



“The Black Man’s Burden” A Response to Kipling

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, described it as “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. African Americans, among many others, objected to the notion of the “white man’s burden.” Among the dozens of replies to Kipling’s poem was “The Black Man’s Burden,”

written by African-American clergyman and editor H. T. Johnson and published in April 1899. A “Black Man’s Burden Association” was even organized with the goal of demonstrating that mistreatment of brown people in the Philippines was an extension of the mistreatment of black Americans at home.

April 27, 1883 Estate Concordia, St. Croix, Danish West Indies (now U.S. Virgin Islands) Died December 17, 1927 (aged 44) New York, NY, USA -- A later publication of Black’s Man’s Burden published by Mr. Hubert Harrison.

Hubert Henry Harrison (April 27, 1883 - December 17, 1927) was a West Indian-American writer, orator, educator, critic, and radical socialist political activist based in Harlem, New York. He was described by activist A. Philip Randolph as “the father of Harlem radicalism” and by the historian Joel Augustus Rogers as “the foremost Afro-American intellect of his time.” John G. Jackson of American Atheists described him as “The Black Socrates.”

An immigrant from St. Croix at age 17, Harrison played significant roles in the largest radical class and race movements in the United States. In 1912-1914 he was the leading Black organizer in the Socialist Party of America. In 1917 he founded the Liberty League and *The Voice*, the first organization and the first newspaper of the race-conscious “New Negro” movement. From his Liberty League and *Voice* came the core leadership of individuals and race-conscious program of the Garvey (Marcus Garvey) movement.

Harrison was a seminal and influential thinker who encouraged the development of class consciousness among working people, positive race consciousness among Black people, agnostic atheism, secular humanism, social progressivism, and freethought. He was also a self-described “radical internationalist” and contributed significantly to the Caribbean radical tradition. Harrison profoundly influenced a generation of “New Negro” militants, including A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Marcus Garvey, Richard Benjamin Moore, W. A. Domingo, Williana Burroughs, and Cyril Briggs.

Hubert Harrison

THE BLACK MAN'S BURDEN

from When Africa Awakes (New York, 1920)

Take up the Black Man's burden—

Send forth the worst ye breed,
And bind our sons in shackles
To serve your selfish greed;
To wait in heavy harness
Be-devilled and beguiled
Until the Fates remove you
From a world you have defiled.

Take up the black Man's burden—

Your lies may still abide
To veil the threat of terror
And check our racial pride;
Your cannon, church and courthouse
May still our sons constrain
To seek the white man's profit
And work the white man's gain.

Take up the Black Man's burden—

Reach out and hog the earth,
And leave your workers hungry
In the country of their birth;
Then, when your goal is nearest,
The end for which you fought
Watch other's trained efficiency
Bring all your hope to naught.

Take up the Black Man's burden—

Reduce their chiefs and kings
To toil of serf and sweeper
The lot of common things:
Sodden their soil with slaughter,
Ravish their lands with lead;
Go, sign them with your living
And seal them with your dead.

Take up the Black Man's burden—
And reap your old reward;
The curse of those ye cozen,
The hate of those ye barred
From your Canadian cities
And your Australian ports;
And when they ask for meat and drink
Go girdle them with forts.

Take up the Black Man's burden—
Ye cannot stoop to less.
Will not your fraud of "freedom"
Still cloak your greediness?
But, by the gods ye worship,
And by the deeds ye do,
These silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the Black Man's burden—
Until the tale is told,
Until the balances of hate
Bear down the beam of gold.
And while ye wait remember
The justice, though delayed
Will hold you as her debtor
Till the Black Man's debt is paid.