

Nell Irvin Painter, *Harvard Journal of Afro-American Affairs* 2:2, pp. 30-42, 1971.

# Black Journalism, the First Hundred Years

NELL PAINTER

*Nell Painter is studying History in the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. She has done extensive traveling in Africa.*

"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, though in the estimation of some mere trifles; for though there are many in society who exercise towards us benevolent feelings; still (with sorrow we confess it) there are others who make it their business to enlarge upon the least trifle. . . ."

The Black community in this country is an oppressed community, and as such, cannot depend upon its oppressors to champion its causes against those self-same oppressors, its enemies. This was the primary motivation for the establishment of Black newspapers in the nineteenth century. Two Black editors introduced their publications with similar words: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations . . ." These were the sentiments expressed in the prospectus of the first Afro-American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827. Twenty years later, Frederick Douglass introduced his *North Star* with words speaking to the same need, words which might have been written in 1970: "We solemnly dedicate the *North Star* to the cause of our long oppressed and plundered fellow countrymen

. . . Every effort to injure or degrade you or your cause—originating wheresoever, or with whomsoever—shall find in it a constant, unswerving and inflexible foe . . ."

From Albany, New York, another early Black journal expressed what has proved to be the second distinguishing characteristic of Afro-American journalism in January, 1831: "*The African Sentinel* and the *Journal of Liberty*, will also be devoted to the dissemination of the news of the day, but more particularly to that relating to the colored population; both Foreign and Domestic . . ."

Since the first half of the nineteenth century Black journalism has reflected the supranational nature of the Black community. Consequently, news relating to Africans, West Indians, and Black South Americans has been reported regularly, not merely as foreign news, but as family news. *Freedom's Journal* promised in 1827 that "everything that relates to Africa shall find a ready admission into our columns . . ." In 1841 the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Magazine* stressed its interest in Africa. And from 1887, when Edward Wilmot Blyden published his *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, a Liberian of West Indian origin became familiar to Black Americans through reviews of his work and his own articles in the Afro-American press, particularly in A.M.E. publications.

As Africans came to speak for themselves in the early twentieth-century, the international character of the Black community became more evident in the Afro-American press. In the early nineteen-twenties, the Chicago *Defender* covered Duse Muhammed Ali's visit to the United States and the successes and problems of "Siki", a Senegalise boxer. During the same period the *Crisis* ran several articles on René Maran, the Martinican colonial officer in French Congo who had won the Prix Goncourt in 1921 for *Batouala*. Experts of the prize-winning novel were translated and published in the *Crisis*.

These are only a few of hundreds of examples of the international, pan-Negro flavor of Afro-American journalism. John Russwurm and Marcus Garvey worked in periods separated by an enormous growth of Black self-consciousness, yet they provide two excellent examples of the international nature of the Black community and its editors. Russwurm was the first Afro-

\* John Russwurm, *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1927.

American to be awarded a bachelor's degree in this country. In 1827 he founded *Freedom's Journal* with the Reverend Samuel Cornish. Above all, Russwurm wanted to serve his people and had seen *Freedom's Journal* as a means to do so. By 1829 he so seriously questioned his ability to serve in the United States that he emigrated to Liberia where he felt his education could be of more use. There he began publishing the *Liberia Herald* in 1830.

Marcus Garvey's appeals to Black people all over the world were more explicit and are better known today. The *Negro World* carried Garvey's messages and news from the whole of the Black world to the Black community in the United States and published editions in French and Spanish. The three editions were read in Africa and the West Indies as well as in New York, where they were published. [It is perhaps worth noting that Garvey's sharpest critics were the Afro-American editors of the *Defender*, the *Crisis*, and the *Messenger*: Robert Abbott, W. E. B. Du Bois, and A. Philip Randolph.]

Thus the two distinctive characteristics of Black journalism which most clearly differentiate it from the white press in two centuries are: 1. a racial rather than partisan orientation; and 2. a sense of a supranational racial identity. This first, the racial orientation, renders the Black press, almost by definition, one of protest.

While there are striking similarities between Black journalism of the first hundred years and the contemporary Black press, distinctions can nevertheless be drawn which set off one period in the development of Black journalism from another. Four periods will be discussed below: 1827-1847, 1847-1865, 1865-1890, and 1890-c. 1927.

The earliest Black newspapers and journals were less confident and self-assertive than those which appeared after Frederick Douglass' *North Star* in 1847. Until emancipation the Black press was orientated towards Black abolitionist thought, which in its concern for the enslaved, pretended to speak for all Afro-Americans. After emancipation new Black newspapers often spoke to narrower racial interests. And after 1890 there was a tremendous increase in the number of Black newspapers and a new sense of professionalism.

