

Reviews

A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America. By Stephen G. Hall. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xv + 334 pp.

“American history,” James Baldwin said in 1963, “is longer, larger [and] more various than anything anyone has ever said about it.” So too is the history of African American historical writing, as Stephen G. Hall expertly demonstrates in his recently published monograph, *A Faithful Account of the Race*. Drawing from pamphlets, black newspapers, emancipation narratives, collective biographies and race textbooks, *A Faithful Account* charts “the origins, meanings, methods, evolution and maturation of African American historical writing from the period of the early republic to its professionalization in the twentieth century” (3-4).

Whereas most studies of black history locate the field’s origins in 1915 with the advent of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Hall maintains that the formation of Carter G. Woodson’s Association did not mark the beginning of African American history but rather “represented the culmination of a century-long effort to legitimize the study of the African American experience” (216). This rich tradition of black historical writing, Hall shows, stretches from Jacob Oson’s *A Search for Truth* (1817) and David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) to Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892) and John Cromwell’s *The Negro in American History* (1914).

Arguably the greatest strength of *Faithful Account* is

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Hall's consistent and illuminating efforts to connect African American historical texts to larger "ideological and intellectual constructs" from the Bible, classicism and Romanticism during the first half of the nineteenth century to realism, scientism and objectivity by century's end (4). That African American writers were invariably dedicated to vindicating the race, Hall emphasizes, should not obscure their sophisticated deployment of the intellectual theories, methodologies and concepts from the time in which they lived. In the early Republic, for example, writers such as Oson, Walker and Maria Stewart invoked both Biblical and classical authority to establish "a historical genealogy whose beginnings transcended the narrow confines of the hold of slave ships in the Middle Passage" (47). Later, postbellum authors such as Cromwell, William Henry Croghan and Pauline Hopkins wrote histories that skillfully incorporated the quintessentially late nineteenth-century ideas of "progress" and "civilization."

In addition to his attention to significant intellectual currents, Hall does an excellent job of showing the relationship between black historical writing and broader socio-political trends. When the slavery controversy reached fever pitch in the 1850s, for example, writers such as William Nell documented the record of black participation in the Revolutionary War in order to "remind the nation of its unpaid debt, the guarantee of freedom and citizenship" (96). At the same time, other writers such as William Wells Brown turned to the history of Haiti, using the example of the Haitian Revolution "to warn the United States of its possible future if slavery were not abolished" (7). In the late nineteenth-century, meanwhile, writing race histories "required an intense engagement with New South philosophy of modernization, urbanization and industrialization" (156).

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Books by the likes of Croghan and George Washington Williams readily incorporated statistics (in the form of detailed graphs, charts and tables) to underscore the race's progress since Emancipation with respect to education, property ownership and so on.

The last chapter of *Faithful Account* sketches the concomitant rise of the black academy and the professionalization of black historical production. Hall shows that industrial schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee developed a robust history curriculum much earlier than more elite, classically-oriented institutions, due largely to the formers' strong teacher training missions. This finding is a welcome tonic to the widespread perception that schools in the Hampton vein were retrograde institutions, devoted exclusively to educating African Americans for second-class citizenship (see, for example, James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, UNC Press, 1988). It is also emblematic of the overall quality of Hall's analysis, which displays the same "high level of intellectual engagement with the large and dynamic world of ideas" as the scores of authors highlighted in *Faithful Account* (228).

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder
Ph.D. Candidate
New York University

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