

JOSEPH MCELRATH
ROBERT C. LEITZ

“To Be an Author”

*Letters of Charles W.
Chesnutt, 1889-1905*



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“To Be an Author”



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Letters of
Charles W. Chesnutt
1889–1905



Edited by
Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and
Robert C. Leitz, III

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Dedicated to

DONALD PIZER

*Pierce Butler Professor of English
Tulane University*

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PREFACE



*Every time I read a good novel, I want to write
one It is the dream of my life—to be an author!*

Chesnutt's journal, 26 March 1881

THE redefinition of American literary history in process since the 1960s has been guided by two goals. The first is the inclusion of numerous female writers who, despite the high visibility of many in their own time, were marginalized and even dismissed from serious consideration earlier in this century. Kate Chopin ably represents the former group of no longer "minor" authors whose considerable accomplishments are now acclaimed, the prolific and once quite popular nineteenth-century novelist Mary Jane Holmes still awaits her redeemer. The second goal is twofold in nature: the rediscovery of "minority" authors whose works once enjoyed some celebrity, and the identification of less successful ones doomed to obscurity from the start because handled by small presses outside the American publishing mainstream. This volume of letters is devoted to an already rediscovered African-American author, whose prose fictions began to receive widespread attention in the late 1960s and who now enjoys a much greater degree of fame than he did in the 1890s and early 1900s, when his works were both praised and vigorously criticized—even attacked—in the national press.

Short-story writer and novelist Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858–1932) may, however, still prove to be a fresh discovery for many contemporary readers who are familiar mainly with his successors during and after the Harlem Renaissance, and who have not yet given sustained attention to the pioneers in African-American literary history. He is particularly important in that he was among the most visible figures of the group testing the commercial viability of African-American authorship at the turn of the century. Like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington, Chesnutt was one of the first to succeed in "crossing the color line" into the Anglo-American publishing industry of the Jim Crow era, when his six books were manufactured, advertised, and distributed to a national readership by three distinguished firms from 1899 to 1905.

By 1905, though, Chesnutt had already reached the zenith of his brief career as a professional author. He had impressed his publishers and many liberal, reform-minded book reviewers interested in his original treatments of African-American experience. But novelty of subject matter, the artfully droll tone in many of his short stories collected in book form, and Chesnutt's fiery zeal in novels exposing the chicanery of Southern racists did not interest book buyers enough to advance his long-dreamed-of career as a professional author. The Cleveland attorney and head of a very profitable stenography business

continued to write in free hours, but his lapse into relative obscurity in the literary world was, through his death in 1932, interrupted only by a brief flurry of attention when the NAACP awarded him the Spingarn Medal in 1928 for literary contributions to the African-American cause

What it meant to be an African American attempting what Chesnutt did at the turn of the century, and how he both won a place in the limelight and then precipitated his own demise by writing exposes of racism for an unappreciative white readership—these matters are dramatically documented in this collection of his letters

Chesnutt maintained files of drafts and carbon copies of his letters of 1889–1905 that dealt with his short stories, novels, and essays, many of the delivered versions were preserved by distinguished authors and social reformers such as George Washington Cable, Albion W Tourgee, William Dean Howells, Booker T Washington, and W E B Du Bois Those most important, in the editors' judgment, have been brought together here and, with annotations explaining what transpired in the ones not selected for publication, they tell the story of the extraordinary achievements of an individual determined to realize his version of the American Dream Lamentably, they also chronicle the frustration of a lifelong quest to transcend the limitations faced initially by a man of color born free in the antebellum North, then by a largely self-educated provincial who came to maturity in North Carolina, and next by a sophisticated belletrist whose workaholic habits once promised a literary success at least equal to that which he enjoyed in the Cleveland business world It would take almost a century before the recognition that he hoped for would occur—that is, before his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, would be viewed the way he saw it as the equal of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the now almost-forgotten *A Fool's Errand* of Albion W Tourgee

That is now a fait accompli Chesnutt has at last arrived, and thus the need for this record of how an outsider did what was necessary to find a place in the pantheon of American literati