It is possible today to find mention of hundreds of Black

periodicals published during those first hundred years but far more difficult to come to significant conclusions about them. Their names, editors and publishers are fairly easy to determine, and usually the dates of first printing and the place of origin. But only in exceptional cases can the last date of publication be determined, not to mention the motive for discontinuing publication. Since only a few copies of these papers still survive in private collections, it is often impossible to draw more than general and tentative conclusions about their editorial policies or successes. The *Chicago Defender*, the *Negro World*, the *Christian Recorder*, and the *Crisis* are prominent exceptions. But of these four, only the *Christian Recorder* extends well back into the nineteenth century. A more recent example will illustrate the rule.

William Monroe Trotter published the *Guardian* in Boston from 1901 until his death in 1934. But like most public libraries, the Boston Public Library did not subscribe to Black papers, and it has no copies of the *Guardian* or any local Black paper. Only the two years 1902-04 are available, and they are in the Schomburg collection in New York. As this case is typical, the criticisms included here of the early Black press are from nineteenth-century comments, particularly those in I. Garland Penn's *The Afro-American Press and its Editors* (Springfield, 1891).

Afro-Americans had been protesting injustices in this country from at least as early as the sixteen-sixties, but until the end of the eighteenth century these protests were in the form of petitions humbly begging for the redress of specific grievances. If the scanty sources are an accurate sampling of the whole, they were aimed entirely at white people. By the post-Revolutionary period, however, Black people were working with each other towards certain goals—the creation of autonomous churches and lodges or settlements in West Africa, for example.

By about 1830 this new self-confidence and self-reliance had grown to such an extent that Afro-Americans were no longer satisfied by merely petitioning white governments, and they began to take an active part in the anti-slavery campaign. The appearance of *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 signaled the emergence of a substantial Northern free Black population, relatively literate, and, more critically, beginning to sense that *its own best*

interests did not necessarily coincide with those of its white compatriots. It was *Freedom's Journal* which said, "Too long have others spoken for us."

In contrast to John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish, however, the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers were white and considered the Race destined uniquely to be washerwomen and bootblacks. As mentioned above, Russwurm left the United States in 1829 for Liberia, where he was active in education and government. Rev. Cornish continued publishing in New York, editing *Rights for All*, and then, with John E. Stewart, the *African Sentinel and Journal of Liberty*, from 1831. As in many other cases, it is not known when these papers ceased publication.

During later years Rev. Cornish collaborated with another persistent Black journalist, Philip A. Bell, on the *Weekly Advocate*, from January 1837 in New York City. In March the name of the paper was changed to the *Colored American*. After Rev. Cornish's retirement, Dr. James McCune Smith worked on the *Colored American*, with Bell, until 1841. Several other papers were published during these first twenty years, and most of them were neither as successful nor as enduring as the *Colored American*.

In 1841 David Ruggles published the *Genius of Freedom* and then the *Mirror of Liberty* in Boston. Ruggles was a Black abolitionist active with the Underground Railroad. The names of his papers indicate his primary concern for the emancipation of his enslaved brethren. The Black abolitionist-journalist was not uncommon in the ante-bellum period, and several other Black papers bear similar names which recall the will to be free.

In 1842 two more newspapers appeared, the *Elevator*, published by Stephen Meyers in Albany, and the *National Watchman*, published by Rev. Henry Highland Garnett in Troy, New York. Garnett is now better known as the abolitionist who urged the slave population to rise up and seize freedom by force of arms if necessary—a very militant proposal in 1843. In the 1850's Garnett joined the growing ranks of the emigrationists. The best known of the emigrationists (and a popular hero today) was Martin Robison Delany, who was also the first Black man to attend Harvard Medical School. In 1843 Delany published his own paper in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the *Mystery*.

In terms of future Black journalism Delany's *Mystery* was most influential. It was remembered in the 1890's as the first Black paper to define and defend vigorously the interests of Black people in this country. And it was cited as the best example of what 'Race' journalism should be. Judging from Delany's books, the *Mystery* was probably ruthlessly truthful about the situation of Black people in America.

The last paper to be published before the opening of the new era was Willis A. Hodges' *Ram's Horn*, which was severely critical of ignorance and insolence on the part of white people. It was published in New York City in 1847 and 1848.

With the exception of the *Mystery*, Black journalism during the first twenty years exhibited a certain mildness and timidity, marked by expressions of solidarity with white Americans. Afro-American journalists, by and large, were anxious to portray the race as sober and hard-working, and above all, thoroughly American. With the publication of Frederick Douglass' own paper in 1847, and especially with his definitive break with Garrison, Afro-American newspapers became more confident and more militant in their opposition to slavery.

