

W. E. B. Du Bois

# THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

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# **The Souls of Black Folk**

W. E. B. DU BOIS



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## *Bibliographical Note*

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# Note

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and died August 29, 1963, soon after becoming a citizen of Ghana. Throughout his long lifetime, Du Bois was a figure of controversy. A bright and ambitious student, at an early age he experienced the tensions and contradictions inherent in American society. His assertion that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” was no abstract claim, but one grounded in his experiences of life within “the Veil,” Du Bois’ metaphor for the spectre of segregation. And, although Du Bois lived to see the Supreme Court’s reversal of school segregation policies and the growth of the Civil Rights movement, he well knew how long overdue such achievements were, how difficult the struggle had been, and would continue to be, for black political and economic rights. With disturbing clarity, Du Bois identified and dared criticize the spoken and unspoken rules dictating the interactions between black and white America in the years following Reconstruction.

*The Souls of Black Folk* was first published in 1903, many of its essays previously having been published in journals and magazines. The book was immediately successful — six printings over the next two years — and brought Du Bois national recognition. By 1938, *The Souls of Black Folk* had gone through twenty-two additional printings, and in 1953, the book was reissued with Du Bois’ preface, “Fifty Years Later,” and only minor changes. Part social documentary, part history, part autobiography, part anthropological field report, *The Souls of Black Folk* remains unparalleled in its scope. Du Bois achieves in his text a rare combination of pathos and dignity, presenting a portrait of black culture that commands respect. Though at times painfully poignant, Du Bois’ prose never lapses into sentimentality. After ninety years, the book still has the power to move the “Gentle Reader” Du Bois addresses in “The Forethought” and “The Afterthought.” Unfortunately, despite those ninety years, Du Bois’ “harvest wonderful,” a world without a color-line, has yet to be reaped.

# The Forethought

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.

I pray you, then, receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there.

I have sought here to sketch, in vague, uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive. First, in two chapters I have tried to show what Emancipation meant to them, and what was its aftermath. In a third chapter I have pointed out the slow rise of personal leadership, and criticised candidly the leader who bears the chief burden of his race to-day. Then, in two other chapters I have sketched in swift outline the two worlds within and without the Veil, and thus have come to the central problem of training men for life. Venturing now into deeper detail, I have in two chapters studied the struggles of the massed millions of the black peasantry, and in another have sought to make clear the present relations of the sons of master and man.

Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses, — the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written.

Some of these thoughts of mine have seen the light before in other guise. For kindly consenting to their republication here, in altered and extended form, I must thank the publishers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The World's Work*, *The Dial*, *The New World*, and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs, — some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past. And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?

W. E. B. Du B.

ATLANTA, GA., Feb. 1, 1903.

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