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



OF the many individuals who made this volume possible, Charles W Chesnutt himself merits the premier position. Had he not been so businesslike an individual with a proper sense of how his papers documented history in the making, cultural historians would not enjoy the wealth of data that the editors of this volume have had the privilege of making available. Next in order of importance is his daughter Helen, who preserved the greater part of what her father bequeathed us in his files. The largest collection of these papers has been organized for the scholar in the Charles W Chesnutt Collection at Fisk University; we are indebted to Ann Allen Shockley for permission to transcribe the letters therein and to Beth Howse for her kind assistance and especially her good cheer when performing "one last favor" several times. John J. Grabowski at the Western Reserve Historical Society's Library was also a major ally; we thank him and the Society not only for permission to use the many letters in their keeping but for easy access to their periodicals collection, which proved an indispensable resource when we were researching the explanatory notes.

For permission to transcribe other letters in collections, we thank the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, the Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, the Houghton Library, Harvard University, the Archives and Manuscript Collection, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, the Chautauqua County Historical Society, the Rutherford B. Hayes Library, and the Fred Lewis Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University.

Chris Suggs, who was the 1994–1995 Schomburg Fellow when we were conducting our research at the Schomburg Center, repeatedly made available to us his research expertise, kindly answering for us over the following months an inordinate number of queries; he never turned away a request and always found exactly what we needed. Leon Cahill Miller's guidance was invaluable as we analyzed the extensive George Washington Cable Collection at Tulane University. Louis R. Harlan generously gave his time and energy when we called upon him to display his comprehensive knowledge of Booker T. Washington's papers. Lawrence I. Berkove shared with us his knowledge of Midwestern history and geography. We are also indebted to Charles Hackenberry, whose unpublished "Guide to the Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt in the Fisk Manuscript Collection" facilitated our analysis of that collection. Lisa Cooper's meticulous transcriptions and her kind assistance with the verification of the same are gratefully acknowledged. Joel Myerson, Juanita Hayes, Genevieve West, Amy Johnson, Charles Duncan, Ann Leitz, and Sharon M. McElrath contributed much in various ways to the completion of this edition.

For financial support of this project, we are indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Louisiana State University in Shreveport, and Florida State University. The Library Company of Philadelphia not only advanced the research by awarding the project an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship but accelerated our progress by unstintingly making available the expert assistance of its staff. Phil Lapsansky, whose command of the Library Company's distinguished Afro-American Collection was constantly startling, was the apotheosis of the professional research librarian.

We hope that Chesnut's literary executor, John C. Slade, without whose consent this volume would not have been possible, is pleased with what we have made of the materials in his charge.

EDITORIAL NOTE



THE preparation of Charles W Chesnutt's letters for publication—in a manner consistent with what surviving evidence indicates about his epistolary intentions and behavior—has proven a relatively simple matter. The forms sent, revised drafts, and corrected carbon copies reveal a meticulous wordsmith sedulously projecting the image of a learned individual, a man of letters of the old school who had read his Addison and Steele and demonstrated not only clarity of thought and expression but the sophistication requisite for fashioning complex, balanced sentence structures including multiple clausal qualifications and even qualifications of qualifications. The prose styles of Oliver Wendell Holmes and William Makepeace Thackeray come to mind, happily, the elaborations fashioned by Chesnutt are not so convoluted as to recall Henry James'. Chesnutt was in every sense of the term a Victorian gentleman who approached the writing of letters with an earnest desire to make each of his missives as stylish as it was substantive.

On remarkably few occasions he did slip, however. In each case, editorial emendation of the version mailed, or—if it does not survive—the carbon copy or draft most proximate to it, has been as conservative as possible. Noted below are the regularizations uniformly imposed upon the letters as they were styled for book publication, in the main our interpretation on a case-by-case basis of what Chesnutt intended to write, or have a typist transcribe, determined the ways in which we altered the source-texts. These silent emendations conveniently fall into the following categories, and the examples cited are representative.

Spelling errors Corrected, for example, is the misspelling of "advise" when Chesnutt asked "on which of those two grounds your advise was based?" (Variant British spellings at the turn of the century do not include "advise" as a noun.)

