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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Self-Styled Moses

Reviewed by Michael Anderson

MARCUS GARVEY REMAINS THE MOST confounding figure in the history of black America. Arriving in the United States in 1916, the 28-year-old Jamaican emigrant, of slipshod self-education and without connections, rapidly created what the distinguished black historian John Hope Franklin called the first black mass movement in the history of the United States. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association claimed a worldwide membership in the millions; his weekly journal, *Negro World*, had a circulation of 50,000. At the height of his influence, Garvey drew thousands of black people every night to rallies in Harlem.

He deliberately set himself in contrast to the fledgling NAACP. Garvey advocated racial separation, making common cause with white-supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan: "I regard the Klan, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, and White American Societies as better friends of the race than all other groups of hypocritical whites put together." The NAACP was Fabian in its strategy of low-key lobbying and public education to protect black political and civil rights. Garvey roared, "The Ku Klux Klan is going to make this a white man's country. . . . Fighting them

is not going to get you anywhere."

How, then, could Garvey command the almost hysterical devotion of the black masses? Through a commanding oratory that hypnotically invoked racial pride. "The man spoke," James Weldon Johnson wrote in *Black Manhattan* (1930), "and his magnetic personality, torrential eloquence, and intuitive knowledge of crowd psychology were all brought into play." Garvey vowed to "organize the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world into a vast organization to plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa."

Johnson remarked upon Garvey's "Napoleonic personality," and he certainly dressed the part, sporting a "military hat tipped with white feathers, black broadcloth trousers with a gold stripe down the side, a Sam Browne belt across his chest, gold epaulettes, a gold sword, and white gloves." Though the spectacle caused W. E. B. Du Bois to mutter that "a casual observer might have mistaken it for the dress-rehearsal of a new comic opera," to his devoted followers Garvey was what he proclaimed himself to be: the Provisional Presi-

NEGRO WITH A HAT:

The Rise and Fall of
Marcus Garvey.

By Colin Grant.
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530 pp. \$27.95

dent of Africa, the man who would reclaim the continent from its colonialist masters and establish a homeland where an oppressed people would rediscover its lost glory.

And the people were willing to put their money where Garvey's mouth was. At its peak, in 1919 and 1920, Garvey's movement amassed more than \$600,000 (the equivalent today of more than \$7 million), with which Garvey proposed to extend Booker T. Washington's pastoral ideal of black economic self-sufficiency into the entrepreneurial age of the Roaring Twenties. He told his followers he would initiate a business venture every month: a lunchroom, a restaurant, a tearoom, an ice-cream

parlor. These were, however, but overtures to the inauguration of a steamship company, the Black Star Line. As Colin Grant writes in his biography of Garvey, *Negro With a Hat*, not only would the steamship line "operate between American ports and those of

Africa, the West Indies, and Central and South America," but to devoted Garveyites the Black Star would also be the mechanism through which "a latter-day Moses . . . was going to lead them to the Promised Land." Five thousand black people cheered the maiden voyage of the line's first steamer as it left New York's 135th Street pier in November 1919.

"Of course, the bubble burst," Johnson wrote. Garvey and his entourage knew nothing about ships—not even how to shop for them. The vessel that thousands cheered was in such drastic need of repair that one Universal Negro Improvement Association official despaired, "She could not have been worth a penny over \$25,000 when the Black Star Line acquired her for \$165,000." (Two other ships broke down on their initial voyages and never returned to New York.) By January 1922 the Black Star Line was bankrupt, costs outrunning capital by nearly \$89,000 (just over \$1 million today).

Marcus Garvey "was not the worst kind of demagogue," W. E. B. Du Bois conceded. "He believed in his program and he had a childish ignorance of the stern facts of the world into whose face he was flying."

