
Emma Lou Thornbrough's Place in American Historiography

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Recent participants in the American culture wars have boldly declared the need for a "return" to narrative history. Their assumption, a curious one in my view, seems to be that narrative history displays a commitment to "objective truth" and that thematic social history does not. I am aware of no successful attempt at arguing these points. Furthermore, the claim betrays a failure of historical memory, or at least a failure to understand how a related controversy was played out by an earlier generation. At the beginning of this century an heuristic distinction was drawn between historians possessed of a literary bent, those who were concerned with narrative, and "scientific" historians, who were concerned with the objective presentation of empirical evidence. Historians of the literary temperament attempted to define the American national epic, often in the form of a conceptually innovative and rhetorically compelling narrative. Scientific historians, for the most part, eschewed grand theories and moral preachments and were concerned with the systematic introduction of evidence in order, as Leopold von Ranke had put it, to relate history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*," or "as it actually was."

Things were, of course, never so simple. Henry Adams knew that the very idea of scientific history contained a paradox that derived from competing ideas of what constitutes science—in particular, social science. The notion of scientific history developed as much from the sweeping sociological imagination of Auguste Comte as it did from the patient incrementalism of the Rankeans. It should not be surprising, therefore, that from its inception American social history, despite its rootedness in description and analysis and regardless of its methodological devotion to the incremental accumulation of minute data, should be infused with an evolutionary metaphysic. Scientific history was "progressive" in the sense denoted by Herbert Butterfield and later expanded by Richard Hofstadter. The derivation of social history, old and new, from the pro-

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gressive genealogy of Comte and Adams is clear, since American social history almost invariably reveals a confidence in the inevitable march of reason through the gradual unveiling of truth toward the amelioration of irrationality, superstition, and injustice in human affairs. In such fashion is the perfectionist strain in American life complemented by the progressivist strain in American historiography.

Two of the most impressive examples of the scientific-progressive school in the field of African-American history have been John Hope Franklin's *The Free Negro in North Carolina* (1943) and Emma Lou Thornbrough's *The Negro in Indiana* (1963). Both were produced by scholars who were scientific historians in method and progressive historians in ideology. History, especially African-American history, would be a dismal science if its goal were no more than the charting of random victories and defeats. *The Negro In Indiana* would be a depressing book were it not for its underlying current of implicit optimism. Like Franklin's *Free Negro in North Carolina*, it is one of those meticulous volumes that fully documents what common sense and popular legend have always told us, that African Americans have encountered much hardship along the road "from slavery to freedom."

Thornbrough was a progressive historian by temperament. She impressed me as such on the only occasion we ever met. It was at a session of the Popular Culture Association in Indianapolis, where she introduced herself to me after my presentation on a panel. I perceived her as a straightforward, generous-spirited woman, unexcitable, eager to teach and to learn. I never doubted the nature of her sympathies, which are obvious on every page of *The Negro in Indiana*. When Thornbrough describes, in her preface, "the discrimination and indignities" heaped upon the black population or "the gradual and uneven progress of the Negro minority toward equality" (p. x), we know that she perceives racial discrimination as a violation of morality and common sense. To her credit she seems, at times, almost incapable of conceiving how this self-evident truth could not be obvious to everyone.

The early chapters of *The Negro in Indiana* deal with the arrival of African Americans in the state as slaves and indentured servants and with the movement to exclude all Negroes, whether slave or free. Antislavery in Indiana, as in many of the free states, reflected the hostility of free whites toward competition with slave labor as well as a fundamental prejudice against black people. Slavery failed to take root in Indiana, we may assume, for the same reasons—economic and legal—that it failed in the rest of the Midwest. As slavery and indentured servitude were outlawed, attempts were made toward the complete exclusion of all black people from the state, and those free Negroes who did arrive were encouraged to leave.