Frederick Douglass moved from New England to Rochester, New York in 1847 and began publishing a new paper with Martin Delany. Previously he had been working closely with William Lloyd Garrison and his *Liberator* (begun in 1831 with substantial Black support). Garrison was violently opposed to Douglass' setting out on his own, and in 1851, when Douglass suggested that slavery might only be abolished by political action, or perhaps even violent action, Garrison stopped speaking to him altogether. In his ability and willingness to fraternize with Black people Garrison was an unusual white abolitionist; but like the others he seems to have had great difficulty in accepting a Black abolitionist as his equal, not to mention his superior.

The hitherto wide area of agreement between Black and white abolitionists progressively narrowed as general white attitudes towards Black people hardened into severely restrictive policies on the part of federal, state, and local governments. By the eighteen-forties Black people increasingly questioned the efficacy of non-violence in the anti-slavery cause, and their published

opinions reflected this doubt. Throughout the 1850's and early '60's Black journalism articulated this Black impatience with white procedures and promises and the search for foreign alternatives. By now it was clear that in addition to disagreeing with white abolitionists, Black people disagreed among themselves about domestic solutions and emigration, questions of marginal interest to whites.

With the deterioration of the free Black man's security in the 1850's, another Black/white disagreement was exacerbated. Until emancipation Black journals and newspapers were published by and for the Northern free Black people were very concerned with abolition, but they attempted to ameliorate their own conditions as well. However, white abolitionists, by and large, limited their interest to the Southern slave population; they ignored the tremendous hardships inflicted upon the Northern Black population. This disinterest on the part of white reformers tended to further aggravate differences between them and Black abolitionists, and it confined discussions about Northern free Black people to that group only—hence the Black convention movement. With the notable exception of the *African Repository*, the official publication of the American Colonization Society, the entire emigration controversy was confined almost exclusively to the Black press.

The best known newspaper of the period was the *North Star*, published and edited by Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany in Rochester, New York. In 1850 it became *Frederick Douglass' Weekly*, a name change which many Black abolitionists condemned as unseemingly egotistical.

In 1848 Samuel Ringgold Ward issued the *Impartial Citizen* from Syracuse, New York. Reverend Ward was an active anti-slavery lecturer thought by some to be the most intelligent Black American of his time. Like Douglass, Ward had written a narrative of his life in slavery and of his travels in England. Like several other Black abolitionists of note, he was a fugitive slave, and like others he was forced to flee the country with the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law in the 1850's.

All the early Afro-American journals had been published in the Northeast; in the 1850's, however, a trend towards geographical diversity, which became readily apparent after eman-

cipation, began with new papers published in the West. The first such paper was the *Alienated American*, from Cleveland, published by W. H. H. Day shortly after his graduation from Oberlin College in 1852. In San Francisco, Mifflin W. Gibbs published the *Mirror of the Times* in 1855; the *Mirror* merged with the *Pacific Appeal*, edited by Philip A. Bell, in 1862. The *Appeal's* motto was "He who would be free, himself must strike the blow." The *Herald of Freedom* also appeared in 1855, in Ohio, edited by Peter H. Clark.

The longest-lived Black newspaper first appeared in Philadelphia in 1856; it was the *Christian Recorder*, the official paper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, first edited by Rev. Elisha Weaver. The *Christian Recorder* is particularly valuable today because the Mother Bethel Church has preserved the whole set. And while the absence of Black correspondents has long been one of the major criticisms of the Black press, the *Christian Recorder* did have correspondents in other cities. Consequently it was able to publish eye-witness accounts of important events, for instance the New York Draft Riots of 1863, and could report Black reactions to them.

Another well-edited paper was Thomas Hamilton's *Anglo-African Magazine*. Hamilton had long been interested in publishing and had begun his career in 1841 with the *People's Press*. The *Anglo-African* was published in New York City from 1859 with the motto "Man must be free; if not through the law, then above the law." In 1860 the *Anglo-African* became the *Weekly Anglo-African* and in 1861, the *Pine and Palm*. Between 1861 and 1862 *Pine and Palm* was an emigrationist paper edited by James Redpath. It published extraordinarily sanguine appraisals of the Civil War and its significance for Black people. *Pine and Palm* was unique in rejecting the prevailing view that the Civil War would provide a panacea for Black America's many ills. In 1862 Redpath closed his Hatian Emigration Bureau and the *Pine and Palm* became the *Anglo-African* once more.