Omitted words The word "not" was omitted in "I do not know why I should undertake to write a Labor Day story" as Chesnutt actually agreed to write such a story, the sentence is emended accordingly.

Inappropriate word choices The adjective "adequate" appeared where the adverb "adequately" was required in "It is my sincere desire to honor the memory [of Frederick Douglass], as adequate as the scope of this little work will permit." Also, in another letter a reading clearly not intended as a neologism—"disconcernment"—demanded emendation since "discernment" was as clearly required by the context.

Omissions of essential punctuation When expressing thanks for counsel and the motivation to continue improving a manuscript, Chesnutt acknowledged "the incentive thereto your kindly advice and criticism, "

The “thereto” may appear an inappropriate word choice or create the impression of a problem in sentence structure unless a comma follows it, making clear that “your kindly advice and criticism” refers to the “incentive” in question. There are many instances, however, in which Chesnutt either uses “light” punctuation or punctuates in the “rhetorical”—rather than grammar-based—manner, employing the comma to indicate only an emphatic pause in the rhythm of a sentence. When meaning is judged not to be threatened, such readings are allowed to stand.

Apparent Mistranscriptions That Chesnutt’s typists originated authorially unintended readings is clear and made even more apparent by his hand corrections of both the versions sent and carbon copies. But Chesnutt was not an infallible proofreader, and some carbon copies were not perfected. In this edition one reads “I think the book may serve a very useful purpose, beyond the pecuniary returns which it will bring to author or publisher. Fortunately the two things, in the case of a book are very nearly co-terminous, and there is every inducement from either point of view, to push a good thing along.” In the uncorrected carbon-copy source text the second sentence differs dramatically. “Fortunately the two things, in the case of a book are very nearly co-terminous, is that there is every inducement from either point of view, to push a good thing along.”

Normalizations of the letters’ texts are minimal. A few of the letters close with “Sincerely yours” and like formulaic expressions, but the comma is lacking after “yours”, since Chesnutt does include a comma in the vast majority of cases, the editors have emended accordingly. The other normalization has to do with the titles of separate publications—for example, novels and musical compositions. When underlined, they are italicized in this edition. Chesnutt, however, most often puts such titles within double quotation marks, as one would works appearing in periodicals and collected along with other writings in books. All separate publications have been italicized here, as is customary in our time and was as well in Chesnutt’s when previously unpublished texts were translated into print.

The letters have been styled for presentation. Unless otherwise indicated, they originated in Cleveland, Ohio, and the return addresses have not been included. The addresses of the recipients, too, are excluded, when they are significant, that information is given in the explanatory notes. Otherwise, the letters in their edited forms are complete or, as will be seen in some cases, as complete as the fragmentary source texts were.

Immediately following the texts of the majority of letters, the formal closing and the form of Chesnutt’s signature in the source-texts appear. Many of the most authoritative forms of the letters, however, are not the documents

actually sent, and, in this edition, the absence of a closing or a signature, or both, indicates the omission of the same in the draft or carbon copy employed by the editors

Below each letter appears the identification of the nature of the source-text and its location. To the left of the colon is described the nature of the source-text

ALS, autograph letter, signed
 ADS, autograph draft, signed
 ADU, autograph draft, unsigned
 TLS, typed letter, signed
 TDU, typed draft, unsigned
 TCS, carbon copy, signed
 TCU, carbon copy unsigned

To the right of the colon is the Library of Congress symbol for the location. The symbols used here and in the explanatory notes are

CtY, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
 DLC, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress
 LNHT, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University
 MH, Houghton Library, Harvard University
 MU-Ar, Archives and Manuscript Collection, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
 NN-B, Berg Collection, New York Public Library
 NN-Sc, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library
 NWefHi, Chautauqua County Historical Society
 OClWHi, Western Reserve Historical Society
 OFH, Rutherford B. Hayes Library
 PSt, Fred Lewis Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University
 TNE, Fisk University Library

MH P, indicating the collection of the business records and correspondence of Houghton, Mifflin & Co. at the Houghton Library, appears only in the explanatory notes. If a source-text is incomplete, that is indicated in parentheses, if a typed letter, not the one sent, was kept by Chesnutt as a file copy, that too is indicated thus

When, in the explanatory notes, one encounters quotations of or references to letters written by Chesnutt that are not presented in this volume, or letters received by Chesnutt, or nonepistolary documents, one should assume that they will be found at Fisk University in the Charles W. Chesnutt Collection, unless otherwise indicated by the location symbols identified above.

