



Danell Jones. *An African in Imperial London: The Indomitable Life of A. B. C. Merriman-Labor.* London: Hurst Publishers, 2018. 320 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84904-960-3.

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Published on H-Africa (July, 2021)

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An African in Imperial London, by Danell Jones, is a scholarly hybrid. The book is part biography, part travelogue about a travelogue, part exercise in historical contextualization. Jones narrates the life of the Sierra Leonean intellectual A. B. C. (Augustus Boyle Chamberlayne) Merriman-Labor as both an Icarian tragedy and a variation of William Hogarth's series of eighteenth-century paintings *A Rake's Progress*. Merriman-Labor, the scion of a successful Sierra Leonean family, decided to travel to London to seek literary fame. Coming from a publishing family, Merriman-Labor aspired to be both a cultural and commercial entrepreneur, while simultaneously seeking to satisfy his family and Christian society back in Freetown by qualifying as a barrister at the London Inns of Court. Jones does a wonderful job of showing Merriman-Labor's ambition as a function of the cultural milieu of turn-of-the-twentieth-century London, when the perception that the rise of the British Empire had created unlimited opportunities for men (but not women) of talent at least appeared to be sharable across the color line. Jones does an equally good job showing that the reality beyond the perception was an ever-evolving British racism that narrowed Merriman-Labor's options at every turn. Merriman-Labor arrived in London as a bourgeois young African in 1904. He died in London as a British pauper in 1919. In the fifteen years

between these two dates, he careened from one sort of project to another, all aimed at making his fortune, but equally important, with establishing his bona fides as an author. Thanks to the response to his columns in Sierra Leonean newspapers, Merriman-Labor became convinced that the African Christian societies in West and South Africa were receptive audiences for his ideas. Yet, and this is one of Jones's key insights, the approbation Merriman-Labor sought was in London, among the British literary elite, not among Africans. Merriman-Labor aspired to explain Britain and Britain civilization to Africans, but he wanted to reap the rewards for the display of his knowledge and expertise from Europeans as a denizen of London literary circles.

In the early days of British colonialism, hundreds of young Africans came to Britain seeking to qualify for the British bar. Many of them were not successful. Merriman-Labor was. Yet he was dismissive of his own achievement. There was small chance of him making a living as a barrister in Britain. There was much greater opportunity back in Africa. Merriman-Labor was determined, however, to stay in Britain. So instead of the law, he banked what fortune he had on writing and publishing his magnum opus, *Britons through Negro Spectacles* (1909), a travelogue in which a worldly African guide leads Africanus, a bourgeois young African

fresh off the boat, on a tour of London, its sights, and its people. Merriman-Labor sent the manuscript out to several British publishers, but they all passed. He decided to publish the book himself and went into debt printing several thousand copies, some to be sold in Europe, more importantly, others to be shipped to Africa, where Merriman-Labor presumed the book would be a best seller. His presumption turned out to be incorrect. The book did respectably in Britain, selling around a thousand copies. But the book bombed in Africa, where hundreds of copies rotted away in the storerooms of the West African newspapers that published Merriman-Labor's articles, while in South Africa the African agent to whom Merriman-Labor sent copies of the book to be sold on commission sent the book instead to the British governor who had it banned as seditious.

Jones rightly recognizes the failure of *Britons through Negro Spectacles* to sell to African audiences as the precipitant to the downward spiral to Merriman-Labor's life in Britain, but her effort to make sense of this failure is itself problematic. She highlights the racial animus of the era against African writers and points to the preemptive effort of the European government in South Africa to stop the book's circulation. But this focus raises several issues, one having to do with the fact that there were pieces of writing with far more seditious content circulating among African readers at the time and another being the fact that in West Africa, where there was no opposition by any colonial government, Africans just were not buying the book.

Most of the Africans who could read English at that time were Christians, so the question really is why African Christians shied away from *Britons through Negro Spectacles*. Jones expends some effort to establish Merriman-Labor's Christian proclivities, but she never squares these with his obvious predilection for the attractions to the night life to be found in London. She characterizes Merriman-Labor as silent in his writings about sex, love,

and desires. This characterization, however, must be challenged. One chapter in *Britons through Negro Spectacles* is titled "Girls, Girls, Girls." It is followed by a chapter titled "Pleasant to the Eyes," where the centerpiece is a commissioned illustration of six European women dancers on a stage. To be sure Merriman-Labor warns Africanus to "look, but not touch," but there are other indications in the book that suggest the admonition was only for propriety's sake, the most striking of these being the recommendation to Africanus that the best way to lose his clipped West African accent was through conversation with middle-class European women.[1] There is a Proustian voyeurism behind much of what Merriman-Labor had to say in *Britons through Negro Spectacles* that perhaps made Christians of all races uncomfortable. But the thing that arguably most alienated African Christian readers was Merriman-Labor's validation of the racist European rant that African men were sexually obsessed with European women.

Jones comes at her subject from a Europeanist perspective, her training being in the study of turn-of-the-century British writers, most notably, Virginia Wolfe. She does not appear to be conversant with the historiography and debates about African intellectual life during the early decades of the colonial era. As a result, historians perhaps will not find much in her study of Merriman-Labor to advance their own research. Literary scholars, on the other hand, might look at the work as a prototype to the kind of study that demonstrates the historical significance of literary works to broader audiences. What is particularly welcoming about Jones's book is its implicit assumption that the geographical and racial conventions that previously made *Britons through Negro Spectacles* an "African" as distinct from "European" piece of writing can be usefully abandoned. *An African in Imperial London* is an engaging, accessible work that deserves a large audience.

Note

[1]. A. B. C. Merriman-Labor, *Britons through Negro Spectacles* (London: Imperial and Foreign Company, 1909), 27.

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Citation: Andrew E. Barnes. Review of Jones, Danell. *An African in Imperial London: The Indomitable Life of A. B. C. Merriman-Labor*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

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