During the Civil War the first special interest Black newspaper and the first Black daily paper appeared. John P. Samson published the *Colored Citizen* in Cincinnati from 1863 to 1865, aimed specifically towards Black soldiers. One of the two bilingual papers, both from New Orleans, was the first Black

daily. They were the *Union-L'Union*, which appeared tri-weekly between September, 1862 and July, 1864, with two sheets in English and two in French, and the *Tribune-La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orléans*. The *Tribune* came out tri-weekly in 1864 and then daily until 1869; it was owned by Dr. R. B. Roundanez and was considered a moderate paper.

The emancipation of the Black slave population and the subsequent increased educational opportunities for Afro-Americans provided the second watershed in the development of Black journalism. Earlier, Black journalists had attempted to speak for the whole race, positing their opinions on the emigration-colonization controversy as gospel for all Black people. But after emancipation scores of new newspapers appeared all over the country, and particularly in the former slave states where most Black people lived. The Black press had now to speak to a constituency which had increased tenfold in size and diversity.

Some of the new papers still had universalist pretensions, like the *Augusta Colored American*, begun in 1865 by Rev. James Jynch and J. T. Shuften. Others were clearly regional, for instance, the *Colored Tennessean*, which appeared shortly afterwards. While the *Augusta Colored American* soon became the more local *Loyal Georgian*, a few of the post-emancipation newspapers gained nation-wide readerships, in particular, the *New Era*, established in 1870 in Washington, D.C. with J. Stella Martin as editor and Frederick Douglass as corresponding editor. Others were Philip A. Bell's San Francisco *Elevator* and Frederick Douglass' *New National Era*, which he published from Washington, D.C. from 1875.

Reconstruction had ended as early as 1868 in more than one Southern state. By the early 1870's a wave of anti-black violence, encouraged by inadequate federal troop protection, had reinforced the Black tradition of racial solidarity begun in the 1830's. Black newspapermen met in Cincinnati in 1875 to seek ways of co-ordinating their efforts to serve the race by publicizing racial oppression and Jim Crowism, particularly in the South. Thirteen newspapers were represented, most of which had been established within the last ten years: the Lexington, Kentucky *American Citizen*, the Memphis *Planet*, the San Francisco *Elevator*, the New Orleans *Louisianian*, the Carroll Parish, Louisiana *True*

*Republican*, the Baton Rouge *Grand Era*, the Los Angeles *Pacific Appeal*, the Galveston *Spectator*, the Concordia, Louisiana *Eagle*, the Philadelphia *Christian Recorder*, the Cincinnati *Colored Citizen*, the New York *Progressive American*, and the Terre Bonne, Louisiana *Republican*. This conference stood in marked contrast to ante-bellum race conferences because it brought together men with a particular professional interest from all over the nation. Another index of change was the regional distribution of the participants; ten of the thirteen papers represented were from the South and Far West, whereas before emancipation Black newspapers had nearly all been clustered in New York. After emancipation literacy and an accompanying sense of self-determination spread through Black communities in all the United States, encouraging the growth of Black journalism.

By 1880 there were at least 31 Black newspapers being published in the whole country; by 1890 their number had increased to 154. Black people in Boston participated in this spectacular growth of the Black press. In 1880 there was only one Black newspaper in the area, the Boston *Co-operator*, but four more were established before the turn of the century. The Boston *Courant* was edited by J. Gordon Street, who also contributed to the white papers; the Boston *Leader* was published by Howard L. Smith and Robert Teamoh, also a reporter for the Boston *Globe*; Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, an active club woman, published the *Woman's Era* towards the very end of the century; and the Boston *Advocate* was published well into the twentieth century.

After 1890 Black journalism was mature and varied; there were publications of all descriptions. They ranged from Dr. E. E. Williams' *Journal of the Lodge*, the official publication of the Grand Lodge of Masons of the state of Louisiana, to Professor Daniel Webster Davis' Richmond *Young Men's Friend*, to Rev. Calvin S. Brown's *Baptist Pilot* of North Carolina, to the big city newspapers.

By the eighteen-nineties the major city papers were frequently read from coast to coast and their editors were often personalities of national stature. The Chicago *Conservator* was founded by Rev. R. De Baptiste (whose daughter was also a journalist) in 1879, but it was made a national paper by Ferdinand Barnett

in 1884; William C. Chase started the *Washington Bee* in 1882, but the best known late nineteenth-century editor was Timothy Thomas Fortune, of New York. Fortune edited three New York newspapers, the *Globe*, the *Freeman*, and the famous *Age*.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a continuation of the trends of the late nineteenth. New periodicals continued to appear, some to become nationally known. Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's *Messenger*, Marcus Garvey and William H. Ferris' *Negro World*, and the N.A.A.C.P. and W. E. B. DuBois' *Crisis* are only four examples of the sophisticated, professional and very diverse orientations of the modern Afro-American press.