Garvey was convicted of federal fraud charges in 1923. His five-year sentence was commuted by President Calvin Coolidge in 1927, and Garvey, who had never become a U.S. citizen, was immediately deported to Jamaica. Irrepressibly, he announced plans for a *new* steamship company, as well as a campaign to collect \$600 million for a worldwide program of global black uplift.

However, exiled from his base in Harlem, Garvey was a leader in search of followers. A newspaper account of his talk in 1928 in London's Royal Albert Hall, which seated 10,000, was headlined, "9800 Empty Seats." In 1940, five years after settling in London, he died there, at the age of 52, without ever seeing the continent he had promised to deliver.

"Writing on Garvey has lately been a polemical tussle between two camps," Grant concludes, "one that wants to skewer him as a charlatan and the other that seeks to elevate him to the status of a saint." On the one hand, there is Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche's judgment from 1940: "When the curtain dropped on the Garvey theatricals, the black man of America was exactly where Garvey had found him, though a little bit sadder, perhaps a bit poorer—if not wiser." On the other hand is the fact that a future prime minister of Jamaica, Edward Seaga, arranged in 1964 for Garvey's remains to be returned for a funeral honoring him as the country's first national hero.

But the forced choice Grant proposes is far too restricted. Himself of Jamaican heritage, Grant is unable to achieve a balanced perspective; though he is obviously aware of Garvey's lunacies, his reservations are expressed only as snarky asides (as in the title of his book, a reference to that befeathered military hat that dominates the best-known photographs of Garvey). For the most part he writes as Garvey's champion, praising his "genius," snidely denigrating his opponents, even (most unforgivably) comparing him to Gandhi. The principal value of *Negro With a Hat* may be that it inadvertently immerses the modern reader in the spirit of Garveyism: a murk of inchoate exhortation, discus-



Marcus Garvey, shown above in 1923, sought to unite blacks worldwide to “plant the banner of freedom” in Africa, and often dressed as though he were ready to lead the charge.

sive and digressive, lacking organization or over-scrupulousness about facts. For example, Grant situates a Chicago beach on the Missouri River. Anyone seeking an intelligent and accurate account of Garvey and his movement must return to E. David Cronon's superb *Black Moses* (1955), still the only scholarly account of Garvey's life and movement.

From the time of his ascent, Garvey evoked conflicting responses, even from opponents such as the black newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, which wrote in an obituary editorial: “Had Garvey succeeded in his undertakings, he would have been incontestably the greatest figure of the 20th century. Having failed, he is considered a fool.” Though he might have been a buffoon, a crook he was not: His endless and strident appeals for black people to purchase shares in the Black Star Line (“Any Negro not a stockholder in the BSL will be worse than a traitor”) were not designed to line his pockets but to support his crackpot fantasies of racial grandeur. (When one of the line's steamships finally managed to take on coconuts as paid cargo,

Garvey's insistence that the vessel make unscheduled stops, that more people might marvel, ensured that the fruit rotted before it could be delivered.)

And had the man himself not appeared, the times might have created him. In the wake of the Great Migration of southern blacks to the North and their subsequent bitter discovery of a subtler segregation, in their disillusionment with the failed promise in Woodrow Wilson's flatulent, if ringing, rhetoric of democracy, in their newfound determination to confront racial violence during the series of white mob actions of the “Red Summer” of 1919, “the mingled emotions of the race were bitterness, despair, and anger,” Johnson wrote. “There developed an attitude of cynicism. . . . There developed also a spirit of defiance born of desperation.” These conditions called for a demagogue, and Garvey answered.

But he was “not the worst kind of demagogue,” Du Bois conceded. “If he had been simply a calculating scoundrel, he would carefully have skirted the narrow line between promise and performance and avoided as long as possible the inevitable catastrophe. But he believed in his program and he had a childish ignorance of the stern facts of the world into whose face he was flying.” Garvey certainly had the right enemies (colonialism, racial oppression, economic exploitation), and though his appeals for racial self-respect could be shrill and silly (he bestowed endless titles on followers: “Baron of the Zambezi,” “Knights of the Nile,” “the Distinguished Service Order of Ethiopia”; even the humblest Garveyite was called “Fellowman of the Negro Race”), they could not be wholly despised at a time when Congress refused to outlaw lynching.

