

The Prince who Refused the Kingdom

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When I was twenty, I decided to hitchhike across the African continent, more or less following the line of the Equator, from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. I packed only one pair of sandals and one pair of jeans to make room for the three hefty books I had decided to read from cover to cover: *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, and *From Slavery to Freedom*, by John Hope Franklin. I read the latter—the black and white bound third edition of the book—while recovering from a severe bout of amoebic dysentery sailing down the Congo River. It became such a valued reference for me that I kept it, for years, in the bookcase at my bedside.

Like just about every Black student at Yale in 1969, I enrolled in the Introduction to Afro-American History survey course, taught quite ably by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, William McFeely. At the end of each class, someone would find a way to bring up the fact that while our subject matter was Black, McFeely was quite White, and hadn't he better find a way to remedy that fact? With the patience of Job, McFeely would graciously grant his accuser the point and add that he hoped to put himself out of a job just as soon as a Black historian could be found to take his place. He would then remind us that the textbook around which our course was structured, *From Slavery to Freedom*, had been written by a Black man—a Black man who had been trained at Harvard.

John Hope Franklin was the last of the great generation of Black historians to graduate from Harvard in the first half of the twentieth century. W. E. B. Du Bois, who graduated in 1895, paved the way for Carter G. Woodson (the father of Black History Month) in 1912, Charles Wesley in 1925, Rayford W. Logan in 1936, and Franklin in 1941. Both because he was the youngest member of this academic royal family and because he was lean and elegant, poised and cosmopolitan, many of us in the younger generation came to refer to Franklin as “The Prince.”

Despite all of the important work published by his four predecessors at Harvard, Franklin was the first to publish a comprehensive and popular story of the Negro's place in American life. *From Slavery to Freedom* was not just the first of its genre, it was canon-forming. It gave to the Black historical tradition a self-contained form through which it could be institutionalized—parsed, divided into fifteen weeks, packaged and taught—from Harlem to Harvard, and even, or especially, in those places where almost no Black people actually lived. Every scholar of my generation studied Franklin's book; in this sense, we are all his godchildren.

But Franklin's relationship with Harvard was a complicated and tense one. Because Harvard had trained him as an historian, Franklin aspired to become the college's first Black history professor. By the late 1960s, that dream certainly seemed to be in his grasp, especially after he had integrated the history department at Brooklyn College in 1956, then moved to the Midwest in 1964 to integrate the history department at the University of Chicago, just a year after Dr. King's March on Washington.

While my classmates and I down in New Haven were busy busting William McFeely's chops for being White, Harvard had the good sense to invite John Hope Franklin to become the first chair of its fledgling academic Afro-American studies department, which it started in 1969 along with Yale and most other research universities.

But Franklin had an understandably principled opposition to academic segregation or "ghettoization" of any kind. He was suspicious about the uneven and troubled origins and stated intentions of the nascent field of Afro-American studies. He agreed to hold his breath if the faculty hired to teach in the new department were jointly appointed in the departments in which they had taken their degrees. With Franklin's pedigree, a joint appointment should have been an obvious move.

But the tenured faculty of history at Harvard, including some of the classmates with whom he had studied while pursuing the Ph.D., refused. His appointment, were he to accept the offer of Chairman, would be solely in the Department of Afro-American Studies. Franklin angrily rejected the offer, calling it the most egregious insult of his academic career. Although he would accept an honorary doctorate from Harvard in 1981, in large part as a snub to the history department, Franklin never forgave his professional colleagues for the insult. In fact, he took a certain perverse pleasure in talking Black scholars out of accepting tenured professorships at Harvard, including most famously William Julius Wilson and Cornel West in the 1980s. When Drew Faust was inaugurated two years ago, one of the few featured speakers was John Hope, who spoke "on behalf of the History profession." This painful history, of which only a few of us were aware, made President Faust's gesture all the more poignant.

The experience with Harvard's history department also deepened his initial skepticism about the entire field of Black Studies, making him, until the 1990s, an ardent foe if it was a subject area set apart from and not integrated with the traditional disciplines. I once heard a Black nationalist assistant professor at Yale in the late 1970s refer to him derogatorily as "John Hopeless Franklin." But for Franklin, there could be no Black History without "History," as it were, and on this point he was unequivocal. For most of his career, Franklin saw Black Studies as the unfortunate correlative of Jim Crow segregation, self-imposed by well-meaning but naive Black students and complicit Black professors eager to get lucrative jobs at historically White institutions.

John Hope and I had met at Yale in the early 1980s, over a small dinner attended by the great historians David Brion Davis and John W. Blassingame, following Franklin's lecture. Davis turned to me during dinner and asked if I had ever discovered how I had been selected in the first group of MacArthur Fellows. As I attempted to say no, John Hope, from the far end of the table, thundered out that he knew precisely how I had been selected, because he had done the selecting! It was a bit like winning the fellowship all over again; I blinked back tears.

I told him how influenced I had been by *From Slavery to Freedom*, and that I had carried my copy of the third edition, published in 1967, with me across the African continent, reading it from cover to cover. (I didn't tell him that I felt the third edition was his best, and that subsequent editions, perhaps responding to the pressures from publishers to make textbooks more "readable," more accessible, seemed dumbed down—a long way in style from the densely rich narrative blend of documented facts with philosophical speculation and musings that characterized the black and white edition.) We stayed in touch after that, mostly by phone. One day he called to ask me to accept an offer that had just been extended by Stanley Fish in Duke's English Department.