Exclusionists argued that the people of Indiana would be “recreant to their best interests and greatest duties to posterity, if they supinely continue to permit the migration of free negroes to the state. The dregs of offscourings of the slave states are most likely to change residence, and they are too incurably affected with that horrible gangrene of morals which slavery engenders, to be welcome among a virtuous and intelligent people” (quoted, p. 57-58). In short, in the interest of progress black people should not be allowed into Indiana. This position was mild in comparison to the opinion of one gentleman who, speaking before the legislature, maintained that “in all sincerity, and without any hard feelings towards them [the free Negroes]—that it would be better to kill them off at once, if there is no other way to get rid of them. . . . we know how the Puritans did with the Indians, who were infinitely more magnanimous and less impudent than this colored race . . .” (quoted, p. 66-67).

Indianans also gave widespread support to the American Colonization Society despite the fact that African Americans showed little interest in migrating to Africa. As was true in other free states, the Quaker community constituted the most prominent white group that consistently opposed not only slavery but discriminatory legislation. The Constitution of 1851 provided, in its notorious Article XIII, that “No Negro or mulatto shall come into, or settle in the State, after the adoption of this Constitution.” While most whites in Indiana supported the provision, an abolitionist minority protested it. The law turned out, in the long run, to be ineffective; but although it was never systematically enforced, attempts at its repeal were unsuccessful.

Thornbrough’s discussion of African-American politics after emancipation is one of the book’s most interesting features. Indiana was one of the states in which African Americans began quite early to resent the Republican monopoly of their votes. Throughout the Reconstruction period most black leaders subscribed to Frederick Douglass’s dictum, “The Republican Party is the ship; all else is the sea.” The challenge to Republican orthodoxy came largely from the Indianapolis *Freeman*, which began publication in 1888 with Edward E. Cooper as its editor. The *Freeman*, Thornbrough notes, “tried to show that although the Republicans could not carry the state without Negro votes, they were ingrates who did not give the Negroes the rewards they deserved” (p. 303). Black Indianans were denied a voice in the national Republican party and were also ignored in local municipal affairs. In the presidential campaign of 1888 the *Freeman* supported the reelection of Grover Cleveland, acknowledged even by Douglass to be an honorable and fair man. The *Freeman* retained its association with the Democratic party until 1892, when it was purchased by the black Republican leader George L. Knox.

As a scientific historian focusing on the nineteenth century, Thornbrough was obliged to relate a series of verifiable facts regardless of their unpleasantness, just "as they actually were," but the conclusions she reached were reasonably optimistic. She viewed the years between the Civil War and the turn of the century as "a period of substantial, if uneven, progress" in Indiana. While black Americans were not always treated with full equality, they were recognized as equal before the law. "While the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment was bitterly resisted, once political rights were granted there was never any movement to take them away" (p. 391). She notes the rise of Ku Klux Klan activity in the 1920s and describes the lynching of two Negro youths in 1930. Having confessed to killing a white man and assaulting his female companion, they were taken by a mob from the Grant County jail and hanged. Most of the population of Indiana in 1963 would have been startled, she asserts, "to know that a lynching had occurred in the state so recently" (p. 393). Thornbrough makes no mention of the fact that interracial marriage was still prohibited by Indiana law at the time her book was published.

True to the progressive tradition, Thornbrough was confident of the power of facts, simply presented, to overcome ignorance and of the power of science to defeat racial superstition. Her scientific history, therefore, aspired to something beyond the modest pretensions of apolitical Rankeanism. It was more akin to the scientific teleology of Comte. Civil rights were destined to triumph because intolerance is fundamentally irrational. The fact that she allowed the facts to speak for themselves did not imply an apolitical attitude, only a methodological integrity. She believed, as did the best historians of her generation, that monstrous and irrational dogmas were ultimately doomed by the progress of science. She gave every indication of having accepted the fundamental tenet of progressivism that no democratically conceived society could permanently allow itself to be governed by an ethos that was essentially irrational, hence unjust.

