

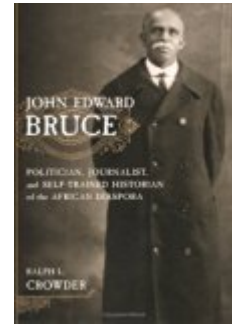
H-Net Reviews

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Ralph L. Crowder. *John Edward Bruce: Politician, Journalist, and Self-Trained Historian of the African Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2004. x + 243 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1518-5.

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Ralph L. Crowder's *John Edward Bruce: Politician, Journalist, and Self-Trained Historian of the African Diaspora* is an informative, engaging text about a dynamic—and too-long ignored—figure in African American journalism history whose life intersected with the lives of some of the major figures involved in the struggle for equal rights during the first fifty years after the Civil War.

In the introduction, Crowder, an associate professor in the department of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside, states that his goal is to “broaden the historical appreciation” of Bruce, who, he states, is a “complex, but neglected African American intellectual activist” (p. 3). Crowder's overview contextualizes Bruce as a man of his time in terms of the major people and debates of the post-Civil War era.

To begin, Crowder examines the effects of slavery on Bruce's upbringing and the individuals who provided professional guidance and inspiration. Though scant materials exist detailing Bruce's early life, Crowder presents an effective picture of his early years based on the available sources, which are limited to a short autobiographical piece Bruce wrote when he was nineteen. Three years after John Edward Bruce's birth on a Maryland plantation in 1856, his father, Robert Bruce, was sold to a Georgia planter by the man who owned Bruce's family. The absence of his father, coupled with the ever-present fear of childhood friends being sold into slavery, was a source of worry for Bruce during his formative years. Even so, Crowder explains, Bruce's mother and grandmother were able to provide a supportive environment that enabled him to develop a “sense of independence and respect for courage in the face of adversity” (p. 8).

Just before the Civil War, Bruce and his mother es-

caped to the District of Columbia. For the first three years of their time there, Bruce and his mother lived with his mother's cousin. After a short stint in New York and Connecticut, they returned to the District. This period in Bruce's life, Crowder notes, was important to Bruce's development because it was during this time he decided on journalism as a profession and came into contact with influential activists in the Pan-African nationalism movement. Some scholars of African and African American history maintain that Pan-African nationalism has its origins in the fifteenth century, as a reaction against the economic exploitation of Africans as cheap labor by Europeans. Kwame Nantambu, professor emeritus at Kent State University, on the other hand, suggests that its origins go back even further, as Africans had resisted invasion, occupation, exploitation, or domination by people from many foreign countries, thousands of years before the European colonial era began. The concept of Pan-African nationalism as it manifested itself in the post-Reconstruction United States stressed the pursuit of Black self-determination in connection with worldwide unity among all people of African descent, including Black American emigrants to Africa. In the early twentieth century the movement became the focus of intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, who saw the unity of Black Africans connected to domestic issues of racial justice.

Bruce's connection with the Pan-African nationalists of his time, together with his burgeoning interest in African American history and his experience in confronting the class and color conflicts within the African American community in the District of Columbia would later allow him to serve as the connection between the intellectual side of Pan-African nationalism represented

by Du Bois and the more pragmatic strain represented by Marcus Garvey, who chose to pursue Pan-African unity by stressing economic and political development.

One of the themes that emerges in the first part of the book is that of surrogate fatherhood. Busie Patterson, the cousin of Bruce's mother, Martha Bruce, owned a boarding house frequented by prominent Blacks, and he was a servant to Thomas Hart Benton, the Missouri senator who supported westward expansion but opposed the extension of slavery into the West. Patterson's position provided him with access and influence, which allowed him to secure jobs for Bruce and his mother. Moreover, because Martha Bruce did not remarry, "Patterson became a father figure to young John" (p. 11). It was through Patterson that Bruce met Pan-African spokesmen Henry Highland Garnet and Martin Robinson Delany, the first of a series of Pan-Africanism advocates Bruce would meet before the end of the nineteenth century. These men would serve as John Bruce's "spiritual" fathers, introducing him to ideas about Pan-Africanism that would influence his careers as journalist and political spokesman.

