



ASALH
ASSOCIATION *for the Study of*
AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE *and* HISTORY



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

Nineteenth Century Pan-Africanist: John Henry Smyth, United States Minister to Liberia, 1878-1885

Author(s): Walter L. Williams

Source: *The Journal of Negro History*, Jan., 1978, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan., 1978), pp. 18-25

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717357>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Association for the Study of African American Life and History and The University of Chicago Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Negro History*

NINETEENTH CENTURY PAN-AFRICANIST: JOHN HENRY SMYTH, UNITED STATES MINISTER TO LIBERIA, 1878-1885

Walter L. Williams*

Traditionally, historians have viewed Pan-African thought by black Americans as a twentieth century development. W.E.B. DuBois or Marcus Garvey have been seen as the originators of a new ideology of inter-continental black unity. Recent studies of black leaders have, thankfully, destroyed this misconception. Biographies of Martin Delany, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Henry McNeal Turner, in particular, have done much to explain the rise of Pan-African feeling before DuBois or Garvey appeared on the scene. Yet in this growing list of opinion-molders, who exerted a significant influence on Afro-American thought, the name of John Henry Smyth has been unjustifiably ignored.¹

One of the most direct links by which late nineteenth century Afro-Americans became interested in Africa was through the channels of political patronage and international diplomacy in Liberia. Although the American colonized state of Liberia had been independent since 1847, the United States did not officially recognize it until 1862. Nine years later, during President Ulysses S. Grant's first term and with the Republicans firmly in control, the first Afro-American diplomat was appointed to the West African nation. Thereafter, the post of Minister to Liberia was held continuously by black men, into the twentieth century.

While the American Ministers to Liberia were not usually among the most eminent of black leaders, they were educated men who had an important influence upon the black community at large. Many of them wrote letters back to America about their experiences in Africa, or they lectured and wrote about Africa after their return to the United States. By actually having lived in Africa, their attitudes gained an important influence upon black thought. Their reaction to Africa also represented an aspect of Afro-American thought that was closer to the people, rather than to the intellectual elite. Their comments, especially in their correspondence with the United States Department of State, reveal much about the history of Liberia and the contours of black American thought.

As the first Afro-American appointed Minister to Liberia, James Milton Turner represented the successful Reconstruction involvement of blacks in the main-

*Walter L. Williams is Assistant Professor of History, The University of Cincinnati, Ohio

*The author wishes to express gratitude to the American Council of Learned Societies, for a grant to complete a study on Afro-American involvement in Africa, 1877-1900; and to the Taft Memorial Fund of the University of Cincinnati, for a 1975 travel grant to the National Archives and to the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

stream of political life during the late 1860's. Because of his firm identity as an American, probably predicated on this Reconstructionist optimism, Turner held no identification with either Liberians or indigenous Africans. However, he did feel a humanitarian impulse—as a civilized man—to defend “the ignorant and heathen Africans” and to encourage their ultimate enlightenment in Westernized culture.²

John Henry Smyth, the man who succeeded Turner as the United States representative in Monrovia, contrasted strongly with Turner. Smyth became one of the most militant nineteenth century spokesmen of the Pan-African ideal. He was born in 1844 near Richmond, Virginia, to a free black woman. Although his father was a slave, John was free because of the Virginia law that the child followed the condition of its mother. During his childhood his parents saved enough money to buy his father's freedom, where-upon the family moved to Philadelphia to escape the threat of reenslavement. Showing artistic and theatrical talent, John became the first black student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; but he transferred to the Quaker Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia and graduated in 1862. After a short teaching and acting career he moved to Washington, became a federal clerk and put himself through law school at Howard University. Although he became a lawyer in 1873 in Raleigh, North Carolina, by 1877 Smyth left the South to return to Washington. His active campaign efforts for the Republican party, plus his education and legal experience, earned him the position of United States Minister to Liberia.³

Smyth was evidently influenced not only by his presence in the United States while Reconstruction collapsed, but also by his four year career in the South. When he arrived in Liberia in August, 1878, Smyth brought with him a strong feeling in favor of Afro-American emigration to Africa.⁴ In his letters to the U. S. State Department, he expressed the opinion that blacks would find no relief for their grievances by migrating from one section of the United States to another, and that they should come instead to Liberia where they had a chance to become prosperous and independent. In one letter he pleaded for U.S. government aid in settling blacks in Africa, saying that blacks had no future in America and their leaving was “but a question of time This would seem the solution by which the problem of Africa in America must be, sooner or later, ultimately effected.”⁵ Smyth's disillusionment with America, probably resulting from his experiences in the South during the dying days of Reconstruction, led him to favor emigration and concern for Africa.