Around 1970, when the black studies publishing boom was heating up and academic presses were attempting to meet the demand for "books to set the record straight," I somehow got hold of Thornbrough's tidy little reader, *Booker T. Washington* (1969), which was issued in the Prentice-Hall series Great Lives Observed. It is a collection of some of Washington's representative speeches bound together with memorable responses from his contemporaries overlapped by several historical appraisals, including those of Carter G. Woodson, Langston Hughes, August Meier, and Louis R. Harlan. It is gratifying to see how well Thornbrough's collection has stood the test of time, for there have been surprisingly few attempts at reappraising Booker T. Washington in the past quarter century. Certainly his complexities are seldom appreciated, and it is difficult

to interest present-day students in getting to know him. I still consider Thornbrough's text useful for graduate and undergraduate courses. A good teaching tool does not go out of date in a mere quarter century.

But while an anthology must be a good teaching tool, it should also justify itself in terms of its theory of history and its theory of the teaching of history. Consumers should be able to count on an accessible, evenhanded introduction to the author in question, but any instructor who plans to assign such a text will always hunger for something more than a simple presentation of the facts and documents. By the process of selection and, of course, in the introduction they provide, editors have an obligation to teach. They must present a body of material in such a way as to reveal to the reader why they consider these materials important. In the process they will tell us much about their theory of history and about their philosophy of life. Thornbrough's introduction to *Booker T. Washington* is a model of its genre, objective and balanced yet offering an interpretation with a touch that is characteristically light and subtle.

"To understand a man it is necessary to know something of the times in which he lived," she tells us in the introduction (p. 1). This is more than a statement of the obvious. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, she recognized the fact that any useful treatment of Washington must place him within the context of American economic culture. In her opening paragraph she therefore outlined the *Zeitgeist* of the "Gilded Age," highlighting the major personalities and events that gave the period its character in that age of excess. While Thornbrough was not inclined to make excuses for the policies of the Tuskegee Machine, she recognized, as did Du Bois, Washington's genius at catching "the thought and speech of triumphant commercialism." His behavior was not simply a matter of slavish compliance with the dictates of power, it was a brilliant, albeit tragically doomed, attempt to alter the course of a power that was beyond all hope of control.

Unhappy discoveries that I have made in my recent dealings with textbook editors lead me to fear that such a volume as Thornbrough's *Booker T. Washington* would not make it through the editorial process at some publishing houses today. Thornbrough made an assumption, which was perhaps more reasonable in 1972 than it is today, that intelligent students and teachers were alike capable of understanding a college level presentation of historical documents. She obviously expected that the text would be administered by a mature, dedicated teacher with a knowledge of the general contours of American history. She assumed that an instructor would take the time to define such terms as "Gilded Age" and explain the representatives of that age, "men like Rockefeller, and Carnegie [who] were free to exercise their entrepreneurial and acquisitive talents without interference from government" (p. 1).

She assumed, furthermore, that a competent teacher would have sufficient imagination to follow her suggestions about placing Washington within the context of cultural studies. Her text alludes to the once popular myth of Horatio Alger, assuming that students would want to know and that teachers would be happy to explain who Alger was. The introduction briefly mentions that element of primary importance in the intellectual history of the period, "social Darwinism," and its effects on segregationist thought before going on to sketch the background of *Plessy v Ferguson*. Thornbrough evinced her progressive optimism by assuming that students and teachers would display sufficient curiosity and initiative to make their way across the intellectual terrain once she pointed out the landmarks.

Thornbrough's objectivity and authoritative knowledge of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made her an obvious choice to write the article on Washington in the *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (DANB). Thornbrough, as much as anyone, was responsible for the reappraisal of turn-of-the-century black leadership that is still occurring in American historiography. Along with Meier and Harlan she led us to an understanding of the complexities of Washington's behavior and the subtle workings of his Tuskegee Machine. While, on the one hand, it is evident that Thornbrough was no defender of Washington, it is equally obvious that she respected him. I think her work marked a departure from the position of other progressive scholars, notably Rayford W. Logan and J. Saunders Redding, who could barely mention Washington's name without a sneer.

If Thornbrough was a good choice to write the article on Washington for the DANB, she was the best choice to write the article on T. Thomas Fortune. As author of *T. Thomas Fortune, Militant Journalist*, she had long been immersed in her subject. Her study of the militant journalist had obliged her to wade into areas of American history more obscure than the relatively straightforward court reporting that had dominated her earlier work. Fortune's brilliant but unstable character and the apparent contradictions in his political philosophy made him an intriguing subject. Thornbrough's attempt to make sense of Fortune's life inevitably resulted in a more interesting project, in this reader's view, than the masterful, but unadventurous, archival reporting of *The Negro in Indiana*.

