

W . E . B .
DU BOIS

(1868–1963)



William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois, one of the greatest scholars the world has ever known, and leader of the New Negro movement, was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

His father, Alfred Du Bois, died before Will was old enough to remember him. His mother, Mary Silvina Du Bois, had to struggle to make ends meet for herself and her son.

When she passed away in 1884, young Du Bois went to work in a local mill. He continued to excel at Great Barrington High School, where he was the only black student. He graduated the same year his mother died. A few months later, the principal helped arrange a church scholarship for him to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Du Bois arrived at Fisk in the fall of 1885, and he never forgot his first day there: "It was to me an extraordinary experience," he wrote. "I was thrilled to be for the first time among so many people of my own color or rather of such various and such extraordinary colors. . . ." ¹



During summer vacations, he taught black students in rural Tennessee. After three years at Fisk, he had gained a lot of insight into the depths and complexities of racism.

Du Bois graduated with a bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1888, and entered Harvard University as a junior. There he graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in 1890 and earned a Master of Arts degree in history in 1891.

He studied at the University of Berlin in Germany for two years after graduating from Harvard. Europe was the first place he had ever lived without race prejudice, and this had a profound effect upon him. "I ceased to hate or suspect people simply because they belonged to one race or color," he said.²

In the next few years, Du Bois began an academic career that brought him nationwide attention. From 1895 to 1897, he taught English, Latin, Greek, and German at Wilberforce University. There he met and married Nina Gomer in 1896. The couple had two children: Burghardt Gomer, who died while still a baby, and Nina Yolande.

When his son died, Du Bois sat down and wrote what many have called the most searing essay in the history of race relations: "On the Passing of the First Born." It included this passage: "All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart . . . and my soul whispers ever to me, saying, . . . 'not dead, but escaped, not bound, but free.' No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart till it die a living death."³

In 1899, Du Bois's book *The Philadelphia Negro*, a survey he conducted of the social, racial, and economic conditions of black Philadelphians, was published. The book was the first in-depth study of an urban African American community. Today, it is still considered a significant work of its kind.

From 1897 to 1910, Du Bois taught history and economics at the old Atlanta University. During that time, he published fourteen studies on African Americans that were so important he could later say

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

One night in 1893, alone in his small room in Berlin, Du Bois realized what he wanted to do with his life. “These are my plans,” he wrote, “to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race.”⁴

Du Bois quickly made a name for himself. He received a Ph.D. degree in history from Harvard in 1895. He was the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard. His Ph.D. dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870*, was the first of nineteen books (both nonfiction and fiction) he would write.

truthfully: “Between 1896 and 1920 there was no study in America which did not depend in some degree upon the investigations made at Atlanta University. . . .”⁵

He had enjoyed friendly relations with Booker T. Washington, the famous founder of Tuskegee University, for several years. In 1903, however, with the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois posed a direct challenge to Washington’s philosophy. Washington believed in practical, vocational education. In his “Atlanta Compromise” speech on September 18, 1895, at the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington had urged black Americans to quietly accept segregation and its second-class status.

In a period when the South averaged five lynchings of African Americans a day, when black southerners in rural areas were being reduced to a condition of semi-slavery, and when Black Codes forced thousands of black men, women, and children to work as unpaid labor on chain gangs and plantations, Du Bois declared: “We have no right to sit silently by while the inevitable seeds are sown for a harvest of disaster to our children, black and white.”



Tuskegee students gather for a history class in one of the many classrooms built with skillful hands of students. By 1888, Tuskegee owned 540 acres of land, had an enrollment of over 400, and offered courses in printing, cabinetmaking, carpentry, farming, cooking, sewing, and other vocational skills.

Instead, he urged black Americans to unite with white Americans who believed in racial equality, and to use “force of every sort: moral persuasion, propaganda and . . . even physical resistance.”⁶

Rather than concentrate on vocational training, he urged higher academic training for what he called the Talented Tenth (the top 10 percent) of black students, who could then go on to help teach, inspire, and lead the masses. He also practiced what he preached. In 1905, Du Bois was one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, a group of black professionals and intellectuals whose aim was to fight for full equality in every area of American life.

Booker T. Washington used his influence to try and destroy the new organization, but he failed. In 1909, the Niagara Movement merged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Du Bois served as an officer in the new group.

In 1910, he left Atlanta University to join the NAACP in New York City as its director of publications and founder and editor of its magazine *The Crisis*. It expressed his hopes for the black race.

In the pages of *The Crisis*, Du Bois supported American involvement in World War I (1917–1918). But after the war, the widespread lynchings and raw racism inflicted on African Americans led him to declare that all “of us fools fought a long, cruel, bloody, and unnecessary war, and we not only killed our boys—we killed Faith and Hope.”⁷

In 1919, he began trying to unite people of color throughout the world by organizing the First Pan-African Congress in Paris. In the years to come, he organized several more congresses: in Paris, Brussels, and London in 1921; in Lisbon and London in 1923; and in New York City in 1927. Although delegates attended from many parts of the world, the idea of Pan-Africanism did not develop a strong following until decades later.

The Great Depression of 1929–1941 led Du Bois to conclude that the NAACP needed to change drastically. In his view, racism existed because it was profitable to white Americans to exploit black Americans. Du Bois said that what was needed to fight racism was black economic power, even if it meant temporarily accepting racial segregation.

NAACP officials, who were committed to working for integration, were horrified at his ideas. In June of 1934, they forced him to submit his resignation. Du Bois was now sixty-six years old, but he was about to embark on some of the most productive years of his life.

He returned to Atlanta University, where he taught for another ten years and produced two of his finest books: *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935), and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940). In 1944, he returned to the NAACP as director of special research. There he served as an associate counsel to the American delegation at the founding of the United Nations in 1945, speaking out strongly for independence for European colonies in Africa and Asia.

Du Bois also helped revive the Pan-African movement. He attended the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, England, in 1945, and presided over several sessions. Delegates from sixty countries and colonies elected him permanent chairman and president, and he was widely recognized as “the father” of Pan-Africanism.

In 1961, he and his second wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, moved to Accra in newly independent Ghana, at the invitation of its first president, Kwame Nkrumah. Du Bois’s first wife had died in 1950. He became a citizen of Ghana and settled down to work on a long-dreamed-of project: the *Encyclopedia Africana*.

On August 27, 1963, Du Bois passed away at the age of ninety-five. The government of Ghana honored him with a state funeral, and he was buried in Accra.

Word of his death came to a small meeting of African Americans in Washington, D.C., on the eve of the March for Jobs and Freedom, where the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Author John O. Killens said someone told

THE POWER OF THE PEN

For twenty-four years, through the power of his pen, Du Bois turned *The Crisis* into one of the most powerful publications the United States has ever known.

His NAACP colleagues would later say that the ideas Du Bois expressed in *The Crisis* “and in his books and essays transformed the Negro world as well as a large portion of the liberal white world. . . . He created, what never existed before, a Negro intelligentsia. . . .”⁸

Du Bois called all aspiring African Americans “the Talented Tenth.” This group included Howard University teacher and writer Alain Locke. He guided many young poets and writers. The lawyer, novelist, composer, diplomat, and journalist James Weldon Johnson was another influential figure. His song, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” became the unofficial “Negro National Anthem.”

those at the meeting that “the old man” had died, and everyone knew without asking that “the old man” was Du Bois. For generations of African Americans, he was also, as Killens described him, “our patron saint, our teacher and our major prophet.”⁹

His tremendous contributions to scholarship and the cause of human freedom were recognized by honorary degrees from Howard, Atlanta, Fisk, and Wilberforce Universities and several foreign universities.