

# BOOK REVIEW SERIES

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**GRANT, Colin.** 2008. *Negro With a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of a Mother Africa.* London: Jonathan Cape.



*Marcus Garvey. Image from the Library of Congress collection.*

In the summer of 1925, the most frequent play in the Harlem ‘policy’ numbers game was 19359: those were the digits that the Atlanta federal penitentiary had assigned to inmate Marcus Mosiah Garvey, recently jailed for ‘mail fraud’. African Americans across the continent had already taken a massive bet on Garvey when they bought hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of shares in his Black Star Line; Garvey had envisioned a fleet of ships that would rival Cunard’s White Star Line or the United Fruit Company’s Great White Fleet. The difference would be that the Black Star Liners would be manned by black seamen and give passage to black passengers; and they would carry beleaguered black people

back from the Americas to their homeland, Africa. Garvey’s prosecution for misuse of the U.S. mail struck the last nail in the coffin of an already faltering Black Star Line, but curiously next to none of these multiple thousands of people who had placed their money on Garvey’s dream came forward to assist the U.S. Justice Department in his downfall. In the decades after the First World War, and well into the 1930s, millions of people across the U.S., in the West Indies and in South and Central America joined Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). He was the leader of the single biggest black internationalist movement that has ever existed, but a decade after his death in London Garvey seemed already almost forgotten: only the Rastafarians of Jamaica continued to revere the one time ‘provisional President of Africa’, as their ‘John the Baptist’.

Reflections on Garvey typically reach for the word ‘enigma’, ‘enigmatic’. Speaking for myself, I first noticed him when I began fieldwork in Jamaica early in the 1990s. There he was, a self-repeating presence amongst the many murals painted on the zinc and chipboard walls of house-yards in downtown Kingston: always the same image – the bullish, proud face in semi-profile and, of course, the striking bicorne hat plumed with ostrich feathers. I am late, though, in reviewing Colin Grant’s biography; originally published in 2008 there is now a Vintage edition where he adds a forward explaining his choice of eponym – ‘negro with a hat’ – a title I have not been alone in finding odd. The choice of phrase, he suggests, was deliberately aimed at alienating the reader: the author describes his experience at an exhibition where a photograph of a white man was simply titled ‘man with a hat’, while a black man became ‘negro with a hat’. Was not the ‘negro’ also a ‘man’? Thus explained, his aim becomes more obvious – is it possible for us to see beyond Garvey, the ‘negro with a hat’? At over five hundred

painstakingly researched pages, including nearly twenty of bibliography and footnotes, this is clearly the definitive biography and has been widely praised. As we read, the protagonist takes different shapes on the page, engages in varied, sometimes mundane, sometimes strikingly eccentric, acts (making an unannounced visit to the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, for example).

### **Exploring Garvey's mass support**

Grant shows in comprehensive detail how a flood of money and support enabled the UNIA's diverse projects; from black run laundries and restaurants in Harlem to black crewed ships and black aviators. The UNIA was backed by a complex coalition of refugee sharecroppers, Central American plantation and industrial workers, longshoremen and New York urbanites who offered money, and in many cases idolization, and to whom Garvey answered in his famously orotund way. There are gaps in the discussion, however. Garvey and his UNIA was above all an intrusion of the utopian and the fantastic into the actually existing American society of the time: explaining this in turn calls out for a type of socio-cultural interpretation that this book perhaps avoids engaging in.