Fortune was born in Marianna, Florida, in 1856, the child of former slaves with appreciable white and Indian ancestry. Though the photograph that appears as frontispiece to Thornbrough's biography provides no clue of his African ancestry, other photographs are more revealing. Born in a time and place when one drop of Negro blood was sufficient to predetermine one's fixed place within the racial caste system, Fortune was always known as a "black man," and his life was dedicated to uncompromising struggle

against racial oppression. While he was in his early teens, Fortune's parents moved to Jacksonville. There he briefly attended the Stanton Academy, where he was instructed by two women from New England. During these years he held various jobs, including one as printers devil for the Jackson *Daily Union*. By the time he left the deep South, still in his teens, Fortune had become an expert compositor and had learned the rudiments of the newspaper business.

Fortune entered the preparatory department of Howard University in 1874 with less than three years of formal schooling. He soon rebelled against the discipline of the university, including what he identified as a spirit of religious hypocrisy, but he respected several of the teachers greatly and expressed continuing admiration for Dean of the Law School John Mercer Langston. Fortune's career at Howard came to an abrupt end when he lost all the savings that were to have seen him through the university in one of the periodic bank failures that characterized the era. He then went to work for *The Peoples Advocate*, a black newspaper recently established by John Wesley Cromwell in Washington, D.C. Fortune later founded other newspapers of his own, the New York *Globe* and the New York *Freeman*, the latter of which changed its name to the New York *Age*. He ended his career in journalism at the *Negro World*, a publication of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, where he was editor until his death in 1928.

Thornbrough had earlier treated Fortune as a civil rights activist in her article, "The National Afro-American League, 1887-1908," which appeared in the *Journal of Southern History* (November, 1961). Fortune organized the Afro-American League, later called the Afro-American Council, to protest against a list of six grievances: the suppression of voting rights, "the universal and lamentable reign of lynch law," the inequity in the distribution of school funds, "the odious and demoralizing penitentiary system of the South," discrimination on the railroads, and denial of hotel and theater accommodations. In many respects the league was, as Thornbrough noted, a precursor of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), although, at least at the beginning, it employed a far more militant rhetoric than the NAACP. "We propose to accomplish our purpose," the league asserted, "by the peaceful methods of agitation, through the ballot and the courts, but if others use the weapons of violence to combat our peaceful arguments it is not for us to run away from violence" (p. 496).

White moderates and conservatives viewed Fortune as a dangerous agitator and a racial chauvinist. Some of Fortune's black contemporaries accepted his militancy as a necessary complement to Washington's accommodationism. Militant blacks saw him as Washington's puppet and a traitor to the race. Thornbrough sifted

through the various and contradictory contemporary opinions, finally portraying Fortune as the more militant voice of Washington's Tuskegee Machine. Fortune was, in fact, no less militant than William Monroe Trotter or other elements of the Niagara Movement, including Du Bois. Certain features of Fortune's personality, including his perennial drinking problem, alienated the journalist from the cold-water puritanism of the Niagara leadership. Thornbrough, however, does not miss the paradox that militant integrationists, such as Fortune and Victoria Earle Matthews, were more than tolerated within the Tuskegee Machine.

It is impossible to imagine a greater difference in personalities than that between the precocious, unstable Fortune and the scientific, reliable Thornbrough, yet the biographer demonstrated remarkable sympathy with and respect for her subject. Further, she significantly elevated our understanding of the relationship between Washington and the educated classes of African Americans, particularly that between Washington and Fortune and between Washington and Du Bois. It is generally known today that Du Bois praised Washington's Atlanta Exposition address and defended Tuskegee from criticism, but Thornbrough was among the first to bring such facts to light.

