

Kitabu

The bi-monthly newsletter of the African School Mobile Library
"African Studies by bicycle"

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Dear Reader, welcome to Kitabu.

Our Man From San Juan

In the month of January, I remember the birthdays of two men. Both were bringers of awareness, poets of our potential: one of human gold, the other of textual gems. The world knows of Martin Luther King, so let me take this opportunity, to speak of Arturo Schomberg.

Born on the land where the Antilles meet; to a Caribbean mother and a father of German descent, when I think of what he amassed over the years, of what is held at the Harlem library that bears his name and at Fisk University, I know that he was destined to be a great bibliophile and collector. He didn't just fall into this role, something from an accidental manouver: this was the Schomberg Destiny.

It was like he'd been invited to step into the portal, to the sphere where the great collectors congregate: I think Hubert Harrison must have passed through there too. He became a frequenter of antiquarian bookshops, a specialist in rarities. Imagine holding in your hand, original writings from such figures as Tousein L'Overture and Frederick Douglass. Nowadays, Christie's and Sotheby's would pay top dollar for his vast knowledge and curatorial skills. Like the Kuba of the Congo who beaded everything, Schomberg of Puerto Rico collected everything; books, art, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, press clippings, letters, sheet music, speeches, documents and so on. He stepped through the portal, celebrating a diaspora and its homeland.

In that place, where the blessings of books are a continual and happy debate and there are monthly festivals of literature, do they light anniversary candles for you Arturo, four times a year? For the 1912 co-editing of an encyclopedia and the 1916 publishing of a bibliography: the Encyclopedia of the Coloured Race and a bibliography – the first – of African American poetry. And for the remembrance of roles fulfilled; the 1911 founding – alongside your mentor John Bruce aka Bruce Grit – of the Negro Society of Historical Research and the 1920 presidency, of the American Negro Academy.

And in that place Arturo, where there is no need for currency, just the loaning and bartering of books, do they light fireworks, to commemorate the 1926 purchase of your collection by the 135th Street Library? Bought with the support of the Carnegie Foundation. From your overloaded home into the public domain. And the people of New York and America and researchers worldwide, continue to be blessed by your discoveries, researched in Europe, Latin America and throughout your adopted land. Fireworks in red, yellow and green, for the man who gave us a gargantuan present, wrapped in historical achievements.

He brought awareness of the centuries of Black contribution, backing it up with his writings, such as the great essay "*The Negro Digs Up His Past*," - excerpts below - published in the equally great anthology, *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke, who was a collector of African art, as well as a spokesman for the New Negro Movement.

On the 15th of this month, I shall remember the birthday of the civil rights icon. Nine days later, it will be that of the Doyen of Black Discoverers: discoverers such as Joel Augustus Rogers. Celebrate the one who generated the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: our man from San Juan.

Sources – New York Public Library - StreetsBlogNYC – The New Negro

Pride of race is the antidote to prejudice. We need the historian and philosopher to give us with trenchant pen, the story of our forefathers, and let our soul and body. With phosphorescent light, brighten the chasm that separates us. We should cling to them just as blood is thicker than water.

Reinforcing these were still rarer items of Africana and foreign Negro interest, the volumes of Juan Latino, the best Latinist of Spain in the reign of Philip V, incumbent of the chair of Poetry at the University of Granada and author of Poems printed there in 1573 and a book on the Escorial published 1576; the Latin and Dutch treatises of Jacobus Eliza Capitein, a native of West Coast Africa and graduate of the University of Leyden; Gustavus Vassa's celebrated autobiography that supplied so much of the evidence in 1796 for Granville Sharpe's attack on slavery in the British colonies; Julien Raymond's Paris expose of the disabilities of the free people of colour in the then (1791) French colony of Hayti, and Baron de Vastey's Cry of the Fatherland, the famous polemic by the secretary of Christophe that precipitated the Haytian struggle for independence. The cumulative effect of such evidences of scholarship and moral prowess is too weighty to be dismissed as exceptional.

...For a true estimate of their ability and scholarship, however, one must go with the antiquarian to the files of the Anglo-African Magazine, where page by page comparisons may be made. Their writings show that Douglass, McCune Smith, Wells Brown, Delaney, Wilmot Blyden and Alexander Crummel to have been as scholarly and versatile as any of the noted publicists with whom they were associated. All of them labored internationally in the cause of their fellows; to Scotland, England, France, Germany and Africa, they carried their brilliant offensive of debate and propaganda, and with this came instance of signal foreign recognition, from academic, scientific, public and official sources. Delaney's *Principia of Ethnology* won public reception from learned societies, Pennington's discourses an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg, Wells Brown's three year mission the entree of the salons of London and Paris, and the tours of Frederick Douglass...

The ASML has **THE NEW NEGRO** – edited by Alain Locke
THE OPPORTUNITY READER, THE CRISIS READER and **THE MESSENGER READER**
– all edited by Sondra Kathryn Wilson.

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