Despite Smyth's favorable attitude toward emigration, or sometimes because of it, he reacted against many of the policies of the Americo-Liberians. He complained of those emigrants “who seek Liberia, not for love of Africa, but to escape political oppression.”⁶ Coming under the influence of Edward W. Blyden, Smyth blamed Liberia's problems on the mulatto leadership. He felt the mulattoes were trying too much to imitate whites. Thus he advised the Caucasian nations not to give too much aid to Liberia for fear that it would make the small Republic too dependent and too similar to whites.⁷ Smyth was overanxious in projecting

Liberia's role as an activating and elevating force in Africa, so he was disgusted at the exaggeration of Liberian attention toward America rather than toward Africa. In 1880 he wrote:

The Americo-Liberians . . . are in civilization Americans. They look upon the United States as a sort of Fatherland and gather their political, religious, and educational impulse from the American Republic; preferring the institutions of that country to those of any other . . . [This] is not a hopeful commentary upon Liberia in its hoped-for influence upon Africa.⁸

Smyth saved his most vigorous denunciation for his criticism of Americo-Liberian discrimination against the Africans. He spoke out against lack of schooling and opportunities open to African children, and the proclivity to treat apprentices as menial servants rather than as trainees to be educated. He also criticized Liberian antipathy toward intermarriage with Africans. On the political level, Smyth protested the disfranchisement and political ostracism meted out to the tribal population.⁹ He called Liberian control over the indigenous Africans "tyranny and absolutism," and explained that:

Fifty years have so riveted[sic] this error in the brain of the emigrant negro and his issue that no citizen of the United States could realize the sentiment and practice of the Liberian toward the aboriginal man and woman without an involuntary expression of surprise and astonishment . . . [The emigrant's] American teaching had led him into gross error. At no period of the existence of colony or republic has Liberia acted wisely, justly toward [the Africans].¹⁰

Smyth saw this discrimination as the cause of bad relations between the Liberians and the Africans. He heard the Africans "uniformly testify to the dislike of the Americans, as they call the Liberians" and observed that if a Liberian settled near an indigenous village the villagers would remove their homes rather than live near the emigrant.¹¹ Many of the contemporary conflicts with the Africans, according to Smyth, originated due to a failure of the Liberians to treat the original inhabitants fairly.¹²

Smyth's denunciation of Liberian-African relations reached a high point within a year after his arrival in Liberia. He rather openly expressed his feelings to the Liberian leadership, and a number of officials responded positively to his criticism. Either because of a sincere desire to change, or because of the diplomatic necessity of having a favorable American Minister, the Liberian Secretary of State G. W. Gibson wrote to Smyth on April 19, 1879, that Smyth's expressions on the African relations had his sympathy and that "you have been sent here in the order of providence" to help bring about those changes.¹³ Smyth was taken into the arms of the Americo-Liberians and, among other things, he was proclaimed a "Knight Commander of the Humane Order of the African Redemption."¹⁴

In any case, by 1880 Smyth's attitudes began to change toward a less critical and more optimistic tendency. He wrote to North Carolina Senator Matt Ransom, a former Confederate general who had helped him obtain the post, that he was well pleased with his position in Liberia and thanked Ransom for his assistance.

Either Smyth had helped spark a Liberian reform movement of the 1880's or he was being lulled into acceptance of superficial guarantees by skillful strategists, prolific in international diplomacy. His optimism can be evaluated only in relation to subsequent Liberian history.¹⁵ Certainly one factor that would have made Smyth more optimistic was the end of the Liberian-Grebo War of the 1870's, and the better relations that followed the settlement. However, it is clear that Smyth did not lower his ideal of equality for the African. Rather, as he settled into a closer understanding with the Liberian power structure, he saw more signs that improvements would increase. Without this hindrance, Smyth could let his true commitment to the emigrationist ideal predominate in his relations with Liberia. As early as 1880 he expressed his appreciation that Liberia College became more accessible to students from all of West Africa, and that a professorship of Arabic, Mandingo, and Vai languages had been created.