My tenure at Duke was regrettably brief. Still, it gave me time to get to know John Hope better, to listen to his stories about school and segregation, about the

academic life before *Brown v. Board* and his role in and perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement. Best of all, I loved his anecdotes. His favorite story was about the day he met W. E. B. Du Bois. Franklin was a graduate student at Harvard, doing research in North Carolina for his thesis on the Free Negro in North Carolina before the Civil War. John Hope, taking his evening meal in the segregated Arcade Hotel in the spring of 1939 spotted the great Du Bois dining alone in a corner. Cautiously, tentatively, he approached his hero. Du Bois' gaze was riveted on a book. John Hope loved describing what happened next:

Seeing Dr. Du Bois dining alone and reading, I decided that this was an opportunity that I would not let pass. Crossing the dining room, I approached his table and spoke to him, giving him my full name. Surely he would recognize the fact that I was named for one of his closest friends and hearing it would embrace me. He did not even look up. Then I told him that I was a graduate of Fisk University, class of 1935. That, I assumed, would bring him to his feet singing 'Gold and Blue.' Again, he continued to read and eat, without looking up. Finally, as a last resort, I told him that I was a graduate student in history at Harvard and was in Raleigh doing research for my dissertation. Without looking up from his book or plate, he said, 'How do you do.' Dejected, I retreated, completed my dinner, and withdrew from the dining room (Franklin 2005, p. 117).

John Hope loved to tell that story, always ending it with, "Of course we became close friends later, when he and his wife, Shirley, lived in Brooklyn and I was teaching at the College." He told the story as a way of explaining why he was so very generous with younger colleagues. Myself included.

In April of 2007, Butler University invited us both to campus for a dialogue. I agreed, but only if I could play the role of interviewer, and if we could talk with no strict time limit attached. John Hope regaled a standing-room-only crowd for over two hours with stories about his family, his education, his political beliefs, his triumphs and disappointments. And as we dined together, sharing a bottle of Margaux, followed by a cognac, he congratulated me on recruiting Bill Wilson and Cornel West to Harvard despite his best efforts to dissuade them from coming. I congratulated him on receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom; he returned the compliment about my receipt of the National Medal of the Humanities.

I congratulated him on Duke University's creation of the John Hope Franklin Research Center, and the forthcoming edition of *From Slavery to Freedom*, being revised by my colleague Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the first Black professor ever to receive tenure in Harvard's history department. I told him how much I valued the old third edition, the one with the black and white cover, and that I deeply regretted that it had gotten misplaced somehow. He told me he was proud of what we had created at Harvard. I shared with him the faculty's decision to co-name the library at the Du Bois Institute in his honor. He promised to visit, which he did following his speech at Drew Faust's inauguration. He seemed touched by the gesture.

A few days later, a FedEx envelope arrived at my house in Cambridge. Inside was another package, carefully wrapped in brown paper, the way antiquarians in England wrap books that they mail. When I give books as Christmas presents, I wrap them the same way. There is something wonderful about that brown wrapping paper. Inside the paper was a signed copy of *From Slavery to Freedom*, the black and white paperback edition, dated 1967, the same one that Professor McFeely had assigned us back at Yale. It was signed, "With affectionate best wishes." It sits in the bookshelf by my bedside.

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An Appreciation

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Mirror to America, the title John Hope Franklin gave his autobiography, implied that one might recognize important themes of the nation's life-story in his own. Be that as it may, it is indisputable that in his life one can find the main themes and plot lines of the professional study of African American history, both its origins and its maturation, in the twentieth century.

Born two years before America's fateful entry into the First World War and coming of age during the Great Depression, Franklin emerged as a professional historian during a propitious, if brief, opening in America's racial regime. He was part of the best-educated generation of African Americans until that time—a few of them, like him, at the nation's most prestigious universities. Arguably, this was also the largest, most politically active cohort of African American intellectuals before the 1960s and 1970s. Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, E. Franklin Frazier, Abram Harris, Ralph Bunche, Sterling Brown, and others followed in the tradition pioneered by W. E. B. Du Bois; they saw intellectual work as a tool for race advancement. It is significant, then, that even though he matured in a McCarthy-scarred era of frightened academics, Franklin never renounced the dangerously dual commitment to intellectual rigor and the pursuit of racial justice that these “race-men” modeled.

Like them, Franklin believed that the “substance and direction” imparted by historical knowledge was a source of power and its transfer an obligation the older owed the younger generation; its legacy a precious tie binding the one to the other. That legacy was not meant to be preserved in museum wax, however, but to serve as a springboard for fresh investigations and challenges to the received wisdom. “Every generation has the opportunity to write its own history,” he lectured an audience of young historians gathered at Purdue University in 1983, “and indeed is obliged to do so. Only in that way can it provide its contemporaries with the materials vital to understanding the present and to planning strategies for coping with the future” (Franklin 1986, p. 13).

The irony of that moment is that by that point in his long career, Franklin had come to be regarded by many in that audience as the embodiment of the profession's conservative Establishment. Then the John Manly Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago—itsself something of a right-wing preserve at the time—and just recently the presiding officer of the American Historical Association,