Understandably enough, the bulk of the text is taken up with the period just after the First World War until the mid-1920s when Garvey's fortunes were rapidly transformed and his ideas began to be treated seriously, even religiously, within a mass movement. Arriving in New York in 1916, one more clever, book-learned West Indian, leader of an obscure 'association' for 'negro improvement' with a hand full of followers, Garvey's carefully nurtured skills as an orator abruptly caught the public attention of Harlem. Harlem was itself in a process of change beyond recognition due to ever increasing black immigration both from the Caribbean and from the U.S. South. Southerners were coming in great numbers to escape racist violence,

Caribbean industrial workers were arriving too, often *en route* from the recently completed Panama Canal, while educated middle class West Indians were here establishing an income and an outlet for self-expression; all converging on what would become, for a while, the unrivalled artistic and intellectual epicentre of black social life in the Americas. Just a few years after his arrival from Jamaica, Garvey, initially by way of relentless soapboxing, had gathered tens, then hundreds of thousands of followers for his UNIA; much to the irritation of eminent black sociologist W.E.B. Dubois who already ran the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Dubois increasingly viewed Garvey as an upstart foreign nuisance who was damaging the cause of black social progress in the U.S. Coming from the West Indies, where colour and class were understood differently, Garvey saw Dubois as a member of the brown elite, as someone whose interests were allied with the whites in power.

We can gain some sense of the chord Garvey struck by looking at his speeches, of which he sold phonograph recordings, along with his newspaper *Negro World*. Garvey personifies an era in which political charisma could fuse with mechanical reproduction and trigger a mass response. Listening to or reading his words now is a curious experience, because the message is a strange mix. A central motif is the ballad of the self-made man: Garvey tells his audience that they too can succeed by their own efforts, and here he uses language that Benjamin Franklin would surely have approved of. Much discourse is given over to berating his fellow blacks for using rude language and being discourteous to those around them. This is the conservative narrative of 'improvement' that remained at the core of the UNIA; a clear reflection of Garvey's upbringing in colonial Jamaica where 'discipline' and 'manners' were of the essence. The second theme, closely

following from the first, was that all human beings have the same capacities and potentials, people of the black race the same as people of the white: this was of course far more controversial. While in the British West Indies lip-service would have been paid to this idea so long as the preeminence of 'things English', the culture of Shakespeare and the de facto rule of white Britons was maintained, in contrast, in the U.S. of the 1920s, this kind of thought was uncontained gasoline waiting for a match. Here, white supremacy, both in politics and the human sciences, was orthodox. During the 1920s the scientific racism of the Galton society was only beginning to be challenged by figures such as Franz Boas.

The third pillar of Garveyism was inflammatory in a different way; this was the idea of Africa for Africans 'at home and abroad'. If Whites and Asians had their homelands, why should negroes not have theirs - Africa? The anti-imperialist entailment of this idea was of relatively little concern to white American politicians - on occasion they even supported it. In contrast, the notion of returning the African colonies to black people was deeply seditious from the perspective of the British colonial office; in response they tried as far as possible to ban Garvey's massively successful newspaper *Negro World* from entering any of the British territories. Despite the great appeal of Garvey's vision for blacks in the American South and in the Caribbean, the truth is that Garvey himself knew little of contemporary Africa. In part this was because he was barred from visiting the continent by the British, but his ideas were fundamentally a loud echo of a religiously framed 'Ethiopianism' that had existed in the West Indies since slave emancipation and before. Africa in this vision was the biblical Ethiopia from which emancipated slaves had long drawn hope and to which they might some day return - 'Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon

stretch forth her hands unto God' was the phrase repeatedly quoted by Garvey. This is why UNIA documents refer interchangeably to Africa and Ethiopia and why the Rastafarians would later focus their beliefs on repatriation there; no Rastaman would die before he reached the promised land of Ethiopia. When Garvey channeled thousands of UNIA dollars in arranging transportation of American blacks to one part of the actual Africa, specifically Liberia, the results were a fiasco. Likewise, when Garvey declared himself 'provisional President of Africa' (an idea he borrowed from de Valera, then 'provisional President of Ireland') this was plausible to him, as to those around him, because Africa was significantly a blank slate and a potent myth.