Smyth was overjoyed that Edward W. Blyden, who so heavily influenced the American diplomat, was appointed as Secretary of the new Liberian Department of Interior. Smyth characterized Blyden as "a gentleman of so large a knowledge of his race in Africa and his known devotion to their interests, and of so good and ripe scholarship, [which] foreshadows great promise for Liberia for the aboriginal man."¹⁶ Later he noted the reform of ceremonies concerning battles between colonists and Africans which had previously been occasions for keeping past tensions alive.¹⁷ Smyth summarized the major favorable changes as "the infrequency of wars between Liberian citizens and natives; the overtures made lately by the powerful king of Medina for a closer union between his state and the Republic; recent marriages between Liberians and aborigines . . . and the late signing of a treaty of peace."¹⁸ With his attitude of inevitable progress, Smyth evidently did not realize that Liberian-African relations could deteriorate again.

Smyth remained well satisfied with his position in Liberia, and after he was recalled by the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland in 1885, he attempted to obtain another appointment in Africa.¹⁹ Although Smyth was vitally concerned about Liberia, his interests led him beyond Liberia to Africa as a whole. As early as August, 1879, he was requesting authorization from the U.S. State Department to accompany Dr. Blyden into the interior of West Africa to visit the Kingdom of Musardu. Notwithstanding his repeated assurances that he was thinking about expanded American trade markets, his primary concern seems to have been with Africa. He wrote to Senator Ransom that a major steamship line between the United States and Africa would contribute to "a healthful solution of the Negro question in America, and will benefit Africa by its civilizing influence." Smyth recommended that American Consular posts be established at Whydah, Dahomey; Lagos, Abeokuta, and Bonny in Nigeria; and in Gaboon. He further advised that educated Africans, rather than European traders, be used as consular officials.²⁰

Not surprisingly, Smyth held a favorable view of indigenous Africans. He held that Afro-American aversion to Africa originated with "the current opinion in the minds of the Caucasians, whence the American Negroes' opinions are derived,

that the African is by nature an inferior man."²¹ Furthermore, he questioned the very basis of Western interpretations of Africa and characterized much of Western "knowledge" about Africa as originating from frustrated traders who could not succeed in taking advantage of African merchants. On the other hand, he lashed out at the West as being responsible for the degradation which did exist in Africa, when he said:

The Actual appalling state of things in Africa is the result of the policy of Europe towards the African races. European contact has brought . . . political disintegration, social anarchy, moral and physical debasement, [and] the decay of the simple arts and industries which had been developed during centuries of undisturbed and uneventful existence European trade, while extinguishing native handicrafts, places within the African's grasp the power of self-destruction by spirits and of mutual destruction by firearms.²²

Smyth was complimentary of the native beauty and grandeur that he found in Africa. He characterized the charm and usefulness of the physical environment as "spread around in prodigal abundance by a beneficent God."²³ Even the numerous diseases of Africa were complimented as a blessing in disguise because they served as a "protective belt" to keep the continent out of the hands of white men. But the greatest praise was reserved for the African people: "the flower of womanhood and the pride of our manhood."²⁴ Concerning their civil society, he commented on African Friendliness, advancement in native industry and scholarship, and livelihood "in regular towns, under municipal regulations."²⁵ He was not critical of African religions, and saw Islam primarily as "a guarantee of liberty and equality" to the West African Muslims—who "represent the highest type of Negro races."²⁶ Smyth considered the Africans to be a high and unique people, and he demonstrated an intense black pride when he described the African tribes he had visited as "the stately and grave Mandingo, the diplomatic Sosoo, the frail but handsome Foulah, and the paragon of men, the magnificent Jollof . . . intensely, lustrously, magnificently black."²⁷

Despite Smyth's positive attitude toward the Africans, he occasionally expressed sentiments in favor of the Westernization of the interior. The African, he said, "must be taught to provide for his material wants. He must be made to engage in improvements."²⁸ In a rather uncharacteristic letter, dated October 2, 1882, Smyth predicted that "the influence of civilization shall gradually destroy heathenism."²⁹ What is remarkable is not that Smyth repeated such common attitudes of his time, but that he diverged so sharply from the dominant sentiment which the Victorian Age felt toward Africa.

