EDITORIAL

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perspectives

What Could Be More Interesting Than "A History of Reading", II

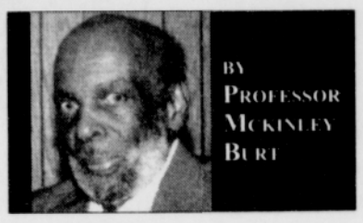
BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

Its all about the art of reading -- you can't curl up in the NET with a good book. It won't allow you to reach up on your shelf and effortlessly turn to that awesome paragraph or chapter which is hard-wired in your mind for life.

Occasionally, the page is a work of art where some inspired ink slinger has made ornaments out of the letters of the alphabet with his use of swirling serifs. And sometimes an equally striking illustration will adjoin the script. You can close your eyes and re-read the message on the bus, on the plane, or between servings at that good restaurant; you will never lose a fact.

I received some interesting comments on last week's introduction to this series, "McKinley, I knew you would find a way to get `us' in there some way." You certainly got that right! I'll be on my job as long as we have rascally `main-line' historians who somehow always manage to leave out the warm, human element of African interaction with other races of mankind.

The reader had reference to my account of the 'Havana Cigar-Makers' in Key West, Florida who wrote to Alexander Dumas, the noted black French author ("The Three Musketeers, The Count of Monte Cristo, Etc."). These workers (1870) sought permission to name their prize product after a character in his novel. It seems that they employed a narrator to read to them during their boring task and Dumas was their favorite author. Request granted.



I have written an organization in Key West to learn if the Cuban expatriates still follow this practice. This technique of a 'reading' is followed in our neighborhood book clubs today and on a regular basis at popular bookstores. But I'll warrant you that even the most knowledgeable military buff doesn't know that his didactic practice began almost 1500 years ago on a craggy Italian hill called "Monte Cassino"(scene of a bitter World War II siege).

Alberto Manguel in his "History of Reading" (Viking 1996) tells us that Saint Benedict of Nursia founded a monastery on this cragg hill halfway between Rome and Naples. "Believing like sir Thomas Browne, that God offered us the world under two guises, as nature and as a book, Benedict decreed that reaching would be an essential part of the monastery's daily life."

We remember that the Cuban cigar-makers in Florida had a 'reader' to reveal the beauty or inspiration of literary gems which could relieve a boring task. Saint Benedict anticipated them with his "Article 38"; that there should be an appointed reader during meal times and that there should be the greatest silence at the table. "Whatever is needed in the way of food, the brethren should pass to each other in turn, so that no one need ask for anything."

You may not wish to "ask for anything" while being enthralled with this beautiful and oh-so-informative book. One of the joys of reading Alberto Manguel's text is that this author himself often invokes that "whole page" image for the reader; imprinting a message that can easily be recalled anytime; anyplace. That is communication.

As I said earlier, "you cannot curl up in the NET with a good book", and people are fast learning that cyberspace is for the storage and retrieval of data. Book publishing and distribution is accelerating weekly - new catalogs in your mail each day. And have you seen "Reader's Digest" big new entry into the fray; and I do mean `big'. You won't stick these new issues in your pocket or purse.

Yes, there has been a major paradigm shift-back to the printed page for true knowledge. The WEB provides the data; titles, authors, publishers, booksellers and prices. You know, I remember a page from childhood, Herman Melville's description of becalmed sailors in "Moby Dick, like a painted ship on a painted sea."

Cont'd next week.

Civil Rights Journal

Environmental Justice And Convent

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

Convent, Louisiana is a little town of 2700 or so people located between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Sitting right alongside the Mississippi River, Convent is in an area which the state calls the Chemical Corridor because of the dozens of chemical plants located there. Those of us who are concerned about environmental justice have another name for that area however. We call it Cancer Alley because of the incredibly high incidence of all types of cancer found in the residents. And, oh, by the way, the majority of the residents of Convent are African American and most of them are poor.

For hundreds of years the area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans was an agricultural and fishing area. Before the Civil War it was an area full of plantations and in the century or so after the war it remained a rural area where people fished in the river for oysters and fish and grew crops which fed their own families. But about forty years ago all of that changed as the state of Louisiana decided to give tax abatements to huge chemical corporations to locate their plants there, along the river where transportation was easy and cheap. The trade-off for this new development, or so the residents were led to believe, was good jobs.