He may have been wrong-headed, but at least he was sincere: Such has been the case made for Garvey. Just as he ignored the ancient dictum when he acted as his own lawyer in his mail fraud trial, far too many commentators cite his good intentions without acknowledging that they cobbled the pathway to perdition. Yet in the cold light of history, what did he accomplish, what good did he do? Garvey's putative importance as precursor to racial self-esteem is as greasy as that

term has come to be; his concrete achievement is as evanescent as his steamship line. "You have been preying upon the gullibility of your own people," a judge told Garvey. "You should have taken this \$600,000 and built a hospital for colored people in this city instead of purchasing a few old boats. There is a form of paranoia which manifests itself in believing oneself to be a great man."

Honky baiting, a favored tactic of black demagogues from Garvey to Jeremiah Wright, is a sorry substitute for reform. Equally barren is the

assertion that Garvey, however demented, deserves praise for detesting the detestable. Such symbolic triumphs have so long been offered to black Americans that too many have substituted shadow for act (these days it is called "representation") in a state of almost conscious denial. As the black scholar Kelly Miller said in the last century, "The Negro pays for what he wants and begs for what he needs."

MICHAEL ANDERSON is writing a biography of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

Waking Nightmare

Reviewed by D. T. Max

PITY THE POOR SLEEP RESEARCHER. THERE he (and it is usually a "he") is at a sleep convention, and along comes Gayle Greene, a professor of literature with chronic insomnia who has made a specialty of trying to cure herself. The researcher is pumped up on recent successes in the field: the growth of apnea treatments or the development of a pill that quiets restless legs syndrome. The "sleep switch," a central trigger in the brain that divides sleeping from waking, has been located. Then Greene, who teaches at Scripps College in Claremont, California, starts her rat-a-tat of questions. What do we know about how our diet affects sleep? she might ask the researcher. Er, nothing. Do our parents' sleep habits affect our own? Er, we don't really know. Well, surely you can tell me how the best-known sleeping pills work? No, actually, Professor Greene, we can't. They just sort of seem to help.

Insomniac is an odd kind of book: It's not a whodunit but a why-don't-they-do-it. It asks questions, then asks why no one really qualified is exploring them. Greene wants answers, and, unfortunately, there are few in the world of sleep research. Those we have are bought and paid for by Big Pharma, with a predictable distorting effect. For instance, we know a lot about how breathing affects sleep patterns, but next to nothing about how menstruation affects sleep

patterns. That's because there's money to be made in treating breathing problems. Insurance companies will cover the costs of the things sleep clinics can sell you to ease your apnea. Not so if your insomnia is linked—as Greene suspects hers is—to hormonal fluctuations.

Insomniac is, along the way, an alarming, uncomfortable portrayal of how researchers in the field fail the sufferers they are supposed to treat. Desperate for funds, bent over by insurance companies, whiplashed by the National Institutes of Health, researchers do not treat insomnia as it is actually experienced. If you cannot cure me, Greene seems to be saying, at least hear me. Don't tell me how insomnia ought to be, but let me tell you how it really is. "What is missing from everything I read about insomnia is—the insomniacs," she writes. And earlier she confides, "No doctor I ever saw showed the slightest curiosity about the cocktail of hormones, estrogen, progesterone, thyroid, that I ingest daily." "This is a somewhat cranky book," she writes. Indeed it is.

And with reason, as Greene makes clear. Certainly insomnia came early to her and has stayed for a long time. Greene was born wide awake. "There is no sleep in that baby," her mother wrote to

INSOMNIAC.

By Gayle Greene.
Univ. of California Press.
503 pp. \$29.95