That Smyth did diverge from stereotyped attitudes toward Africa can be seen most clearly in his comparison of Westernized American blacks with indigenous Africans. He criticized the "abnormal system" in the United States which produced "Caucasianized Negroes, whose corrupted instincts deprive them of any innate interest in their race." This nineteenth century "oriole," he felt, would disrupt the divine purpose in making a distinct black race and would be following the line set down for another race: "So long as the Negro in Christianity and

secular education develops on a line rather than his own, so long must he accept the inevitable of being inferior . . . to his free, unhampered brother in Africa who rejects that system of Christianity that, ethically, is below his own heathenism.” In contrast to the Americo-Liberians, Smyth characterized the indigenous African as “possessed of that superiority that liberty gives.”³⁰ Culturally and ethically, then, Smyth not only complimented the African, but saw him as actually superior to black Americans.

Smyth’s seemingly inconsistent desire to change Africa, while praising it as superior, resulted from his vision of a future great black civilization. Rather than using the term “civilization” in its standard nineteenth century context as equivalent to Westernization, Smyth pled for a unity of blackness which would result in a new culture “which will be as important in its influence on mankind as the other civilizations.”³¹ Black education, he felt, should have been “raising the Negro as a Negro, and not making of him an imitation of the European in religion and education; then the work of civilization here [in Africa] would have been facilitated.”³² Smyth did believe in change and civilization as applied to Africa, but he did not see this inevitable progress in Western terms. His hopes centered on Liberia, which he wished would discover “the wisdom of appropriation of the mind and physical power of the aborigines in constituting a civilized Negro nation.”³³ Smyth expressed his great respect for African ways of life when he joyfully anticipated the day when the Americo-Liberians would “assimilate the sentiment of liberty and rule, the general heritage and possession of the native African, [rather] than . . . echo the expression of opinion of white men.”³⁴

Smyth was concerned not only with Africans or Americo-Liberians; he also hoped that his Pan-African ideal would influence black people in America. He wrote to an agent of the American Colonization Society that his original race pride had been instilled by his mother, but that his experiences in Africa had considerably widened his horizons. He referred with pride to the Yoruba government of west central Africa as “our kith and kin,” and saw Africa as the “fatherland” and “natural home” for Afro-Americans.³⁵ He wished to see black Americans become “less American and more African,” and in an 1895 speech he endeavored to impress Afro-Americans:

. . . with the fact that you are descendents of African races and as a consequence that you are a separate and distinct people from Caucasian races And thereby awakened in you an interest and sincere desire for the well being of Africa and her races . . . and this sentiment, if produced, will place you *en rapport* with the Negroes in Africa.³⁶

Although Smyth never used the term, his idea of a cultural unity of the black race was a precursor of twentieth century Pan-Africanism.

Smyth’s attitudes were not limited to the abstract, and they took on an immediate political significance when he opposed the Westernization of Africa by the European colonial imperialists. As early as 1880 he expressed alarm at French expansion in the interior of West Africa, and a year later he was opposing British imperialism as well.³⁷ In 1895, while Europeans were rushing to stake claims on

much of Africa, Smyth challenged the view that enforced imperialism was necessary to insure all the benefits of civilization. He argued by an analogy that southern Europeans who were forcefully Romanized in ancient times became only "spurious Romans," while the barbarians of north Europe—free to evolve their own forms of civilization—would in later centuries surpass the old cultures to the south. After implying that this trend might be in the future for Africa, Smyth expressed a form of cultural relativism when he acknowledged that: "People should be allowed to grow naturally into their distinctive type and place in the world."³⁸

Smyth exhibited some inconsistencies in his thought, such as his adherence to the ideal of "civilization" and his support of what amounted to imperialistic expansion by Liberia, but he transcended the limits of his time period to construct a philosophy of ethnic tolerance. Although there is a danger of imposing a later concept upon spokesmen of an earlier era, it might not be too bold to suggest that this American diplomat had formulated a genuine ideology of Pan-Africanism. He is convincing proof that a feeling of unity with their African kinsmen was not something that was felt by Afro-Americans only after 1900. But for the accident of his birth several decades too early, the name of John Henry Smyth might be honored as a crucial figure in Pan-African thought.

¹Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus, Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832–1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Cyril E. Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975).

²Irving Dilliard, "James Milton Turner: a Little Known Benefactor of his People," *Journal of Negro History*, XX (October, 1934), 372–411. The best summary of these diplomats is James A. Padgett, "The Ministers to Liberia and their Diplomacy," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (January, 1937), 50–92.

