

INTRODUCTION TO *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900*

This book was a revision of my 1974 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of North Carolina. Originally my plan was to write my Master's thesis on Black history, and then my Ph.D. dissertation on Native American history. I did my research in many archives, such as at historically black colleges like Atlanta University and Howard University, as well as at established mainstream institutions like the National Archives and Harvard University.

As I started writing up my research, and turning it in to my faculty advisers, they kept cautioning me to wrap it up. After I turned in 277 pages, they said firmly: "STOP!" I protested, "But I've only written up half of my research. I want to finish it."

In tamping down my fervor, they explained that a Master's thesis is usually around a hundred pages, and I was already nearing three times that length. So, they said they had decided to admit me directly into the Ph.D. program, bypassing the M.A. degree, and they wanted me to submit it all as my Ph.D. dissertation. I protested again, "No, my plan is to write my Master's thesis on African American history, and my Ph.D. dissertation on Indian history. I want to be qualified and recognized as a scholar of inter-ethnic relations, based in both fields of study."

Then they said something that surprised me. "We want you to get your dissertation finished quickly. Then after you have a Ph.D. you can write on Indian history as another book. That way you can establish your credentials in both fields more quickly."

I had not thought of this option, and I was complimented that they thought highly of my ability to publish books beyond my present study. Many assistant professors are hired on the basis of their dissertation, and then dutifully given promotion and tenure when they publish it as their first book. At many colleges, that well might be the only book they ever publish. Many professors sail through their career, comfortably complacent as a teacher, until retirement.

As it has turned out, the story of my life has been vastly different. Part of the reason for that difference, in 1972, had nothing to do with academia. At the time, a reality pressing upon my psyche was that I might not live long enough to accomplish this comfortable tenure-track scenario. When still an undergraduate student at Georgia State University I had already gone through U.S. Army basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I expected to be called into active duty, since it was my generation that was being conscripted to go and fight in the Vietnam War. I knew classmates who had died in the jungles of Southeast Asia. I had been persuaded to oppose that war by the principled speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, whom I had met and who was an important influence on me. I had even taken a trip north to Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec, to check out the possibility that I might apply for Canadian citizenship. To my dismay, the certainty of bitterly cold winters had made that option seem less than ideal.

Then a miraculous thing happened (one of several such turning points in my life). I was chosen to receive one of only twelve scholarships given nationally by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation.

The prestige of that veritable institution, headquartered in Washington, D.C., was influential enough to gain me a military exemption, and I was admitted to the graduate program in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

By 1972, though I thrived in graduate school, my luck was running thin. In the fall, I received a notice that I was to report for active duty. I decided at that point that I needed to press for a Master of Arts degree, rather than to proceed directly toward the Ph.D., as my professors wanted me to do. I felt that, if I was going to die in the jungles of Vietnam, at least the letters “M.A.” would be placed after my name on my tombstone.

To make a long story short, with great misgivings I decided to follow my orders to enroll in the advanced training program in military intelligence at Fort Benning, Georgia. My dismay was immeasurably increased when I learned that my assignment was to be dropped by parachute behind Viet Cong lines, with a radio and a pistol, to report on enemy troop movements. The survival rate for this particular assignment, I learned from a bitter anti-war veteran, was about 30%. That news chilled me to the bone.

Then another miraculous event occurred. Three weeks before our unit was scheduled to be shipped out to Vietnam, in April 1973, the Department of Defense announced large troop reductions in Vietnam. The war I detested was finally winding down. Suddenly, the army had too many soldiers, and to save money orders went out to reduce the ranks. Our captain announced that anyone who wished to transfer directly to the U.S. Army Reserves could do so. One of my memories of army life was that I hated always having to stand in line—for every thing. As a consequence I would wait until the last possible moment to show up. But in this case I joyfully rushed to stand in the line to receive my release papers.

When I left Fort Benning I went directly to the Eastern Cherokee Reservation, where I had previously lived, and where I hoped to further my connection to the Native American side of my family. At the same time, I worked furiously on my dissertation. My professors encouraged me to speedily finish it. This was a time before computers, backup disks and flashdrives, or even copying machines. So I kept my hundreds of notecards and research files in a suitcase always close at hand, with my desk right beside my bed. I worried if a fire or other disaster happened in either daylight hours or at night, I would be able to save my precious research. All other possessions took lower priority.

