>7</sup>*Slavery*, 25.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>14</sup>Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), vii.

<sup>15</sup>Basil Mathews, *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Interracial Interpreter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), viii.

<sup>16</sup>Samuel R. Spencer, *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1955), 203.

<sup>17</sup>Scott, v.

<sup>18</sup>Scott, vii.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 177.

<sup>26</sup>Mathews, vii.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 300, 303.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>35</sup>Spencer, 205.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>38</sup>Meier, iii.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, iii-iv.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, viii, xi.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>42</sup>Louis R Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 5, 326.

<sup>43</sup>John White, *Black Leadership in America: From Booker T. Washington to Jesse Jackson*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman Press, 1990), 42.

<sup>44</sup>Howard-Pittney, 47.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Donald B. Gibson, "Strategies and Revisions of Self-Representation in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies," *American Quarterly* 45 (Sept 1993), 371.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 373-74.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>53</sup>Scott Richardson, "Eureka Professor Questions Reagan Biography," *Pantagraph*, 3 Oct 1999, A1.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, A6.

<sup>55</sup>Carolyn Alessio and Julia Keller, "Is This Any Way to Find the Inner Ronald

Reagan?," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 Oct 1999, E1.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., E5.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., E1.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., E6.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.