Crowder also expands upon the surrogate-father theme in discussing the relationships between Bruce and Edward Wilmot Blyden, the vice-president of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and a leading proponent of Black emigration to Africa. Bruce was an aspiring reporter when he met Blyden in 1880 at an ACS meeting. United by their belief that Africans and African Americans should have closer ties, their mutual interest in history, and their suspicion of the mulatto aristocracy they felt held undue influence over black achievement, the two formed a friendship and political alliance that Crowder states lasted for thirty-two years.

Their friendship also paralleled the rise of Bruce's status as a journalist. By 1884, Bruce had adopted byline "Bruce Grit" for his columns, which had begun appearing in newspapers such as the *New York Age*. "Grit" was a late nineteenth-century slang term denoting courage and determination. As "Bruce Grit," John Edward Bruce was a fierce anti-lynching critic in his writings and speeches. For example, in an 1889 speech he called for Blacks who were victims of racist terror campaigns to defend themselves, to take "a life for a life" (p. 63). He reasoned that "Wherever and whenever the Negro shows himself to be a man he can always command the respect even of a cutthroat" (p. 63). He concluded his speech by stating "Organized resistance is the best remedy for the solution of the vexed problem of the century which to me seems

practicable and feasible" (p. 63).

Bruce had become known as one of the leading black journalists of his time by the time he met Alexander Crummell, a minister who was a colleague of Blyden's and a friend of Henry Highland Garnet's. They developed a friendship based on their political interests, their mutual belief that Africans and African Americans should be closely connected, and their views about history and Christianity as driving forces in African and African American culture. Moreover, as self-made men, "Crummell and Bruce also were dedicated to a philosophy of self-help and separate economic development" (p. 39). Crummell was thirty-seven years older than Bruce, and Crowder writes that Bruce saw him "as a replacement for the father he had lost in slavery" (p. 39). Equally important, he provided Bruce with a contact who was a member of the Black elite.

Crowder shows how Bruce's growing interest in politics informed his journalism. In his twenties, he became a supporter of the Republican Party while striving to make a career as a journalist. Before he turned twenty, Bruce had worked with Lorenzo Crouse, associate editor in the Washington office of the *New York Times*, and John Freeman of the *Progressive American*. These journalistic father figures nurtured Bruce's interest in both journalism and politics. Bruce also served as a correspondent for African American newspapers from St. Louis to Fayetteville, North Carolina. As a "hired gun" editorial writer financed by the Republican Party, he wrote editorials in support of Republican candidates in the early 1880s, praising them in Washington, D.C.'s *Weekly Argus* and other papers. Crowder states, "[Bruce] characterized the Republicans as the 'champions' of African Americans, while writing that southern Democrats practiced the 'cowardice of disfranchisement'" (p. 52). The party moved away from supporting the rights of African Americans in the late 1800s—causing a debate among Black intellectuals and politicians about where Blacks should cast their political allegiance. Bruce joined in the debate but remained loyal to the Republican Party until after World War I, when he became disillusioned with the party's inability to fully realize the dreams of democracy for Black Americans.

Bruce carried his love of history into his association with Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). As originally conceived by Garvey, UNIA was an organization dedicated to the promotion of economic and political uplift and self-determination for Blacks, with the ultimate goal of creat-

ing an educational institute like Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. After failing to realize his dream in his home country of Jamaica, Garvey relocated to Harlem in 1916 and found the area more receptive to his idea. He established the first UNIA branch in Harlem in 1918 and within a year had dozens of other branches in major cities across the United States.

Bruce was sixty years old and at the height of his career as a journalist when he met Garvey. With his connections to professional and civic organizations in the Black community, he was able to offer Garvey access to a wide spectrum of African Americans who were interested in his ideas. He became a columnist in UNIA's newspaper, *Negro World*, in 1920 and helped increase the

paper's influence by persuading the publication's diverse collection of writers to work together cooperatively. By the end of their association, Bruce had become a trusted associate of Garvey's and a firm believer in his movement.

Crowder concludes his discussion of Bruce by stating, "Bruce's life demonstrates that the ideas of Black nationalism and separatism can be combined with the philosophy of political and civil protest" (p. 163). Crowder has written an informative, significant book that shows the importance of a self-made man like John Edward Bruce, a journalist, historian, and activist who was dedicated to the pursuit of racial uplift on his own terms during a key period in African American and American history.

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