“To Be an Author”

INTRODUCTION



IN 1928, Charles W Chesnutt was the recipient of the Spingarn Medal, awarded to him by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in recognition of his literary contributions to the welfare of the African-American community. That he had been selected for this honor was undoubtedly a surprise for many. It had been almost a quarter-century since his last book appeared. *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) had followed upon the heels of two other novels, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Behind them stood three more volumes. In 1899, his first and banner year as an author of books, he saw the publication of two collections of previously published and new short stories, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, the third work to appear before the year's end was a biography, *Frederick Douglass*. His was an extraordinary achievement. But he had not become a widely celebrated or best-selling writer, and the announcement of the honor to be given him in 1928 could not have been expected in the Chesnutt household.

True, Carl Van Vechten had made much of his fiction two years earlier in his novel *Nigger Heaven*. The character Byron Kasson, a literary aspirant, feels a profound sense of obligation to the Cleveland author of an earlier generation who demonstrated what was possible for an African-American author determined to excel.

He lifted *The Wife of His Youth* and opened the pages for the hundredth time. How much he admired the cool deliberation of its style, the sense of form, but more than all the civilized mind of this man who had surveyed the problems of his race from an Olympian height and had turned them into living and artistic drama. Nothing seemed to have escaped his attention, from the lowly life of the worker on the Southern plantation to the snobbery of the near whites of the North.¹

Chesnutt had changed his life. But, although encomiums almost as laudatory had appeared in periodicals at the turn of the century (and particularly those published in the one-time cauldron of abolitionist fervor, still-liberal and reform-minded Boston), such praise was more than rare by 1926.² Outside of the network of social reformers and intellectuals in which Chesnutt remained a participant until his death in 1932, and until the rediscovery of his writings that began in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, he remained at most a bit player on the national stage.

¹ (New York and London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 176.

² For succinct summaries of commentaries on Chesnutt and reviews of his publications, see Curtis W. Ellison and E. W. Metcalf, Jr., *Charles W. Chesnutt: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977).

His prose fiction is now no longer excluded from the canon of national scriptures. Since the 1960s his major short stories have appeared in the American literature anthologies used on college and university campuses, and four of his six books are available in paperback. Along with the works of contemporaries Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, his books are more often than not “required reading,” as Paul Laurence Dunbar unfortunately shows signs of waning, Chesnutt is waxing. And yet, both within and without the academic world, he is still very much overshadowed by numerous authors, and there is no consensus on how he stands in relation to the larger and most significant trends in the history of American letters. Historians have yet to move beyond broad generalities about his being a protest writer related to the “local color” school of late nineteenth-century American fiction. Even though he has been more specifically described as a turn-of-the-century champion of the African-American cause, his identity has not assumed so precise a definition as those of Dunbar and Washington.

Chesnutt himself unwittingly came close to glossing his present, relatively nebulous status among the reading public as he ruminated over his particular predicament in his journal on 3 January 1881. He was a sophisticated, fair-skinned mulatto with Native American ancestry who could pass for white but lived on the other side of the color line. When twenty-two years old and residing in North Carolina, he was continuing to experience an identity crisis; he did not then feel as though he fit in socially any more neatly than he does now vis-à-vis the main categories in which our memorable literary artists have been situated:

I occupy here a position similar to that of the Mahomet's Coffin. I am neither fish, flesh, nor fowl—neither “nigger,” poor white, nor “buckrah.” Too “stuck-up” for colored folks, and, of course, not recognized by the whites. Now these things I would imagine I would escape from, in some degree, if I lived in the North. The Colored people would be more intelligent, and the white people less prejudiced, so that if I did not reach *terra firma*, I would at least be in sight of land on either side.³

Chesnutt did move to the North, in 1883, and to some degree mollified his persistent problem of dual identity—African-American but at least seven-eighths white—as he chose to associate with other middle class “blue vein” mulattoes in Cleveland.⁴ Over a century later, though, the literary historian can still legitimately pose the question he did: what was Charles W. Chesnutt? How should we construct a frame of reference appropriate for him?