Perhaps what drew more attention to Garvey's movement - including astonishment and ridicule - than anything else was the mass pageantry of the UNIA. UNIA members often wore quasi-military garb, with sabres and epaulettes for officials and black serge uniforms for ordinary members. Garvey would parade as a Professor in a gown and mortarboard, or as a Potentate in a turban, or, most recognizably, as an imperial Governor (or perhaps as Toussaint L'ouverture) in his cocked hat and braided uniform. This carnivalesque quality of the UNIA surely had West Indian roots. Marcus Garvey was no more a university professor than the 1960s calypsonian Lord Kitchener was an English lord, but there is more to the symbolism than either a cheeky inversion of the established order or an expression of a stereotypically colourful Caribbean parade. This aspect of the phenomenon of Garveyism asks for further explanation, but to interpret it we need to know something more about the West Indian colonial culture than we can gain from this book. Within the colonial situation, while acknowledging official power with its offices, rituals and uniforms, colonial subjects developed parallel frameworks that mimicked the

official hierarchy appropriating some of its symbolic forms. But again, behind that fact, we also need to recognise how, by the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the Caribbean had become a society of migrants who, wherever they arrived, reorganized their social situation in particular ways.

### **The Imperial Emigrants**

After slave emancipation in the 1830s, anglophone West Indians had quit the sugar plantations *en masse* and many thousands began to migrate abroad, both to secure subsistence for themselves and their families, but also as an act of escape and defiance. Migrant work came in the form of massive engineering projects – first a French organized railway across the Panama isthmus in the 1850s, then the first French attempt at a trans-oceanic canal completed by the U.S. in 1914, then a sequence of mostly U.S.-led railway projects in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and Peru. Britain and the U.S. had rival interests in the South America, but a symbiotic relationship developed in which anglophone West Indian labour became crucial for the development of U.S. capitalism in South America. A case in point is the notorious U.S. company United Fruit which is unlikely ever to have existed in the form it took had not Jamaican workers supplied labour first on Minor C. Keith's railways, then expertise in growing and cropping his Costa Rican bananas.

Work on these projects was deadly; thousands of West Indians died building the railways and in the three gargantuan industrial projects in Panama. Workers were blown to pieces in dynamite explosions, buried in mudslides, contracted pneumonia from sleeping week after week in the same clothes in the rain. Official medical intervention focused on diseases, particularly malaria, that killed whites disproportionately, but against which

islanders often had good resistance.<sup>1</sup> West Indians looked to practitioners of folk or 'bush' medicine and avoided the hospitals where they feared contracting TB and other diseases. The Americans imposed strict racial segregation on labour to the extent that, in Panama, white workers were 'gold people' because they were paid in gold, while black workers were 'silver people' because they worked for Panamanian silver dollars. Their status as West Indians offered them very little; certainly not remunerative employment, of which there was barely any to be had on the islands. They could, however, claim to be 'British Subjects'; and in principle they could appeal to the British Consul for help. The figure of the West Indian threatening to complain to the British Consul became something of a stereotype and a joke. For its part, the colonial government put aside money for the repatriation of migrants to whichever island they came from, and had established savings banks and a postal order system so that remittances could be transferred home – a lucrative source of investment for otherwise impoverished island administrations.

On the one hand, West Indians treated their status as 'British Subjects' with gravity. White visitors of the period often comment on West Indian adults and children introducing themselves ceremoniously as 'fellow Englishmen'. On the other, they created a parallel value structure. In 1910, Sir Roger Casement was investigating atrocities in the Peruvian Amazon. West Indian workers affirmed that the British Honorary Consul in Iquitos was in the pocket of the rubber tapping company that was organizing the killing and mutilation of Amerindians there, however, they had their own 'Barbadian Consul' – an elderly migrant called Carlton Morris.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, Jamaican

<sup>1</sup>Chomsky, A. *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company*. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Casement, R. 1997. *The Amazon Journal of*

workers on the banana plantations of Costa Rica struck in protest at withdrawal of wages and the use of torture by overseers. One of the leaders of the strike was Jamaican Charles Ferguson; referred to as the 'Consul' - he was also an obeah man or sorcerer.<sup>3</sup> Others involved included Jamaican migrant J. Washington Sterling accused in Limon of practicing medicine illegally - he was almost certainly likewise a 'medicine man', a sorcerer. Marcus Garvey arrived in Costa Rica in 1910, aged 23, to take up a position as a banana plantation 'time-keeper'. He was quickly recognised by the authorities as a subversive, largely because of his criticism of local arrangements to celebrate the coronation of emperor George V, and his attempts to organize more elaborate festivities without consulting the British vice consul.

