

Robert E. Fleming : On Arna Bontemps' Life and Career

Bontemps, Arna Wendell (13 Oct. 1902-4 June 1973), writer, was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, the son of Paul Bismark Bontemps, a bricklayer, and Maria Carolina Pembroke, a schoolteacher. He was reared in Los Angeles, where his family moved when he was three. He graduated from Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, in 1923.

Bontemps then moved to New York's Harlem, where the "Harlem Renaissance" had already attracted the attention of West Coast intellectuals. He found a teaching job at the Harlem Academy in 1924 and began to publish poetry. He won the Alexander Pushkin Prize of Opportunity, a journal published by the National Urban League, in 1926 and 1927 and the Crisis (official journal of the NAACP) Poetry Prize in 1926. His career soon intersected that of the poet Langston Hughes, with whom he became a close friend and sometime collaborator. In Harlem Bontemps also came to know Countée Cullen, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer.

In 1926 Bontemps married Alberta Johnson; they had six children. In 1931, as the depression deepened, Bontemps left the Harlem Academy and moved to Huntsville, Alabama, where he taught for three years at Oakwood Junior College. By the early 1930s Bontemps had begun to publish fiction as well as poetry. His first novel, *God Sends Sunday*, was published in 1931, and an early short story, "A Summer Tragedy," won the Opportunity Short Story Prize in 1932. *God Sends Sunday* is typical of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Little Augie, a black jockey, earns money easily and spends it recklessly. When his luck as a jockey runs out, he drifts through the black sporting world. Slight in plot, the novel is most appreciated for its poetic style, its re-creation of the black idiom, and the depth of its characterization. While most reviewers praised it, W. E. B. Du Bois found it "sordid" and compared it with other "decadent" books of the Harlem Renaissance such as Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928). But Bontemps thought enough of the basic story to collaborate with Countee Cullen on *St. Louis Woman* (1946), a dramatic adaptation of the book.

Bontemps's next novel would be on a much more serious theme, but he first attempted another genre. In collaboration with Langston Hughes, he wrote *Popo and Fifina* (1932), the first of his many children's books. A travel book for children, it introduced readers to Haitian life by describing the lives of a boy named Popo and his sister Fifina. Bontemps followed his initial success in the new field with *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934), a story of a boy and his dog in rural Alabama.

Northern Alabama in the early 1930s proved to be inhospitable to an African-American writer and intellectual. The Scottsboro boys were being tried at Decatur, just thirty miles from Huntsville. Friends visited Bontemps on their way to protest the trial, and a combination of his out-of-state visitors and the fact that he was ordering books by mail worried the administration of the school. Bontemps claimed in later years that he was ordered to demonstrate his break with the world of radical politics by burning a number of books from his private library--works by James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frederick Douglass. Bontemps refused. Instead he resigned and moved back to California, where he and his family moved in with his

parents.

In 1936 he published *Black Thunder*, his finest work in any genre. Based on historical research, *Black Thunder* tells the story of Gabriel Prosser's rebellion near Richmond, Virginia, in 1800. Gabriel, an uneducated field worker and coachman, planned to lead a slave army equipped with makeshift weapons on a raid against the armory in Richmond. Once armed with real muskets, the rebels would defend themselves against all attackers. Betrayed by another slave and hampered by a freak storm, the rebels were crushed, and Gabriel was hanged, but in Bontemps's version of the affair, whites won a Pyrrhic victory. They were forced to recognize the human potential of slaves.

Although *Black Thunder* was well reviewed by both black and mainstream journals such as the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the royalties were not sufficient to support Bontemps's family in Chicago, where they had moved just before publication. He taught briefly in Chicago at the Shiloh Academy and then accepted a job with the WPA Illinois Writers' Project. In 1938, after publishing another children's book, *Sad-Faced Boy* (1937), he received a Rosenwald fellowship to work on what became his last novel, *Drums at Dusk* (1939), based on the Haitian rebellion led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. Although the book was more widely reviewed than his previous novels, the critics were divided, some seeing it as suffering from a sensational and melodramatic plot, others praising its characterizations.

The disappointing reception of the book and the poor royalties that it earned convinced Bontemps that "it was fruitless for a Negro in the United States to address serious writing to my generation, and . . . to consider the alternative of trying to reach young readers not yet hardened or grown insensitive to man's inhumanity to man" (1968, p. x). Henceforth, Bontemps addressed most of his books to youthful audiences. *The Fast Sooner Hound* (1942), was written in collaboration with Jack Conroy, whom he had met on the Illinois Writers' Project.

In 1943 Bontemps earned his master's degree in library science from the University of Chicago. The necessity of earning a living then took him to Fisk University, where he became head librarian, a post he held until 1964. Thereafter he returned to Fisk from time to time. He also accepted positions at the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois and at Yale University, where he served as curator of the James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Arts and Letters.

During these years Bontemps produced an astonishing variety and number of books. His children's books included *Slappy Hooper* (1946) and *Sam Patch* (1951), which he wrote in collaboration with Conroy, as well as *Lonesome Boy* (1955) and *Mr. Kelso's Lion* (1970). At the same time, he wrote biographies of George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington for teenage readers; *Golden Slippers* (1941), an anthology of poetry for young readers; *Famous Negro Athletes* (1964); *Chariot in the Sky* (1951), the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers; and *The Story of the Negro* (1948).

For adults, he and Hughes edited *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949) and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958). With Conroy he wrote *They Seek a City* (1945), a history of African-American migration in the United States, which they revised and published in 1966 as *Anyplace But Here*. Bontemps's historical interests also led him to write *100 Years of Negro Freedom* (1961) and to edit *Great Slave Narratives* (1969) and *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972). He also edited a popular anthology, *American Negro Poetry* (1963), just in time for the black reawakening of the 1960s.

Bontemps had been forced by the reception of his work to put his more creative writing on hold after 1939, but the 1960s encouraged him to return to it. He collected his poetry in a slim volume, *Personals* (1963), and wrote an introduction for *Black Thunder* when it was republished in 1968 in a paperback edition. At the time of his death, he was completing the collection of his short fiction in *The Old South* (1973). Bontemps died at his home in Nashville.

Arna Bontemps excelled in no single literary genre. A noteworthy poet, he published only one volume of his verse. As a writer of fiction, he is best known for a single novel, written in midcareer and rediscovered in his old age. Yet the impact of his work as poet, novelist, historian, children's writer, editor, and librarian is far greater than the sum of its parts. He played a major role in shaping modern African-American literature and had a wide-ranging influence on African-American culture of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Bibliography

The major collections of Arna Bontemps's papers are at Fisk University; the George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University; and the James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book Room and Manuscript Library, Yale University. No book-length biography exists, but Bontemps wrote several autobiographical essays: Introduction to *Black Thunder* (1968), Preface to *Personals* (1963), and "Why I Returned," in *The Old South* (1973). An interview appears in John O'Brien, *Interviews with Black Writers* (1973). A bibliography is Robert E. Fleming, *James Weldon Johnson and Arna Wendell Bontemps: A Reference Guide* (1978). See also Minrose C. Gwin, "Arna Bontemps," *American Poets, 1880-1945* (1986), and Kirkland C. Jones, "Arna Bontemps," *Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940* (1987).

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