³ *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, edited by Richard H. Brodhead (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 157–58. Subsequent quotations of and references to Chesnutt's journal are documented according to entry dates.

⁴ That is, “blue veins” were visible if one's skin color was light enough. In two stories collected in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899) Chesnutt described members of this caste within African-American society: “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle.”

The first step toward the end of understanding what Chesnutt accomplished over the next decade involves recognition of the state of African-American literary achievement by 1893 and the unique role Chesnutt was playing as a representative of a minority group whose potential for belletristic performance was not yet recognized at large.⁵ It was a time during which a white novelist and near-monomaniacal champion of the African American, Albion W. Tourgée, could, without risking offense, declare in a book review, "Aside from newspaper articles, some controversial pamphlets, volumes of sermons and speeches, the colored people of the United States can scarcely be said to have produced any literature." To Tourgée it was a lamentable but undeniable fact that he had so bluntly stated—one that now serves as a means of appreciating how extraordinary Chesnutt appeared to him. He continued,

This is not surprising nor at all discreditable to them. . . . [A] race by law barred from the fields of literature for two centuries, needs at least the lifetime of a generation in which to produce good literary work. The wonder is not that it came so late but that it came so soon, and is of such simple, genuine quality. Except Mr Chesnutt, [whose] brief [short stories] were something marvelous in their unpretentious realism, of which there are no more because prosperity in other fields has smothered his rare gift, hardly any colored writer has made a serious attempt in the realm of fiction, and not one has ventured upon good-tempered, keen, yet kindly, discussion of present conditions with any specific attempt at literary excellence.⁶

In 1893, then, there was articulated a point of view on the period that is still current outside the relatively small circle of literary historians who have recently drawn attention to black writers such as the two whose works Tourgée was reviewing when he made his typically magisterial pronouncement on the state of things in racist America. His praise was not fulsome but he did appreciate William E. Easton's *Dessalines, A Dramatic Tale: A Single Character from Haiti's History* (1893) and Anna J. Cooper's *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892). Had he waited one year more, he might as well have complimented William H. Anderson and Walter H. Stowers, whose *Appointed: An American Novel* was published under the pseudonym Sanda in 1894, though it is unlikely that he would have advanced a different thesis about the state of black letters.

In one sense, Tourgée was wrong. That year Dunbar's *Oak and Ivy* appeared;

⁵ In 1931, Chesnutt described the situation thus "At the time when I first broke into print seriously, no American colored writer had ever secured critical recognition except Paul Laurence Dunbar, who had won his laurels as a poet. Phillis Wheatley, a Colonial poet, had gained recognition largely because she was a slave and born in Africa, but the short story, or the novel of life and manners, had not been attempted by any one of that group" ("Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," *Colophon* 2, Part Five [February 1931], n p.)

⁶ "A Bystander's Notes," Chicago *Inter Ocean*, 8 April 1893, 4

and, although Tourgée did not mention her, Frances Watkins Harper was far from a literary neophyte when her novel, *Iola Leroy*, was published in 1892. Further, those articles in “white” periodicals to which Tourgee referred were often first rate—the artfully fashioned essays of William S. Scarborough and Bishop Benjamin T. Tanner, for example, met any standard for evaluation of formal expository prose that one might apply. In fact, what one finds, when focusing upon black writing at and immediately after the turn of the century for the purpose of fashioning the explanatory notes in a collection of letters such as this one, is that a large sea of ink was being expended by blacks in books, pamphlets, and periodicals for black readers and the relatively few white ones who chose to pay attention to what was transpiring on the other side of the great divide in a segregated society. African-American culture had long since passed an oral stage of development; by the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance generation was reared in a densely verbal, print-suffused environment generated by blacks, though Chesnutt in his correspondence makes it clear that long after 1893 he shared Tourgée’s estimation of its lack of “literary excellence.”