Notably, Garvey spent some of the first years of his adult life travelling across Central America, going as far south as Ecuador to visit West Indians railway workers there; a journey of nearly two thousand miles from Jamaica by steamer. On his way he published pamphlets and newspapers for the emigrant readership. These years in his career take up just a few pages of Grant's biography, reasonably enough because relatively little is known about his travels: nonetheless, what we do know for sure is that, not only did the Central American workers become an indispensable cornerstone of support for the UNIA, but Garvey and Garvey's wife Amy Jacques made repeated visits to Colon and Limon with the aim of re-gathering support there. In return, as Grant shows, they received staggeringly large sums of money, usually donated spontaneously at mass public meetings.

### **Reconfiguration in Harlem**

In Harlem, the initial support for the UNIA was solidly West Indian. As Grant points

out, West Indian migrants stood out in Harlem in the 1920s: here they were nicknamed 'monkey chasers', 'King George niggers' and 'cockneys'. They were 'incredibly addicted to waving the Union Jack in the face of their American cousins' recalled the Jamaican poet Claude McKay (Grant 90-91). The islanders viewed themselves as the better educated and culturally superior subjects of a global empire: in turn, the pageantry and hierarchy of the UNIA mirrored imperial performances. Elsewhere, West Indian migrants had their black consuls and doctors, here Garvey paraded as an imperial official or a Professor. There were recitals of stirring poetry and Garvey often adapted lines from Shakespeare for his speeches. UNIA membership cards offered black people a new 'flag of empire'; an 'Ethiopian'<sup>4</sup> one with a black hierarchy regarding which those 'at home and abroad' could be proud, and aspire to join. If Dubois' movement was 'national', Garvey's was 'universal', but the incipient model for his internationalism was the diaspora of West Indian colonial migrants. When the Chaplain of the UNIA, Antiguan born George McGuire, decided to canonise Jesus Christ as 'the Black Man of Sorrows' he was carrying this logic in a direction that Rastafarians would elaborate more fully, but he may well have adapted the idea from a figure already popular with West Indians in Panama - the 'Black Christ of Portobelo' - a statue processed in Catholic pre-Lenten carnival there. Either way, as Garvey reiterated; if whites can see god 'through the eyes of whiteness' then 'we are going to see him through the eyes of blackness' (Grant, 389).

The race politics that pushed U.S. blacks into espousing UNIA goals is laid out much more fully in the biography. Terrorism against freed African Americans had been ongoing from slave emancipation in 1865. In the thirty years before Garvey arrived in

*Roger Casement.* Dublin: Anaconda Editions.

<sup>3</sup>Chomsky, A. *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Bourgeois, P. 1989. *Ethnicity at Work.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, page 85.

the U.S. more than three thousand southern blacks had been lynched; many more had been burnt out of their homes and forced into exile. These conditions, the devastation caused by the boll weevil on cotton harvests, and the search for work, propelled them North. Post-war demobilization, combined with a major economic downturn, triggered rioting by whites in many U.S. cities; the rioters attacked the black population, particularly black soldiers who some claimed were spreading Bolshevik propaganda.

Many joined Dubois' NAACP, but Garvey's movement was now visible too, offering an organizational structure and even employment prospects. Grant suggests that the difference in success between Dubois and Garvey derived from the fact that Dubois was an analyst and social philosopher whereas, quite simply, Garvey was charismatic, a visionary and a stupendously talented orator. We can still catch a glimpse of this in his writing, his rhythm and style are evangelical: looking back, people who joined the movement describe something akin to religious conversion. The U.S. government quickly took it that Garvey was a potential Bolshevik threat and they appointed a fresh-faced Edgar J. Hoover to investigate. From then onwards the UNIA was subject to surveillance and covert sabotage by the Bureau of Investigation.

