From the Editor’s Desk

Over and over again in their work, historians are reminded that big things come in small packages. One such “package” is a typed sheet of paper tucked inside Lida Keck Wiggins’s *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (1907), a rare book in the Gerald E. Talbot Collection of the African American Collection of Maine. The paper’s heading reads: BANGOR LITERARY READING CONTEST February 17, 1919. This simple, unassuming document provides a fabulous glimpse into Black life in early twentieth-century Bangor. It is also a perfect vehicle for introducing the theme of the ninth volume of the *Griot*. During the 2005-2006 academic year, the *Griot* will have as its theme “Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community.” “Black Bangor” is also the title of the Collection’s annual exhibition, coming in February. (See Calendar of Events for more information.)

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A Place in Time

**Bangor Literary Reading Contest February 17, 1919**

On its surface, the Bangor Literary Reading Contest list is one-dimensional. It comprises 38 separate entries, featuring diverse readings in adventure, biography, sociology, economics, history, romance, and religion. Books of note for that time include Rudyard Kipling’s *Indian Tales*, Charles Alexander Eastman’s *Indian Boyhood*, and Henry Morton Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*. In sum, however, the list may be characterized as reflecting a global, progressive, Christian consciousness of both color and class. New York Evening Sun photojournalist Jacob Riis authored four books on the list, including *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Children of the Poor*. Contest committee members also included the first five books of the New Testament and texts by leading African Americans of the day such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois. Of all the authors represented on the nearly 40-book list, Booker T. Washington appears to have garnered the most attention. In contrast, W.E.B. DuBois’ sole entry is *The Negro*, leaving conspicuously absent his 1903 hallmark publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The Bangor document’s 1919 date is as telling as its content. Its compilation of literary selections came too early for Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, to have been included. However, the Bangor Literary Reading Contest list alludes to the same type of Black consciousness that defined the post World War I era and shaped the Harlem Renaissance.

Similarly, this contest was seven years too early to have been tied to Carter G. Woodson’s creation of Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month.1 The Bangor Literary Contest reading list leaves several questions unanswered. It does not tell us, for example, if Geary, Burtt, and Dymond were the only committee members or who other members were. We do not know what informed the committee’s literary choices or whether the sheet was a preliminary or final draft. Was this contest a one-time event or was it a tradition? Was this contest the work of a distinct society or was it a subcommittee of the Grot? The Bangor Literary Contest reading list leaves several questions unanswered. It does not tell us, for example, if Geary, Burtt, and Dymond were the only committee members or who other members were. We do not know what informed the committee’s literary choices or whether the sheet was a preliminary or final draft. Was this contest a one-time event or was it a tradition? Was this the work of a distinct society or was it a subcommittee of the Grot? The Bangor Literary Contest reading list leaves several questions unanswered. It does not tell us, for example, if Geary, Burtt, and Dymond were the only committee members or who other members were. We do not know what informed the committee’s literary choices or whether the sheet was a preliminary or final draft. Was this contest a one-time event or was it a tradition? Was this the work of a distinct society or was it a subcommittee of the Grot?

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In Review


Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. His father, Joshua Dunbar, escaped from slavery and took refuge in Canada (probably present day Ontario), before returning to the United States and enlisting in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry. His mother, Matilda, had been enslaved in Kentucky. Her marriage to Joshua Dunbar was her second, and Paul appears to have been her only child. When Matilda Dunbar disputed her husband’s choice of name, he reputedly replied: “Matilda Madam, don’t you know that the Bible says Paul was a great man? This child will be great some day and do you honor.” (p.26) Paul Laurence Dunbar, the man with the name his mother regarded as too old-fashioned, did indeed do his mother proud. An honors student, the editor of his high school’s monthly publication, and the composer of his senior class song, Dunbar was forced to accept work as an elevator operator after graduation. Dunbar’s talent would not remain hidden for long, and during his 33-year life, he enjoyed the esteem of various notable persons including Frederick Douglass, Mary Church Terrell, Booker T. Washington, and Theodore Roosevelt. A key turning point in Dunbar’s life came in 1898 when he resigned his position in the Library of Congress Reading Room—and its $720 per year salary—to focus completely on his literary pursuits.

Such are some of the highlights of Dunbar’s life, as related by Wiggins. From this point in the narrative, Wiggins chronicles Dunbar’s marriage, his writing, and health problems until his death in 1906. Part Two of The Life and Works is a collection of Dunbar’s poems, and Part Three is what Wiggins considered the best of his short stories. Dunbar’s work varies from the religious to the quotidian. Some writing is nostalgic and romantic, some is political and satirical, some is disappointed and disillusioned. In sum, The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar should be considered in its own words: a tribute to a “short, feverish, brilliant life” for which “the world was too sad a place.” (p. 136)

Recent Publications

The following books were reviewed in recent issues of the Journal of African American History (formerly the Journal of Negro History), and may be of interest to Grot readers.

Vol. 89, no. 4 (Fall 2004)

Tate offers historical analysis of the presence, absence, treatment, and symbolic value of African Americans in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Vol. 90, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2005)

Alkalimat, moderator of H-Net’s list serve, H-Afro-Am, compiles an extensive inventory of Internet sources useful to researchers as well as to the general public.


This book of nine essays is the product of ten years’ worth of research and debate on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. as catalysts for important dialogue between Christians and Muslims.