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ALEXANDER CRUMMELL:
AN APOSTLE OF NEGRO
CULTURE

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William Henry Ferris Alexander Crummell: An Apostle of Negro Culture / The American Negro Academy. Occasional Papers No. 20

ALEXANDER CRUMMELL AN APOSTLE OF NEGRO CULTURE

A noted English lawyer-author has declared that the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes is the final word of the world's philosophy; that no ancient or modern thinker has uttered a profounder word. And in the seventh verse of that chapter it reads, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

Metaphysicians tell us that through his five senses, man is in touch with and in relation to his physical environment and a physical world, and that through his reason, imagination, conscience, aesthetic and religious intuitions, man is in touch with and in relation to his spiritual environment and a spiritual world. They also tell us that at death, the soul and body merely part company and go their respective ways. The oxygen, carbon, hydrogen and other chemical elements in the body mingle with the material elements from which they came. And the soul of man, the ego, the center of self-consciousness, recognitive memory and reflective thought, which has maintained its identity amid the changes of the physical organism, will survive the destruction of that organism and live on and on in the spirit world, embodied in whatever form and clothed with whatever garments its Maker so decreed.

Scientists tell us that when you throw a pebble in a stream, it sets up a series of ever-widening circles until it reaches the shore. They tell us that when you utter an audible sound, you start in motion sound waves which travel on for miles and miles. So it is with the influence of a human personality. It does not end at the grave. It lives in the lives that have been inspired, in the example set and the thoughts thrown out.

Twenty years and three months have elapsed since the soul of Alexander Crummell bid its bodily partner farewell and took its flight to its spiritual home. But Alexander Crummell's terrestrial influence did not end thus. It still goes on and will go on for centuries. We will briefly review his life and career and then estimate the weight, worth and significance of the ideas which he advocated, for which he lived and which were incarnated in his personality.

The Rev. Dr. Alexander Crummell, the Negro apostle of culture, was a born autocrat, a man born to command. And men instinctively bowed before him. Some even trembled before his wrath.

Crummell was born in New York in 1819, nearly a century ago. He was the son of Boston Crummell, a prince of the warlike Temene tribe, who was stolen while a boy playing on the sands of the seashore. At first, Crummell, with George T. Downing attended a school in New York taught by the Reverend Peter Williams, then went to the school in Canaan, New Hampshire, which was hauled into the pond by those who were angry because the Negro was taught to read. Crummell with others took refuge in a barn. They were fired upon; but Henry Highland Garnet fired a return shot, at which they were allowed to depart in peace. Then Crummell attended the Oneida Institute, of which Beriah Green was the President. He became a priest in the Episcopal Church, was for twenty years a missionary on the west coast of Africa, during which period he visited seventy tribes. He returned to this country in the late sixties or the early seventies, was for a year or two rector of St. Philip's Church, New York, and for twenty-three years rector of the St. Luke's Church in Washington, D.

C. The last years of his life were spent in issuing his race tracts and founding the American Negro Academy, the first body to bring Negro scholars from all over the world together. He died at Point Pleasant, N. J., in Dr. Matthew Anderson's summer home in September, 1898, in his eightieth year.

He was not as famous a man as Douglass, because in the most eventful years of the Negro race's history from 1850 to 1870 he was in Africa. When he died, men like Phillips Brooks and Dr. Fuller, of Rochester, who were old friends of his and who knew him intimately, the man and his work, had already crossed the mystic stream of death and passed over to the other shore. But he was a power in his own race to the last. Still in the late forties, he delivered three addresses that attracted considerable attention. In 1847 he addressed a colored convention at Troy, N. Y. And in 1848 he visited London and spoke at the annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, with such fire, force, finish and polish that he made many friends, both for himself and his race.

He visited Liverpool. He so impressed the Bishop of the diocese, that he was invited to officiate as minister in the St. George's Church at Everton, of which the Reverend Mr. Eubanks was rector. The audience had never heard a colored man preach before. And Crummell's dignity and bearing in the pulpit, his polish and refinement, his lucid exposition of the text, his sublimity of thought, beauty of diction, and fire and force of utterance for nearly an hour held that cultured audience spellbound. Crummell made history for the race on that Sunday morning in 1848. And I suppose that Crummell's eulogy on Clarkson, delivered in New York City in 1846, in its grandeur of thought, sublimity of sentiment and splendor of style, surpasses any oratorical effort of any colored man in the antebellum days. From that time until his death in 1898, Crummell swayed both colored and white audiences.

I remember in the fall of 1896, a Baptist preacher lectured in Newport, R. I. At the close of the lecture, a tall, slender, venerable looking man, with an aristocratic air, arose and stirred the audience with his heroic words. The Baptist preacher was so touched that he sought Crummell out. And then an influence entered his life that made him a new man, a stronger moral force in the Baptist denomination. I remember, too, when McKinley was inaugurated in 1897. Men and women, old and young, from all sections of the country, of varying degrees of culture, of divers religious creeds, came to Crummell's house as a mecca. Some had been thrilled by his sermons and commencement addresses; others caught the inspiration of their lives from his works, "Africa and America," "The Future of Africa," and "The Greatness of Christ, and Other Sermons." Today his memory is treasured in Washington, in cities of the north and south, and along the west coast of Africa. Such was the influence the imperial Crummell wielded.

There you have the historic Alexander Crummell, the finished scholar, the magnetic preacher, the brave, uncompromising idealist, who was dreaded by imposters and fakirs and time-servers and flunkies. He was one of those rugged, adamant spirits, who could stand against the world for a principle, but he was gracious, courteous, tender and sympathetic withal. Tall, slender, symmetrical, erect in bearing, with a graceful and elastic walk, with a refined and aristocratic face that was lighted up by keen penetrating but kindly eyes, and surrounded by the gray hair and beard which gave him a venerable appearance, with a rich, ringing, resonant baritone voice, which had not lost its power even in old age, with an air of unmistakable good breeding and a conversation that flavored of books and literature and art, Dr. Crummell was a man that you could never forget, once you met him or heard him preach. He frequently said that what the race needed was an educated gentry, and he was himself one of the finest specimens of that rugged strength, tempered with Christian culture and a refined benevolence, which was his ideal, that the race has yet produced. Sprung from the fierce Timene Tribes, who on the west coast of Africa cut to pieces a British regiment near Sierre Leone several years ago, he possessed the tireless energy, the untamed spirit and the fearless daring that made his warrior ancestors dreaded. But like the apostle Paul, his native strength was mellowed by the Christian religion.

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