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**Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xviii + 308. CDN\$65.00(cloth). ISBN: 0-521-82826-0.**

**Reviewed by Bernard E. Powers Jr., College of Charleston, South Carolina**

In this work, Wilson J. Moses again turns his deft hand to the oft-examined subject of African American leadership in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aside from the stature of men such as Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey in the pantheon of black leaders, Professor Moses has less obvious reasons for choosing them as the focus of this study. One of the most important reasons is that their writings “illustrate the presence of internal conflicts within their own ideologies and manifest the thought processes whereby they rationalized or attempted to reconcile them”(287). This is not a book that examines the disparity between professions and actual practices but treats what the author calls the “collision of ideas” (xii). The basic premise is that active thinkers frequently hold contradictory beliefs, and attempts to reconcile them lead to sophisticated and creative ideas. Unfortunately, according to Moses, rather than giving these leaders’ ideas serious attention, both scholars and laypersons have often viewed these men in the most cursory and one-dimensional manner. The result is either lionization or vilification, without really understanding what they actually stood for.

By using the vehicle of contradiction, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* seeks to save the aforementioned black leaders from both their worshippers and their detractors. Professor Moses places these leaders’ ideas in the context of both American and African American intellectual history and makes some important and unusual comparisons. For example, the thought of Frederick Douglass is compared to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alexander Crummell’s reservations about democracy are likened to those of Alexander Hamilton, and Booker T. Washington’s ideas are measured against those of Thurston Veblen’s. This is not a consideration of disembodied ideas; the reader also learns about the personal relationships that existed between these and other leaders as they grappled with the challenges of African American destiny.

Predictably, Frederick Douglass receives more attention than any of the others. Moses considers how Douglass the “individualist” could be considered a “race man.” Douglass’s larger-than-life image is even familiar to those with little knowledge of nineteenth-century African American history. In fact, the author contends that an entire “hagiographic tradition” (26) has arisen around Douglass based on his forceful character rather than on his ideas, which have often escaped critical evaluation. Douglass rose to fame as a fugitive slave turned abolitionist activist and newspaper editor. His commitment to racial integration is well known but Moses uses Douglass to show that the demarcation between integrationists and black

nationalists can be too sharply drawn. At various points in his activist career, Douglass “flirted” with nationalism and used nationalist rhetoric.

Moses also shows that after the Civil War, Douglass’s generally *laissez faire* attitude toward the freedmen prevented him from developing an effective plan for advancing the race. Limited by what Moses calls his “egocentric interpretation of history” (43), Douglass naively substituted his own good fortune for that of the race. He therefore remained in the antebellum mode of making moral appeals to whites for justice. Douglass eschewed racial pride, collective racial action, and generally separate institutions, and toward the end of his life, even suggested that racial amalgamation was the destiny of the race. Douglass took a controversial step toward this end by marrying Helen Pitts, a white woman, as his second wife.

Moses discusses how Douglass was a self-promoter who skillfully cultivated the image of the “self made man” (46) which enabled him to remain on the lecture circuit and ironically pursue a career in government service. Moses suggests that for all his achievements, Douglass remained frustrated because he could never escape classification as a Negro. This was ironic because his writing on issues related to race initially made him famous. Moses believes Douglass simply wanted to be considered a man. The ultimate contradiction is that Frederick Douglass, who held views that were in so many cases antithetical to those of his black contemporaries, could nevertheless rise to the zenith of leadership until the end of the nineteenth century and his demise.

In the treatment of Alexander Crummell, many important contradictions are revealed. The Cambridge-trained theologian is generally considered an “idealist,” but Moses demonstrates that this is too narrow a view and shows him to also be a “materialist.” Crummell preached a Gospel of works that emphasized self-help and called for the development of race-based institutions to promote “civilization” within the race. The establishment of the American Negro Academy was a move in this direction. In this way, Moses defines Crummell as a “race man” while denying this label to Frederick Douglass. Moses also shows how Alexander Crummell, famously known for his Anglophilism, was also an ardent Afrocentrist. Crummell had many positive views of the “pristine” African personality, which he contrasted with their degraded African American counterparts. While in Liberia, unlike many settlers, Crummell advocated intermarriage with the indigenes and their incorporation into the society. Crummell also advocated the inculcation of Victorian morality and the spread of the English language in Africa. These steps were designed to promote African uplift or “civilization.” In advocating them, Moses shows Crummell to be part of a community of African and Caribbean elites with a benevolent commitment to the continent. Although clearly a critic of Booker T. Washington, Moses insightfully shows that Crummell’s emphasis on materialism, institution building, and self-help intellectually linked the two men together.

