



# Notes on Du Bois's Final Years

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**T**here are some errors concerning Dr. Du Bois and me in the splendid essay by Robin D.G. Kelley in the December 1999 *Journal of American History*. There Prof. Kelley writes that after publication of my study of slave uprisings (1943) I “went to work for Dr. Du Bois as his research assistant” (p. 1074).

When I came home from the war in late 1945, I sought, unsuccessfully, a job at Columbia University. Luckily, however—and to my surprise—I was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. This eventuated into what became the first volume of my *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, published in 1951.

Soon after this grant, to my delight, Dr. Du Bois invited me to share his office. He was then Director of Special Research for the NAACP. His office was on Fortieth Street near Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. It was across the street from the New York Public Library.


Dr. Du Bois told me that whenever I had a question, I could turn to him. His knowledge,

was, of course, encyclopedic. Thus, for about a year and a half (until Dr. Du Bois was dismissed from the NAACP, Walter White having become an ally of President Truman) I had this almost unbelievable advantage of Dr. Du Bois at my left and the public library at my right.

## **The Encyclopedia Africana**

There is error, through omission, in the account of Dr. Du Bois by Kate Tuttle in the monumental *Africana* encyclopedia edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.<sup>1</sup> Here the reader is told that in 1961 Dr. Du Bois accepted President Nkrumah's invitation to work on his dream of an Encyclopedia Africana in a now-independent Ghana. As a result, continues the account, Du Bois went to Ghana and died there in 1963. This is so incomplete as to be seriously defective, as will be shown in later paragraphs.

Cornel West, in the same work,<sup>2</sup> presents Dr. Du Bois as leaving “America in despair,” having “concluded that black strivings in a



twilight civilization were unbearable for him” and that “he could not envision black freedom in America as realized.”<sup>3</sup>

Henry Louis Gates Jr., in a lengthy and generally splendid essay titled “Du Bois and the *Encyclopedia Africana*, 1909–1963” in the March 2000 issue of the *Annals of the American Academy*, writes that Du Bois had been invited by Kwame Nkrumah “to move to Ghana to edit *The Encyclopedia Africana*.” Gates continues that Du Bois had been “arrested and tried for being a communist sympathizer, and his traveling privileges suspended” and that Nkrumah’s invitation “must have been” a relief. Then, we are told, Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, “moved to Ghana in 1961, becoming citizens in 1963.”

That, of course, was the year of Dr. Du Bois’s death. Gates continues that Du Bois’s “secretariat for the *Encyclopedia Africana* continued after his death and published three volumes of biographies in the late 1970s and early 1980s.”

Relevant facts concerning Dr. Du Bois and an *Encyclopedia Africana* are as follows. In 1909, he projected the idea of such an encyclopedia. Certain contemporary documents concerning this idea have survived and are in the first volume of his selected *Correspondence*.<sup>4</sup>

Some further data are offered in his posthumous *Autobiography*.<sup>5</sup> There Dr. Du Bois writes that his leaving Atlanta, in 1910, in connection with the founding of *The Crisis*, “postponed this [encyclopedia] project and the World War prevented its re-

newal.” In this source, Du Bois continued, “In 1934 I was chosen to act as editor in chief of a new project of the Phelps-Stokes Fund to prepare and publish an *Encyclopedia of the Negro*.” He continues that he secured the promised cooperation of some Black and white scholars, “but the necessary funds could not be secured,” although, as he wrote, “a preliminary volume summarizing this effort was published [by the fund] in 1945.” I add that a second edition, with some revisions, appeared in 1946; the junior editor was Guy B. Johnson.

Du Bois tried to get Carter G. Woodson to participate in this encyclopedia effort; he did so in a letter dated January 27, 1931. Woodson had not been asked by the fund to participate. He rejected Du Bois’s suggestion and added—in a letter dated February 11, 1932—that his association was actively pursuing the objective of a multivolume encyclopedia—something that did not materialize.<sup>6</sup>

The accounts by West and Gates as to Dr. Du Bois’s leaving for Ghana in 1961 are defective. The facts are these: Nkrumah invited the doctor to work on the encyclopedia in Ghana—the work should be done in Africa, anyway, he added. Dr. Du Bois and Mrs. Du Bois planned such a trip. But in 1961, the doctor decided to join the Communist Party. This evoked some notice in the U.S. press. At that time, the provision of the McCarran Act denying a passport to Communists was upheld, hence the doctor’s passport was no longer valid.

Sixty days elapsed between the court’s decision and its implementation, however. In

that crisis, Du Bois cabled Nkrumah asking if he and Mrs. Du Bois could come forthwith. Nkrumah cabled back: "Come when you can; whenever you come you honor Africa."