After an intense year, I completed the dissertation in August 1974, writing another 332 pages beyond what I had turned in for my Master’s thesis. The day after being awarded the Ph.D., with no time even to celebrate, I was busy packing all my worldly possessions to drive to Ohio, where I had accepted a job as an assistant professor of history at the University of Cincinnati. Those first two years in Cincinnati, I hardly got anything done on my research, because like all new faculty I was overwhelmed in teaching my new courses.

When I was finally able to get back to doing more research, I added additional pages to the manuscript. Then, in triumph that it was at last finished, I started submitting the full tome, of over six hundred pages, to a publisher. I was really proud of it.

My pride was soon replaced by disappointment, when the box of papers was returned with a rejection letter. I knew that books are usually rejected until it reaches a press that sees it as compatible with their own publishing priorities. However, as rejection followed rejection, I became discouraged. Finally, after still more rejections, a publisher accepted it, but only with massive changes. I worked on those changes for another year, adding some additional research I had done. I was optimistic when I mailed the revised version, but once again it was turned down.

At this point I became so discouraged that I broke my silence and confided to the history department chair, Professor William Aeschbacher, that I despaired of ever getting it published. He had read it as a dissertation, but had not seen the additional research I had done since then. He was busy, but volunteered to look at it again if he could be of help. When I brought the manuscript into his office, and plopped it on his desk, he took one look at it, and said, "No wonder this has been rejected!" How he could make such a summary judgment was baffling. Then he told me to sit down and listen.

He leaned forward and spoke to me more like a concerned parent than a university professor: "Let me tell you a reality of academic publishing, Walter," he began. "No academic press can afford the cost of printing a book with so many pages, unless they are certain to generate a large number of sales. Unless you are already a famous scholar, no publisher would dare take such a chance on a new assistant professor. I wish you had shown this to me earlier, and I could have saved you a lot of heartache."

I felt so stupid. How could I not have sought out such information? I learned from this bitter lesson the value of always submitting my manuscript to experienced scholars for their advice.

Now I had to spend another year, not adding but subtracting. It was painful to have to delete what I saw as my golden words, but it had to be done. I took some sections out altogether, and submitted them as separate articles, which were published in *The Journal of Negro History* and *Phylon*.

When I finally submitted the trimmed-down manuscript to the University of Wisconsin Press, just as Professor Aeschbacher predicted, it was accepted as part of their prestigious African Studies series. In 1982, it was finally printed, at an acceptable length of 259 pages. I was proud of the book, but still lament how much I had to cut out. One reviewer of the book wrote, in an otherwise positive review in the *Journal of American History*, complaining that "Williams quotes the missionaries frequently but with not enough length or depth to expose readers to subtleties of their theological reasoning and moral pragmatism." All I can say in defense is that

exposing readers to “subtleties of theological reasoning and moral pragmatism” was not exactly my highest priority.

Though I regret how much had to be cut, I felt that my goal for the book was accomplished: to explain how embittered African Americans responded to the limitations and failures of Reconstruction partly by turning to an interest in Africa, and that this interest in Africa, especially as spread by Black missionaries who returned to the United States to raise money by touring the South and speaking to numerous Black churches, laid the basis for the rise of Pan-African sentiment in African American thought after 1900. Even the secular scholar W.E.B. DuBois, known as “The Father of Pan-Africanism” was, I argued, more affected in his ideology by those Black missionaries than any other factor.

Besides the positive reviews that appeared in academic journals at the time of the book’s publication, this book has had an impact on subsequent scholarship in African and Black American intellectual history. For example, the contributions of my book are represented in articles like an essay “The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement and Africa,” published in the 2003 *Journal of Religion in Africa* by David Killingray, a scholar at the University of London.

For scholars who want to learn more, I can only refer them to my unpublished 1972 Master’s thesis “Black American Attitudes toward Emigration to Africa, 1877-1900” and my 1974 Ph.D. dissertation “Black American Attitudes toward Africa: The Missionary Movement, 1877-1900.”

The positive reception of the book in the leading historical journals heightened my academic reputation as an up-and-coming historian. The other leading historian writing on this topic, Professor Sylvia Jacobs, asked me to write a chapter in her edited book *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Greenwood Press, 1982), as well as the book’s Introduction.