Chesnutt was singled out for special praise by Tourgée in 1893 for two reasons. The first was that he was, as Van Vechten later indicated, a remarkably sophisticated stylist in the short stories that Tourgée had read. He wrote as a Victorian gentleman, careful to distinguish between the high formality of his own narrative voice and the rural Southern dialect of the black characters he described. Chesnutt, in short, fashioned prose fiction very much in the style of Tourgee’s best-selling polemical novels *A Fool’s Errand* (1879) and *Bricks Without Straw* (1880), although Chesnutt most often dealt with black subject matter, his aesthetic values were Tourgée’s, from the 1880s through 1905, when his last novel was published. When he related in a letter to Van Vechten on 7 September 1926, “I suspect I write like a white man,” he was deliberately understating the fact of the matter. With regard to tone, Mary Love, the black heroine of *Nigger Heaven*, put it best as she, without sarcastic intent, related to another character, “He’s written several novels from a white point of view.”⁷ This was almost as frequently the case in his nonfiction works as well. The white social reformer who served as Chesnutt’s mentor in the late 1880s and early 1890s, George Washington Cable, modeled the manner Chesnutt employed when directly addressing racism in the United States, and in many of Chesnutt’s quite angry essays on the “Negro Problem” one finds little or nothing indicating his African-American identity.⁸

⁷ *Nigger Heaven*, 104, the letter to Van Vechten is in the Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

⁸ For example, see “The White and the Black,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 20 March 1901, 13, wherein the description of racial discrimination in the South appears to have been offered by an especially literate and reform-minded Bostonian who had recently spent a month “in the South, mainly among colored people.” Although a number of Boston readers would have been aware of Chesnutt’s identity as an African American, the majority undoubtedly assumed that his article was only one of many written by New Englanders interested in the need for egalitarian reform in the South, the *Transcript* regularly focused upon the “Negro Problem” in the 1890s and early 1900s.

The other reason that Tourgee distinguished him from William Easton and Anna Cooper is that Chesnutt, although he was not yet a book author like them in 1893, had “arrived” in a way that they never would during their lifetimes. As did Anderson and Stowers, so did Cooper, Easton, Harper, and Dunbar (before 1896) find themselves compelled to publish their works in a way that guaranteed low visibility. Washington was a successful author not simply because of his omnipresence in periodicals as the “Wizard of Tuskegee” and his frenetic pace as a public speaker who displayed considerable charm. That would not have been enough, nor would his evident talent as a writer have sufficed. He achieved the stature he had as an author because a major firm, Doubleday, Page & Co., published and conducted a massive advertising campaign in behalf of *Up From Slavery* in 1901. He thus obtained what, for an African-American writer, was the *sine qua non* in the world of professional authorship: integration. As Paul Laurence Dunbar did shortly before, he succeeded in crossing the color line into the Anglo-American publishing industry. Cooper, Easton, Stowers, and Anderson were not able to leave their backwaters to plunge into the mainstream; rather, they quickly disappeared from sight because their books were printed by small presses with neither national distribution capabilities nor the financial means of attracting the attention of reviewers and book buyers.

Chesnutt in 1899, on the other hand, would do the same as Washington when the prestigious Boston firm, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., handled the first of the four books by him that it published. But, as Tourgee well knew, Chesnutt had accomplished over five years earlier a feat just as great. He had, beginning in 1885, successfully submitted his work to the S. S. McClure newspaper syndicate, and pieces by him were published in the magazines *Puck* and *Tid-Bits*. Then the transcending event occurred, the special connection ensuring access to the predominantly white national readership was fashioned. When his short story “The Goophered Grapevine” appeared in August 1887 in the magazine owned by Houghton, Mifflin, the non plus ultra that then was *Atlantic Monthly*, he established his claim to fame as the first African-American prose fiction writer to penetrate the sanctum sanctorum of Bostonian, and thus American, high culture. To his and the collective American mind, he thereby “counted.” “Po’ Sandy” confirmed his promise when it was included in the May 1888 issue, and it was followed by “Dave’s Neckliss” in October 1889. Further, the magazine that Bret Harte made famous, *Overland Monthly*, had printed “The Conjuror’s Revenge” in June 1889, and the liberal political weekly, *Independent*, published “The Sheriff’s Children” in its 7 November 1889 number.⁹ Tourg   had every reason to be impressed by such credentials.