³Padgett, p. 59–60; Indianapolis *Freeman*, April 13, 1889, p. 1; Richard Bardolph, *The Negro Vanguard* (New York: Rinehart, 1959), p. 73.

⁴The best discussion of the emigration controversy is Redkey, *Black Exodus*. Also see Walter L. Williams, "Black American Attitudes Toward Africa, 1877–1900," *Pan-African Journal*, IV (Spring, 1971), 173–194; and Walter L. Williams, "Black Journalism's Opinions about Africa during the Late Nineteenth Century," *Phylon*, XXXIV (September, 1973), 224–235.

⁵Smyth to State Department, May 2, 1880, Despatches Received by the U.S. Department of State from U.S. Ministers to Liberia 1863–1908, U.S. National Archives Microcopy M170, roll 8, N.81.

⁶*Ibid.*, July 3, 1879, roll 7, n. 34–1/2.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, May 2, 1880, roll 8, n. 81.

⁹United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), pp. 715–716.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 1879, pp. 713–714, 717.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 1879, pp. 715–716.

¹²Smyth to State Department, July 17, 1879, Despatches, M170, roll 7n. 38.

¹³Quoted in Washington, D.C., *People's Advocate*, May 31, 1897, p. 2.

¹⁴Padgett, "Ministers to Liberia," p. 67.

¹⁵Smyth to Ransom, July 23, 1880, Matt Ransom Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N. C. See also Smyth to Ransom, May 16, 1878; April 19, 1881; March

17, 1883; and December 30, 1884. The author wishes to express gratitude to Robert Miller of the University of North Carolina for discovering these letters. Comments, similar to Smyth's original denunciations, can be found in J. Gus Lienbenow, *Liberia: the Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

¹⁶U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations*, 1880, p. 701.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1882, p. 382.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1883, pp. 610–611.

¹⁹Smyth to Ransom, September 15, 1885, Box 12, Folder 142, Ransom Papers. Although Smyth was in Liberia from 1878 to 1885, his service was broken in 1881 by the appointment of Henry Highland Garnet. This diplomatic change seems not to have been a rebuke against Smyth, but more a political honor for Garnet and a bid by the Republican Party for black voter support. After a few months the aged garnet died, and Smyth had remained in Liberia so he was available to resume his position as diplomat.

²⁰Smyth to State Department, August 23, 1879, Despatches, M170, roll 7, 48; November 27, 1881, roll 8, n. 160. Smyth to Ransom, April 19, 1881, Ransom Papers.

²¹John H. Smyth, speech, in J. W. E. Bowen, ed., *Africa and the American Negro; Addresses and Proceedings of the Congress on Africa* (Miami: Mnemosyne Pub., Inc., 1969 reprint of the 1896 edition), p. 69.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 74, 76.

²³*African Repository*, LVI (December, 1880), 131.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵U.S. Department of State, *foreign Relations*, 1879, p. 712; Smyth to State Department, May 2, 1880, Despatches, M170, roll 8, n. 81.

²⁶*African Repository*, LVI (December, 1880), 131; Smyth to State Department, June 4, 1881, Despatches, M170, roll 8, n. 130.

²⁷Smyth, in Bowen, *Africa and Negro*, p. 78.

²⁸U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations*, 1881, p. 738.

²⁹Quoted in AC. Hill and M. Kilson, eds., *Apropos of Africa; Sentiments of Negro American Leaders on Africa from the 1800s to the 1950s* (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1969), p. 96.

³⁰Smyth, "Negro Education," *People's Advocate* (Alexandria, Virginia), January 24, 1880, p. 1. Smyth to Ransom, November 18, 1878, Ransom Papers.

³¹U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations*, 1879, p. 716.

³²Smyth to State Department, January 12, 1881, Despatches, M170, roll 8, n. 100.

³³*Ibid.*, June 4, 1881, roll 8, n. 130.

³⁴Smyth, in Bowen, *Africa and Negro*, p. 70.

³⁵Smyth to C.T.O. King, November 29, 1881, Series IB, microfilm reel 164, Item 169, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

³⁶Smyth, in Bowen, *Africa and Negro*, p. 75, 82–83.

³⁷Smyth to State Department, Despatches, May 2, 1880, roll 7, n. 81; and November 27, 1881, roll 8, n. 160.

³⁸Smyth, in Bowen, *Africa and Negro*, p. 74.