

A Forgotten Sisterhood: Pioneering Black Women Educators and Activists in the Jim Crow South by Audrey Thomas McCluskey
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Black women became a mighty force rising up against white supremacy in the mid- nineteenth century. Through sexual exploitation, racially charged violence, and employment discrimination, the imposers of slavery and the oppression that followed sought to destroy black women. A small yet savvy group of women defied the powers of institutionalized racism and pressed forward to create and sustain institutions for African Americans. In *A Forgotten Sisterhood: Pioneering Black Women Educators and Activists in the Jim Crow South*, Audrey Thomas McCluskey uncovers the lives and educational contributions of four extraordinary women: Lucy C. Laney, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Nannie Helen Burroughs. McCluskey argues that the quartet of women believed that education was not so much a means to racial equality but the most successful route to undermining and nullifying the damaging effects of white supremacy and achieving a better life for the black community as a whole. During the turbulent era following Emancipation, these women sought to design schools that would secure young black men and women a place in a new and developing society.

Since the late 1980s into the 1990s scholars have published numerous books outlining the history of black clubwomen, highlighting the more prominent women in the movement. The importance of Thomas's work lies in the "sisterhood" and "forgotten" aspects of her study. Thomas rightly defines her four subjects as "daughters of slavery," situating them in their respective time period, regional culture and history, and gender construct expectations. While the women all came of age in the nineteenth century, two prior to Emancipation and two shortly after the end of Reconstruction, each woman was raised in homes where education, and access to it, was of primary concern. Even though there is nearly a thirty year gap between the births of Laney and Brown, the eldest and youngest of the group, the sisterhood began in the home. Thomas asserts that in the struggle against white supremacy, these women wholeheartedly agreed that encouraging the highest educational standard possible was the portal to the freedom blacks so desperately demanded during the years after Reconstruction.

As grown women, Thomas's quartet of advocates belonged to a segment of the clubwomen's movement whose teaching philosophies stretched

beyond rhetoric to actual implementation and administration of educational curriculum. However, the women were quite aware of the multiple routes to achieve the very freedom black people desired. All of the women created curriculum that addressed basic learning objectives. Bethune faced criticism early for implementing domestic science for young women, a line of curriculum that seemed to funnel women into housekeeping positions. As the liberal arts and business courses developed at her school, Bethune still believed that the curriculum teaching domestic science was important because women needed to earn a living. Burroughs also prepared her young students for the employment market, stating that black women of the time worked in the domestic sciences, and it would be a problem if she did not prepare them for the present day reality. Survival and uplift became the dual components of education to which all the women subscribed.

At the height of their success as school founders, what is forgotten was the often daunting task of finding support for their schools. In the most intriguing chapter, "The Masses and The Classes: Women's Friendships and Support Networks among School Founders," McCluskey explores the women's ability to network and navigate during this time period, which was phenomenal. McCluskey begins with Laney, the matriarch of the quartet, analyzing how she stitched together funders, students, and other support for her Haines Normal and Industrial Institute school. In particular, McCluskey focuses on the strong networks developed by both Bethune and Brown. Brown founded the Alice Freeman Palmer Memorial Institute, utilizing an impressive network that covered the entire eastern seaboard, from New England to North Carolina. In addition to the communities of clubwomen in the region, Northern donors, both men and women, saw fit to sustain Browns' Palmer Institute. Raised in Massachusetts in a more racially tolerant environment, Brown consistently received financial aid from her mentor's family and white sympathizers. To help support her Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, Bethune mined the local white Palmetto Women's Club, populated by wealthy whites Northern vacationers, to fill her supervisory board. Bethune also tapped into the black women's support system. Burroughs cultivated deep connections with the National Baptist Convention to support her National Training School for Negro girls in the nation's capital. Burroughs could boast that her status was supported more often than not by black men and women of the National Baptist organizations. Regardless of whether the surrounding community supported the schools, the women understood the importance of soliciting support from those with much to gain from its existence.

Though Thomas gives us a gift in bringing these historical women's contributions together, *A Forgotten Sisterhood* is weakened by dated scholarship. A consequence of this is that the examination of the women's edu-

cational philosophies is two-dimensional, citing DuBoisian and Washingtonian ideologies most often, though there are many recent published projects that speak to the diversity of thought that impacted the vision of many nineteenth century black women, including clubwomen's use of Garveyism and Pan Africanism. In the end, McCluskey's work successfully introduces the "forgotten" component of these women and examines the complexities. Education for them was business. The ways in which they financed the building of facilities, nurtured relationships with wealthy donors, strategized around government and religious institution funding, and tackled mounting debt demanded a business management mindset and savvy multi-tasking many other educators did not have. In order to build, manage, and grow these educational institutions for African Americans, the women's ability to maneuver around racial and gender norms was tested at every side. Conquering the violence, retribution, and uncertainty of their time accentuated their understanding of the importance of networking with like-minded supporters while operating in a system of white supremacy and oppression.

NOTES

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