By the early twentieth century the editors of national Black publications were better educated and more cosmopolitan than their predecessors of the previous quarter century. Perhaps the emergence of several such editors of great stature is the best indication of the coming of age of Black journalism; two such editors were Ida B. Wells-Barnett and T. Thomas Fortune. They shared the Black journalists' traditional concern for their people but combined with it indefatigable and fearless reporting and an acute sense of professionalism.

T. Thomas Fortune began his career as an editor of the *Rumor*, but he became well-known with his work on the New York *Globe*, which he edited from 1880 to 1884. During 1884 he edited the New York *Freeman*, which changed its name the following year to the *Age*. The *Age* was probably the best known Black newspaper of the late nineteenth century.

In 1884 Fortune published a book arguing for civil rights and justice for Black people, *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South*. From the late 1880's he worked to bring into being an organization which would expose the oppression Afro-Americans suffered, especially in the South, and in 1890 formed the Afro-American League, a militant protest movement, somewhat on the order of the later Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

At its inception the Afro-American League denounced taxation without representation, mob rule and lynching, and agitated for equal allocation of public school funds, humane treatment for prisoners and migration from the terrorist sections of the

South. During the last five years of the nineteenth century, however, Booker T. Washington emerged as the consecrated "Leader of the Colored Race", and his disapproval of protest and agitation dampened T. Thomas Fortune's militancy as well as that of the Afro-American League. The League was not recaptured from the cautious Bookerites until 1903-05, when William Monroe Trotter, Kelley Miller, and W. E. B. DuBois began to write hard-hitting and successful critiques of Washington's conciliatory policies.

Combining talent, commitment, integrity with intrepidity, Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a paragon of Black journalism. She began teaching at the age of fourteen and refused offers to leave the South. In the mid-1880's she began to write, contributing to the *Memphis Living Way*. Later she became part-owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech* and was the Memphis correspondent for several other Black journals, including the *Detroit Plaindealer*, the *New York Age*, and *Our Women and Children* (the only periodical which offered Black women the possibility of holding positions of responsibility at that time.)

As editor of the *Memphis Free Speech* the then Miss Wells investigated lawlessness and lynching, which had become routine by the early 1880's. In 1892 she exposed a lynching which had been instigated by white businessmen against their Afro-American competitors. As a result, Miss Wells' paper was burned out and she was forced to take refuge outside the state. She went to New York where she contributed to the *Age* and published *Red Book*, a study of lynching. She later married Ferdinand Barnett, editor of the *Chicago Conservator*.

Just after the turn of the century a Harvard graduate, William Monroe Trotter, established his *Boston Guardian*, a thoroughgoing protest paper based on uncompromising opposition to segregation and racial discrimination. The first number of November 1, 1901 carried columns full of useful adages, society news, and a correction of the irresponsible, anti-black reporting of a white *Dorchester* paper. During the nineteen-twenties the *Guardian* was probably the organ of the Equal Rights League of Afro-Americans, of which Trotter was secretary and prime mover. Trotter's sister Maud continued to publish the *Guardian* after his death in the mid-1930's.

Booker T. Washington was William Monroe Trotter's chief target for criticism within the race, and in typical Bookerite fashion, Washington attempted to neutralize Trotter's attacks. He bought out several Black newspapers, among them the *Boston Chronicle*. But the *Chronicle* never represented a serious threat to the *Guardian*.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, T. Thomas Fortune, and William Monroe Trotter were the first modern Afro-American editors, unafraid of exposing the ugly truths about American racism and working to counter it. While they understandably shared the concerns of nineteenth-century Black journalists, their confident and sophisticated writing was far removed from the hesitant and often apologetic sermons of the eighteen-twenties and 'thirties. Wells-Barnett, Fortune, and Trotter, however, represented the best in race journalism of their time. Their lesser contemporaries were criticized time and again for faults that are still to be found in Afro-American journalism.

In the late nineteenth century Black people criticized the Black press in general for reporting gossip and trivia and calling it "society news", for the absence of clear and committed, and, above all, critical editorial policies, and for its failure to supply its own news. The same criticisms were applicable to the Black press in the early twentieth century. Although the Associated Correspondents of Race Newspapers was formed in 1890, it was unable to establish permanent standards to meet the expectations of the Black reading public.

No doubt there was tremendous room for improvement in Black journalism during the first hundred years, but its critics never denied the need for 'Race' papers nor the irreplaceable service the Black press had rendered in publicizing our abilities, accomplishments, and our oppression.