

The Opening of the Library

By W. E. Burghardt Du Bois

PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AND HISTORY IN ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

“**W**ITH simple and appropriate exercises the beautiful new Carnegie Library was thrown open to the public yesterday.” So says the morning paper of Atlanta, Ga. The master of ceremonies, as he turned the gift over to the city, said:

“And now, Mr. President, in behalf of the Building Committee, I have the honor to tender to you and to the trustees, and through you to the citizens of Atlanta, the completed portions of the building, to be used for free public library purposes forever, with the hope that the results of our mutual cares and labors, now partially accomplished, may be a blessing not only to the present generation, but to thousands and hundreds of thousands who shall come after us.”

The white marble building, the gift of Andrew Carnegie, is indeed fair to look upon. The site was given the city by a private library association, and the City Council appropriates \$5,000 annually of the city moneys for its support. If you will climb the hill where the building sits you may look down upon the rambling city. Northward and southward are 53,905 white people, eastward and westward are 35,912 negroes.

And so in behalf of these 36,000 negroes my companions and I called upon the trustees of the Library on this opening day, for we had heard that black folk were to have no part in this “free public library,” and we thought it well to ask why. It was not pleasant going in, for people stared and wondered what business we had there; but the trustees, after some waiting, received us courteously and gave us seats—some eight of us in all. To me, unfortunately, had fallen the lot to begin the talking. I said, briefly:

“Gentlemen, we are a committee come to ask that you do justice to the black people of Atlanta by giving them the same free library privileges that you propose giving the whites. Every argument which can be adduced to show the need of libraries for whites applies with redoubled force to the negroes. More than any other part of our population they need instruction, inspiration and proper diver-

sion; they need to be lured from the temptations of the streets and saved from evil influences, and they need a growing acquaintance with what the best of the world's souls have thought and done and said. It seems hardly necessary in the twentieth century to argue before men like you on the necessity and propriety of placing the best means of human uplifting into the hands of the poorest and lowest and blackest. You know even better than we that in all things that degrade and drag down there is in Atlanta little argument as to the color-line; that facilities for drinking, gambling and carousing are as wide open for black boys as for whites, and that, while the city has not seats enough in her school-houses for half her black children, she has ample provision for them in her jails.”

I then pointed out the illegality of using public money collected from all for the exclusive benefit of a part of the population, or of distributing public utilities in accordance with the amount of taxes paid by any class or individual, and finally I concluded by saying:

“The spirit of this great gift to the city was not the spirit of caste or exclusion, but rather the catholic spirit which recognizes no artificial differences of rank or birth or race, but seeks to give all men equal opportunity to make the most of themselves. It is our sincere hope that this city will prove itself broad enough and just enough to administer this trust in the true spirit in which it was given.”

Then I sat down. There was a little pause, and the chairman, leaning forward, said:

“I should like to ask you a question: Do you not think that allowing whites and negroes to use this library would be fatal to its usefulness?”

There come at times words linked together which seem to chord in strange recurring resonance with words of other ages and one hears the voice of many centuries and wonders which century is speaking. As I sat there I was for a moment not sure what the chairman had said. Was it “Can a Barbarian mingle with Greeks?” or, later, “May a German stand by a Roman citizen?” Was

it the brave Norman oath, "May I be a Saxon if this be in my day!" or was a Spaniard glowering at a "dog of a Jew" (for, strange omen! a Jew sat here before me among this group of trustees)—was it any or all of these, or was it simply the familiar negro problem dressed anew—Can negroes be admitted to the use of public libraries in the South? And the answer seemed to me so distressingly obvious that I said simply, "I will express no opinion on that point."

Then from among us darker ones another arose. He was an excellent and adroit speaker. He thanked the trustees for the privilege of being there, and reminded them that but a short time ago even this privilege would have been impossible. He said we did not ask to use this library, we did not ask equal privileges, we only wanted some privileges somewhere. And he assured the trustees

that he had perfect faith in their justice.

The president of the Trustee Board then arose, gray-haired and courteous. He congratulated the last speaker and expressed pleasure at our call. He then gave us to understand four things:

1. Negroes would not be permitted to use the Carnegie Library in Atlanta.
2. That some library facilities would be provided for them in the future.
3. That to this end the City Council would be asked to appropriate a sum proportionate to the amount of taxes paid by negroes in the city.
4. That an effort would be made, and had been made, to induce Northern philanthropists to aid such a library, and he concluded by assuring us that in this way we might eventually have a better library than the whites. Then he bade us adieu politely and we walked home wondering.

ATLANTA, GA.