An emergency meeting at the Du Bois's home followed. Mrs. Aptheker was then a travel agent; she prepared the necessary details. The question of the doctor's extensive library arose. Fisk was asked if it was interested in obtaining these books. The answer—from Ana Bontemps, Fisk's librarian—was immediate and positive. Du Bois was paid \$10,000 for much of his library.

Dr. Du Bois turned to me. "Herbert," he said, "you are allowed to edit my correspondence. May we ship that to your home?" This involved over 100,000 letters. I asked Fay if we could manage this. Yes, she said, our basement is solid. Filing cabinets were obtained and the correspondence was shipped to our home—then a few miles from Du Bois's. (Fay and I spent hundreds—perhaps thousands—of hours putting those letters in usable order.)

Then the doctor and Shirley Graham Du Bois set out for Idlewild airfield (not yet Kennedy) with the Apthekeers driving them. At the airport, Jim McManus of the *National Guardian* learned from the doctor that the trip's purpose was to produce an Encyclopedia Africana. Having supervised the preparation for this, the understanding then was, the Du Boises would return.

"How many volumes do you project?" asked McManus. Du Bois thought for a moment and replied, perhaps ten stout volumes. "How long would this take you?" McManus asked. "Oh," replied Du Bois, "perhaps five years per volume." McManus wrote this down and left. Here Du Bois burst out into one of his rare loud laughs. A photographer caught this episode—with me in the picture—which is published in Du Bois's *Autobiography*.

Important in this account is the fact that the doctor had selected Alphaeus Hunton to be

his assistant. Hunton had been the secretary for the Council on African Affairs. Hunton—a man modest to a fault (and a biography of him is needed)—and his splendid wife, Dorothy, did an excellent job setting up the vital preparatory work on the encyclopedia.

The work went forward but was severely inhibited by the death of the doctor. Du Bois did everything right—he was born in February as were Lincoln and Douglass. And he died August 27, 1963. His death was announced by Roy Wilkins, who told the enormous crowd—sembled in Washington, D.C., where Martin Luther King was to deliver his immortal speech—that the man who had first called us together had died, and a moment of silence enveloped the vast assemblage.

Shirley continued important work for the Nkrumah government. Meanwhile, Hunton carried on with the encyclopedia.<sup>7</sup> This terminated in 1966 with the U.S.-engineered coup that overthrew Nkrumah. Later, some biographical volumes were published in Ghana and, according to Gates, Ghanaian officials are "still dedicated to fulfill" Du Bois's dream and recently announced plans to issue in 2009 an Encyclopedia Africana.

Meanwhile the huge *Africana* volume edited by Gates and Appiah carries the dedication: "To the memory of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and in honor of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela."

### Du Bois's Trial

One further note: The sources we have considered do not make clear that Dr. Du Bois was actually put on trial in Washington, D.C., in 1951, charged with being "an unregistered foreign agent." No country was named, but the USSR was understood to be the country for whom Du Bois labored. The specific culprit was the Peace Information Center, which Du Bois chaired, with O. John Rogge—a for-

mer assistant attorney general—sharing leadership efforts.

It turned out at the trial that Mr. Rogge was a “plant” of the government. He did, however, retain the capacity of being embarrassed. Thus, when on the stand as a witness, he was asked to identify the defendant, he hesitated. Dr. Du Bois arose from his chair and announced, “Here I am, Mr. Rogge.”

A powerful defense was organized with Mrs. Du Bois and the doctor very active. Abroad the defense was capably led by Prof. Jacob Presser of Amsterdam University—a miraculous survivor of Hitler’s genocide.

At one point the government, perhaps embarrassed by its actions, offered Du Bois a “deal.” If he pleaded guilty, this would be sufficient and that would end the matter.

When this offer was explained to the doctor by his attorney, he replied that he would rot in hell before he agreed with the Washington government.

When the government concluded its case, the judge—a Republican named McGuire—directed that “a judgment for acquittal be granted.” Shirley wrote that the prosecuting

attorney said, “Well, I guess, Your Honor, there’s nothing for me to do.” She added that the judge appeared to sympathize with that attorney and told him, “I am telling the defendant he may go.”

This was one of the great—and very rare—triumphs in the McCarthy era. It must not be omitted in any account of the life of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

## Notes

1. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 635–636.
2. Reprinted in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 80–81.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
4. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois: Selections* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), Vol. 1, pp. 145–146, 152, 447–449.
5. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Autobiography*, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 302.
6. Aptheker, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Vol. 1, pp. 448–449.
7. Hunton wanted me to come to Africa and take up Du Bois’s work. Mrs. Aptheker and I acknowledged warmly the great compliment, but felt our work was needed at home.