⁹ The index of this edition directs the reader to the publication specifics of the works by Chesnutt cited in this introduction; see the page numbers in italics for such bibliographical citations. A convenient list of Chesnutt’s publications is provided by William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 279–86.

and to celebrate Chesnutt as an unique representative of his race, its most stellar performer

Tourgée had misstated the case in one respect, though. As will be seen below, Chesnutt was quick to inform him in 1893 that he had not “smothered his rare gift” because of “prosperity in other fields.” As convinced of his talents as a writer as he was of the business acumen that elevated him to Cleveland’s black bourgeoisie by means of the very profitable stenography firm he started in the late 1880s, he was determined to thrive someday in a superior career, as a self-supporting, professional man of letters, a velvet-jacketed gentleman who lived by the more dignified labor of words.

A theme that runs through the letters presented here is that Chesnutt meant to secure his place in history by making good—so far as it was possible—the claim he enunciated as he unsuccessfully submitted a collection of short stories entitled “Rena Walden and Other Stories” to Houghton, Mifflin on 8 September 1891: his book, he proclaimed to its editors, would be “the first contribution by an American with acknowledged African descent to purely imaginative literature.” He appears to have been sincere with regard to this actually unsupportable notion, an *idée fixe* implying that he, like most of his contemporaries, was unaware of the writings of William Wells Brown, Harriet E. Wilson, and Martin R. Delany. He was forever deprived of the right to make this claim by Dunbar when *Oak and Ivy* (1893) and *Majors and Minors* (1895) were followed by the book of poems to which William Dean Howells drew everyone’s attention, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). In his introduction to this volume published by Dodd, Mead and Company, Howells, who had positively reviewed his second book, cited Dunbar as providing “the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature.”¹⁰ And yet, despite the failure of Chesnutt’s manuscript in 1891 and the subsequent diminishment of his literary efforts as he gave an increased amount of attention to stenography through the mid-1890s, he finally did establish a claim to special attention as a pioneer in 1899.

If not literally the first contributor to imaginative literature, he was at least the second African-American short-story writer to practice his craft in the context of mainstream publishing. While Chesnutt was attending to his business and giving his evening hours to literature, Dunbar had beaten him on two counts. Dodd, Mead marketed his collection of short stories, *Folks from Dixie* (1898), the year before Houghton, Mifflin printed *The Conjure Woman*, then Dunbar’s novel *The Uncalled* (1899) appeared the year before Chesnutt’s first, *The House Behind the Cedars*. These may have been disturbing developments for Chesnutt, who had missed his chance to assume precedence over all other African-American fiction writers, but we will never know whether they were despite Dunbar’s high visibility and Chesnutt’s association with African Amer-

¹⁰ “Introduction,” *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1896), xiii–xx.

icans in the District of Columbia, where Dunbar was as well known an artist as musical composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the only time he is even briefly mentioned in Chesnutt's letters through 1905 is in 1896. What could not be taken away from Chesnutt, though, was that he had finally prevailed as an author, unlike the majority of black writers, who could do no better than Pauline Hopkins when she placed her 1900 novel *Contending Forces* with Boston's Colored Co-operative Publishing Company. And if he privately brooded over Dunbar's alacrity and accolade, he could still console himself with the thought that his publisher was the superior one. The panache Chesnutt displays in his letters when referring to Houghton, Mifflin & Co. was warranted, one could locate himself in no better venue, since this Boston firm was at that time the publisher of the classic American writers Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Whittier, and Longfellow—and major nineteenth-century British authors as well.