We now know that just as Du Bois never undervalued the self-help aspects of Washington's strategy, Washington never overlooked ways to exploit the militancy of Du Bois and others. Fortune represented a group of relatively militant black persons, including the Grimké brothers and Mary Church Terrell, who were able to work with Washington far more effectively than could Du Bois, and Thornbrough believes that Fortune did not find it necessary to compromise his principles in order to do so. If Fortune was compromised, it was not by Washington so much as by his emotional problems and alcohol dependency. Despite the journalist's continuing drinking problem, Washington, either from necessity or from genuine feelings of friendship, consistently supported him. Fortune, for his part, seems to have had genuine ideological reasons for supporting Washington. Thornbrough, in explaining the strange relationship between the two men, quotes Fortune to good effect:

Perhaps in the history of mankind more victories have been won through the policy of conservatism and moderation pursued by Mr. Washington than through the radical and unbending policy I have always pursued; but it is the temperament of the two of us, and we can neither of us change our nature.

I naturally regard Mr. Washington as the strongest and safest leader we have (*Booker T. Washington*, p. 112).

Thornbrough was not overly sympathetic to the gradualism she associated with Washington, and it would be far from the mark to describe her as a Tuskegee apologist. On the other hand there is some understandable ambivalence in her treatment of the relationship between Washington and Fortune. She seems convinced that

Washington had an affectionate regard for Fortune as well as a genuine respect for his abilities. She never accuses Washington of predatory exploitation of Fortune and reports no vindictiveness after the relationship went sour. At one point she accuses Washington of using the journalist until it no longer seemed advantageous to do so. On the other hand, as she adequately demonstrates, Fortune, like most alcoholics, did an excellent job of alienating even his closest friends and family.

It does not seem that the Tuskegee Machine was unfeeling toward Fortune, and Washington's principal lieutenant, Emmett Scott, continued to loan Fortune money while he was experiencing his worst "years of degredation." Washington was several times willing to forgive embarrassment resulting from Fortune's unsteadiness, although he was most likely to help when the journalist showed signs of coping with his problems. Fortune, for his part, seemed ideologically committed to the Tuskegee philosophy. He consistently sided with the machine in its war with the NAACP, expressing in letters to Washington his contempt for an organization that was controlled by white liberals. In later years, during his Garvey phase, he seemed convinced that black organizations must draw their power to inspire from the masses. This, he said, was something that Garvey had been able to do in a way that neither the NAACP nor Tuskegee nor, as he admitted, his own Afro-American League had been able to do.

Thornbrough's commentary on the Tuskegee Machine, seen from the perspective of Fortune, provides extraordinary insight into the period that Meier has dubbed "the Age of Booker T. Washington." When one reflects on much that had been said and written about the Washington years in earlier treatments, one must admire the evenhandedness of her work. Produced by such progressive historians as Logan, Redding, and Lerone Bennett, many of these works had dealt with Washington as a betrayer of the Negro, a man whose Atlanta Compromise had provided consolation to the Supreme Court for its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Thornbrough does not drag out any clichés to the effect that Washington did the best he could under his particular circumstances. That question, particularly in view of the militancy of Fortune, remains, for her, an open one. But she never loses sight of a fact that had been earlier developed by Meier, that Washington's dealings with the talented tenth were far more complex than generally acknowledged in scholarship before the 1960s.

Thornbrough's work was always characterized by purity of style, meticulous attention to detail, and straightforward presentation of the facts. Many will perceive her biography of Fortune as her best work because she managed, without abandoning her usual non-nonsense approach, to unveil the problematics and ambiguities of "the Age of Booker T. Washington." She demonstrated a respect for

the complexities of African-American leadership, which cannot be reduced to two-sided controversies. While her work on the Negro in Indiana was a sterling example of honest, descriptive history, her Fortune biography was pathbreaking. It heightened contradictions, revealed paradox, and contributed to the reappraisal of a period. There was never anything contrived about Thornbrough's work, nothing faddish or gimmicky. She never abandoned clarity, and while she respected ambivalence as an essential feature of the human condition, there was no ambivalence in her commitment to equality of opportunity for all Americans. She was uncompromisingly an advocate, in all her work, for the complete participation of the African-American people in every aspect of American democracy.