Booker T. Washington has been routinely portrayed as a simple, optimistic materialist and narrowly so according to Moses. This underestimation of the “real” Washington was significantly due to the misrepresentations of W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 publication *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chapter 3).<sup>1</sup> While Moses might have a limited point here, he clearly downplays the fact that what he calls Washington’s “utilitarian educational theory” (156) subordinated the cultural aspects of education to what Du Bois likened unto the search for “golden apples” (Du Bois, 114). Even so, Moses shows that Washington was equally a man of ideas. Like Douglass, Washington projected himself as a self-made man and also skillfully manipulated southern (sometimes racist) imagery and xenophobic fears. One does not usually see Washington cast as a social Darwinist, but that is how Moses represents him. Accordingly, Washington did not fear competition in the New South but believed that proper industrial preparation could prove blacks to be more fit for success than the new immigrants flooding the nation at that time. His goal was never to relegate blacks to the margins of the southern economy but to give them a central role as middle-class farmers and artisans. Above them, he envisioned an African American, college

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

educated, managerial elite who would become the race's own captains of industry. For this to happen, individuals, and by implication the race as a collectivity, must be governed by a strict code of discipline, hard work, and thrift. In formulating these ideas, Moses contends that Washington anticipated the later works of Thorstein Veblen on conspicuous consumption and Max Weber on capital accumulation, progress, and the Protestant ethic. The area of religion is the place where Moses shows the confluence of both materialist and idealist streams in Washington's complex thought. The foregoing shows that Washington obviously believed that religious values could shape the economic destiny of a people. Moses also shows us that Washington believed a people's religious life improved in proportion to its economic situation. For Moses, the Wizard of Tuskegee has to be considered both materialist and idealist in equal proportions.

Moses presents an interesting view of W.E.B. Du Bois. On many occasions, Du Bois's professed a belief in bourgeois "democracy," and he struggled for African Americans to achieve it. However, this obscured his deep-seated reservations about the concept because the masses could be too easily misled and swayed. He had witnessed racist demagogues win the hearts and minds of the people before. Conversely, he knew that racial justice was enforced by the somewhat authoritarian policies of the Freedman's Bureau after the Civil War. Fundamentally, Du Bois was no democrat, and like his counterparts, Crummell and Washington, believed in leadership by elites. Race leaders were to be men of learning and intellectual attainment, however; they were to be self-sacrificing individuals who subordinated their own needs to serve those of the race. Du Bois had tremendous respect for Alexander Crummell who represented intellectual attainment, self-sacrifice, and racial collective action. As a result, Du Bois rejected bourgeois individualism as a pitfall that could derail racial progress. Moses points the reader to one of Du Bois's most important essays entitled "The Conservation of the Races," presented as a speech before the American Negro Academy (123). Therein Du Bois speaks of racial collectivism and the destiny of African people to cultivate their gifts and to share them with the world. Insightfully and provocatively, Moses argues that these ideas were offered as much as a critique of Frederick Douglass's individualism and assimilationism as of Washington's materialism. Moses is quick to point out, however, the commonalities between Washington and Du Bois, and urges us to move beyond the simple Du Bois-Washington dichotomy. They both believed in race-based institutions, industrial and collegiate education, and elite leadership. Aside from the Du Bois-Washington controversy, Du Bois is routinely associated with the contradiction inherent in the double-consciousness phenomenon. Professor Moses cautions that this well-known issue is only one of many contradictions such as elitism verses democracy, self-segregation verses integration, and black nationalism and spirituality verses communism in which Du Bois grounds his activism.

Professor Moses shows that Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association program shared the realism of Booker T. Washington and the romanticism of W.E.B. Du Bois. Garvey's plans for a black commercial empire, linking the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States was Washington's domestic plan internationalized. Drawing upon the ideas of self-help, social Darwinism, capitalist opportunity, and the black messianic tradition, Garvey formulated plans to liberate the African continent. He thereby fulfilled the aspirations of generations of earlier Pan-Africanists who understood that the destiny of Africans in America were tied to those on the continent. As a romantic, Garvey organized his military legions and dressed them in fancy uniforms who threatened to invade Africa. He embraced the idea of a United States of Africa and made ill-fated overtures to Liberia — an African state with tenuous sovereignty and ruled by an exploitative settler elite — to become a U.N.I.A. base. Moses demonstrates that Garveyism reflected all the tenants of classical black nationalism, in contradictory fashion, by combining "political separatism with cultural assimilation" (262). Moses is especially attuned to some of Garvey's ironic actions. He extols the virtue of Booker T. Washington, a man who probably would have disavowed most of Garvey's actions. Garvey also named one of his ships after Frederick Douglass who rejected racial consciousness until his dying days! Despite the Black Star Line debacle, Moses believes that

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Garvey made solid achievements. He was a master of the media and public opinion and a successful journalist with an international circulation who created a space for positive images of African people and all this without white assistance.

Some readers will take issue with only a few assertions and factual matters. Moses uses the term "Reconstruction" to encompass the entire post-Civil War nineteenth century which can sometimes be a bit confusing and he misidentifies Bishop Samuel Crowther as an Ibo (95) when he is Yoruba. He characterizes Theodore Roosevelt as a racial egalitarian (148) but a host of events in his life suggest otherwise, including the Brownsville Affair. In another place, he characterizes Washington as one who "spoke up for the oppressed" (164) but this was not really Washington's style. Moses claims that Garvey's effort was the first to give Afrocentrism an "economic expression" (249). I would agree that Garvey's plans were more concrete than any previous ones but also contend that Martin Delaney's Niger Valley Exploring Party had very specific economic goals and was intended to be more than mere "psychological balm" (249) for bruised African egos. Professor Moses has written an important and engaging book of which specialists will be particularly enamored. Its unusual approach in interrogating the lives and leadership of these important African American leaders alone makes it worthwhile.