One wonders how Chesnutt could have fared differently, given his pronouncedly competitive achievement orientation, his near-obsessional commitment to the goal of becoming a novelist who would equal Tourgee and Harriet Beecher Stowe, his native intelligence honed by decades of self-directed study, and his unshakable conviction that he possessed not just the artistic afflatus but oracular powers of insight into the "Negro Problem." As will be seen in these letters spanning the years 1889–1905, during which he energetically carved his niche in American literary history, Chesnutt was as doggedly persistent a pursuer of literary fame and fortune as he was an indefatigable advocate for those victimized by racism. Disappointments and rebuffs that would have crippled most men and women were regularly neutralized by an ego that was as resilient as it was distended by confidence in himself and a conviction of the rightness of the moral crusade in which he enlisted, on the several occasions that it seems to have been deflated, it was only a matter of time before it assumed its previous proportions and verve. Even at the close of the fifth act of the tragical drama witnessed in his letters, when the curtain made its final descent and the metier of publishing novelist was to be his no more, Chesnutt was ready for a sixth act and more, proceeding to develop new novels that would never be published in his lifetime. When his art was at its best, it was never quite as spectacular as the driven personality that generated it. The story that the letters collected here tell is as compelling as his best-wrought fictions, though readers familiar with Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Horatio Alger, Jr., will find the narrative that they comprise far from foreign.

CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT, who later enjoyed an upper-middle-class lifestyle, with daughters at Smith College, a son at Harvard, and a wife used to the assistance of domestics and to summering away from home, was born in more modest economic circumstances in Cleveland on 20 June 1858. Although

the economic condition of his family remained working-class despite his father's entrepreneurial ventures, the Chesnutt's still enjoyed a social standing higher than most African Americans' in that, as he took pains to explain a 1908 letter to a Dr Park, neither of his parents was "shot free." It was a distinction that carried weight in black society.¹¹ The son of free, self-respecting mulattoes who had emigrated in 1856 from Fayetteville, North Carolina, and married in Cleveland in 1857, he was personally fortunate in another way that promised upward mobility. From his earliest years, he had access to formal education, which would, while he was still in his teens, enable him to rise above Andrew Jackson Chesnutt's station in life: his father drove a horse car in Cleveland and, according to family lore, served as a teamster in the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war, the parents and their three sons returned to Fayetteville, where Andrew's apparent father, white Waddell Cade, enabled him to establish a grocery store, followed by an equally unsuccessful transfer business, then he resorted to farming his own land to support his wife and, by 1871, six children. When Chesnutt's mother died that year, Andrew remarried within a short time, and his obligations continued to increase with each new birth.

Although his father served as a county commissioner and a justice of the peace before North Carolina was "redeemed" by the Democrats, Chesnutt found his first role model not in the expanding family circle but at school where he was proving to be a prodigy. Howard School principal Robert Harris, also the son of free mulattoes who had left the South before the war, was educated in Cleveland and returned to Fayetteville in the late 1860s. He became Chesnutt's mentor and provided a clear view of the middle-class life to which the young man aspired. In 1874, when he was sixteen, the student became an instructor and then served for three years as the assistant of Robert's brother, Cicero Harris, at the Peabody School in Charlotte, teaching in rural schoolhouses during the summer months. At approximately the same time, when seventeen, he began to keep a journal that now provides a remarkably detailed portrait of his personality through 1882—the year before he made his long-planned "escape" from the South and began his new life in the North.

What one finds in the journal is an intellectually, socially, and economically ambitious young man whose dissatisfaction with himself counterpoints with a dynamic self-conception whose limits are defined only by his racial iden-

¹¹ The "aristocrats of color" lifestyle enjoyed by the Chesnutt's is fully delineated by daughter Helen Chesnutt in *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952). For biographical detail and interpretive insights, the editors are also indebted to William L. Andrews, *Literary Career*; Richard Brodhead, *Journals*; and Frances Richardson Keller, *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978). The letter to Dr. Park is in the Charles W. Chesnutt Collection, Fisk University Library.