If the only authenticated recording of him to survive is anything to go by, Garvey never lost a very distinct, highly polished, Jamaican accent. He and the other West Indians were doubly outsiders, in as much as geographical mobility had become so elemental in their worldview. The American blacks who joined UNIA were often exiles too - outsiders in their own country, drawn to Garvey's utopia out of a different set of social facts. Importantly, then, the success of the UNIA was about the similarities but also the contradiction between West Indian and U.S. viewpoints. In both sites race

hierarchy was an inescapable fact, but people of the Anglophone Caribbean had lived in societies where most people were black, where colour prejudice was muted in accord with the need to preserve colonial order, and where race/colour was a complex hierarchic continuum intermixed with class standing and ideas of 'Englishness'. In the U.S., people were either white or they were black but that stark duality made little sense in the West Indies. The coalition and fusion of these alien perspectives amidst the oratory and pageant in Harlem is surely a crucial dimension of why Garveyism was so spectacularly successful. Garvey's movement created an extraterritorial adventure, an anti-structural vista, inside which UNIA members could hold office at every level of the social hierarchy while belonging to their own empire, Africa.

### **Endgame**

Despite the best efforts of J. Edgar Hoover, who cut his teeth destabilising the UNIA, there never was any plausible evidence of illegal activity on Garvey's part. Garvey was a visionary with no capacity, or seeming interest in, the day to day accountancy of his multiple enterprises. Unfortunately, few of his rapidly put together leadership showed any greater competence than him. The U.S. government eventually recognised that the best method of solving the problem of the UNIA was not by keeping Garvey in prison but to deport him to Jamaica; which they did in 1927. For its part, the British colonial authorities were coldly efficient in closing off contact between Garvey and the UNIA's network of supporters across the empire. He was successively banned from visiting other British colonies and kept out of Panama and Costa Rica. In Jamaica, he was as successful as ever, putting on large scale spectacles on the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture and other themes. He also founded Jamaica's first political party - the People's Political Party. Legal means were used to remove him from his elected seat

as a city councilor; ironically or not, the barrister who prosecuted him would later become the leader of the People's National Party and prime minister of Jamaica, Norman Manley.

In the mid-1930s Garvey moved to London – one of the few big cities he could now freely visit, but support for the UNIA was already dwindling. A new generation of pan-Africanists including CLR James and George Padmore had by now come to the fore: they were socialists and for them Garvey's quasi-imperialist pomp was a ludicrous distraction. Having lost his organizational base, Garvey struck an increasingly strange and lonely figure in London. In 1940 he died of a stroke. In his absence from the U.S, the UNIA in Harlem had engaged in a chaotic sequence of internal battles and went into decline and the international network fragmented and ultimately disappeared. Costa Rica remains the last place worldwide where a UNIA branch has continued to exist as a functioning institution.

What then was Garveyism? The fact that I was still asking myself this question when I had finished reading Grant's biography was what prompted me to write this review. Certainly Garvey is still with us as a range of significant ideas and images, like the pictures of him that re-occur on the walls of house-yards in Kingston, Jamaica. Some years ago, walking through my fieldwork site in Kingston, I was pursued by a local eccentric, Upsetter; 'My Lord, My Lord!' he called after me, trying to catch my attention. Two youths shouted at him reproachfully as he followed this white man up the street 'what happen to you man – you forgot Marcus [Garvey]? you forgot Malcolm [X]? There is a great deal more, though, that could be said about the contradictory worldviews which briefly turned Garveyism into a mass social movement. The sudden explosive growth of the UNIA is an instance where an submerged nexus of utopian ideas and

values briefly pierce the membrane of what actually exists and acquire a reality of their own.

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