After nearly two generations of this development most of the people who live along Cancer Alley remain poor and few of them work in the highly-technical jobs which the plants offer. A drive through the parking lots around the plants shows license plates from other states and other counties and only a few families have really benefitted from the plants.

Now the state of Louisiana wants to locate a new plant in Convent. They want to locate one of the most toxic of all chemical plants in little Convent, promising jobs and economic development. They want to allow Shintech, a Japanese-owned plant to build the world's largest polyvinyl

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Tragedy and Hope in Africa

BY HUGH B. PRICE, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE PRESIDENT

Once again, the world is confronted by the scourge of evil, by the awful willingness of some human beings to inflict pain and suffering upon the innocent in order to, by their perverse reasoning, make a political statement.

Once again, we endure the agony of the aftermath.

We see, with a shock, the physical damage that has been done to human bodies. Because the shock waves of the horrendous crime reach every place human decency exists, we feel the psychological trauma of those who were at ground zero and survived, as if the broken window glass and shards of metal, wood and concrete were lacerating our own souls.

The bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania are tragedies in which the human costs-of lives cut short, of promise not to be fulfilled, of suffering loosed around the globe yet again-forever diminish into insignificance the twisted souls responsible for it. they have forfeited their connection with humanity. They are as worthless as dust.

We in America know, now to our sorrow, that individuals of such profound malevolence lurk not just in Asia, Africa, Europe or Latin America. They are not just of "those other people." The crumpled wreckage in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam should remind us-in case we've forgotten-that a similar horrific act happened in the American heartland, destroying the lives of American men, women, and children, as these have destroyed the lives of Africans and Americans.

But we must not fail to recognize that, in its awful way, the aftermath of the tragedies an ocean away actually reaffirm something enormously positive: they reaffirm the essential decency of humankind, and its determination to persist despite crushing setbacks.

So, as in Oklahoma City, we see not only the organized governmental response. we also see ordinary citizens rushing to the sites of the tragedies to, if necessary, help in-and, equally important, to bear witness to-the search for survivors.

They come because they know that the hope of finding survivors is in itself a repudiation of the barbarism of the killers. They understand that in bearing witness against atrocity, we declare ourselves for decency in the conduct of human affairs. In Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam as in Oklahoma City, that universal reaction represents the hope of the world.

In that way, the tragedies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam also offer the American people a more positive way of looking at Black Africa, a region of the world whose reality, still, is so often skewed by some observers' untrustworthy attitudes.

African Americans' feelings about the relationship to Black Africa has long been subjected to the same kind of racist distortion as our perception of our relationship to America itself. The reality is that Black America's true feelings have always been more complex, more nuance than the racist fantasies have suggested.

Mora McClean, president of the Africa America Institute, sketched one facet of that relationship when she wrote in a recent issue of the Urban League's magazine, *Opportunity Journal*, that an attachment to one's ancestral homeland does not automatically diminish the attachment to one's own native land. In fact, the experience of American ethnic groups as a whole indicates that it often leads to a greater civic involvement.

The joyous embrace of that complexity can be seen in the lives of Julian Bartley, the American Consul General in Nairobi, and his son, Jay, both of whom perished in the embassy bombing. Mr. Bartley, 55, was a 24-year veteran of the Foreign Service having previously served in the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Spain, Israel and Korea. his son, 20, a sophomore at United States International University, in Nairobi, was working at the embassy for the summer.

According to the *New York Times* August 9 account of the memorial service in Nairobi for the American victims, "By all accounts the father and son were an immensely popular duo whose headlong embrace of Kenya life had been lovingly returned by the people they met and befriended."

The larger point is that the tragedy also underscored that it was not just Americans of African descent who saw the beauty in Black Africa.

A friend told the *Times* that Molly Huckaby Hardy, 51, another career Foreign Service employee who was white and who also died in the Nairobi bombing, "just loved being there, I think. She found East Africa a beautiful place."

It is this-the stories of the capacity of human beings to see and embrace the beauty of their surroundings, be they in Oklahoma or Black Africa-which transforms the horror of this tragedy into a declaration of hope.