THE BLACK NOVELISTS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR (2):

*The Garies and Their Friends*

-- the First Novel about Free Northern Black Life --

Hisao KISHIMOTO

Written by Frank J. Webb and published in London in 1857, *The Garies and Their Friends* was the second novel by an American Negro. In spite of its early appearance, *The Garies and Their Friends* has not been well known. Very few copies are found in our libraries, and not many students of Negro literature have seen the work. And yet it is a significant novel in several respects. For one thing, it tells us almost as much about Negro life in the pre-Civil War North as *Clotel* tells about life in the Slave South. Neither, of course is a good novel, but Webb's work technically is far superior to that of Brown. (1)

I. Webb's Origin

There are no detailed documents about the life of Frank J. Webb. The only clue about his origin can be found in the preface to *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), which was written by the authoress of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Perhaps, the researchers and scholars of black literature have failed to write about him because they were unable to cover any detailed information about his origins. However, Mrs. Stowe's preface states that "the author [Webb] is a colored young man, born and reared in the city of Philadelphia... of the better class of colored citizens." (2) Hugh M. Gloster said in the notes of his book (1948), that: "Webb is listed as a Negro in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, but his racial identity is admittedly a matter of conjecture". (3) Concerning this matter, there is an effective objection by Robert A. Bone who states in his book, *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), that:

According to Hugh Gloster, Webb's racial identity is a matter of conjecture. There is decisive evidence, however, both external and internal, that Webb was a colored man. We have first the word of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who refers to Webb in a preface to the second edition of his novel as 'a young colored man, born and reared in Philadelphia... of the better class of colored citizens.' Secondly, in the Howard University Library there are two serial stories written by Webb in a colored newspaper: 'Two Wolves and a Lamb', *The New Era* (Jan. - Feb. 1870), pp. 1-4 and 'Marvin Hoyle,' ibid. (March - April 1870), pp. 12-15. Finally there is strong internal evidence, especially in the author's antiwhite sentiments, to indicate that he is colored. (4)
Further information about Webb, for instance, the matter of whether he was of mixed blood or African is unavailable. We can only guess that Webb was a free middle class Negro. The only other biographical information about Webb comes from Arther P. Davis, a scholar of black literature.

We have one additional biographical fact. The novel is dedicated to Lady Noel Byron by her ‘grateful Friend, the Author’. Evidently Webb knew Lady Byron; he probably knew Brougham also. Did he live in England for some part of his life? If so, why did he go there – to escape American prejudice? We take for granted that he was not a fugitive like Brown and Douglass and, therefore, was not forced to leave the country. Did he have money? Unfortunately, we cannot those or other questions concerning this ‘colored young man’ from Philadelphia.\(^{(5)}\)

Since nothing else has been written about Webb, the only way to deepen our insight into his character is by reading his novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*.

II. *The Garies and Their Friends*

*The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) is the second novel written by black novelist. There were only three black novelists in the pre-Civil War period. Of these three, Webb treated the theme of northern free black life in the most unique manner. The story begins with the life of the Garies – Mr. Garie, white planter; his mulatto wife and children – who live in the South. Mr. Garie agrees with his wife’s opinion to move the North, especially wife and children will be sold on the auction block sooner or later after his death. Fortunately, they have a black friend, Mr. Ellis, who lives in the North. Although Mr. Garie worries about prejudice in the North, he dares to move there to ensure the happiness and the freedom of his wife and children. When he and his family arrive in Philadelphia they find agreeable circumstances until they are attacked by Irish racial bigots organized by their next door neighbor, Mr. Stevens, a well-established lawyer. After Mr. Garie ensures his wife and children’s escape, he fights with the mob shouting, “Down with the Abolitionist – down with the Amalgamationist.”\(^{(6)}\) He is shot to death by the mob. To make matters worse, his wife, who is in hiding, dies while giving premature birth because she has been weakened by the severe winter cold. One of the Garie’s friends, Mr. Ellis, who informed him of impending danger of the riot, is attacked and seriously wounded by the mob. In addition, his house is burned down. Mr. Stevens, through cunning plotting, succeeds in taking over Mr. Garie’s property by claiming that he is Mr. Garie’s relative. Mr. Garie’s children and Mrs. Ellis and her children go to live with Mr. Walters, a black abolitionist and millionaire.

Mr. Garie’s son, Clarence, who looks white enough to conceal his identity, is sent to a white school. Clarence grows up in white society, and eventually decides to marry a white girl. Unfortunately, Mr. George Stevens, Jr., who is the son of the man who killed Mr. Garie, reveals that Clarence is “a coloured man.”\(^{(7)}\) The revelation drives Clarence to a hopeless life, and he becomes weaker both physically and mentally day by day.

At the conclusion of the novel, Clarence dies of nervous prostration just before he can meet with his lover again. Mr. Garie’s daughter, Emily, marries the son of Mr. Ellis, who succeeds in the engraving business with help of a white person. Mr. Ellis’s daughter, Esther, becomes happily
married to Mr. Walters. On the other hand, McCloskey, who participated in the racial riot, confesses his guilt and reveals that the plot was planned by Mr. Stevens on his death bed. The villain, Mr. Stevens, kills himself by springing from the balcony because he fears arrest. The property which he stole from Mr. Garie is returned to the Garie family.

From a literary viewpoint, the novel is better written than William Wells Brown's novels. Webb's manner of developing the story is interesting because he relates the story of the Garies and their friends alternately. Moreover, the racial riot scene is developed with tremendous tension. However, after the riot scene, the plot becomes contrived and the ending is disappointing. One of the reasons is that he chose a simplistic resolution, that is, the suicide of Mr. Stevens and the confession of McCloskey. Consequently, the novel seems to loose the tension and to become a moral tract, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. In addition, it is melodramatic.

In spite of these shortcomings, this novel is very important because it is the first novel to treat the theme of the free Northern Negro. Various aspects of that life are covered, for instance, the racial prejudice Irish people had towards black people, the attitudes of the black middle class, especially well-represented by Mr. Walters, and the problems of mulattoes, which are treated more extensively in later black novels, are here treated for the first time. Particularly from the viewpoint of black American literature, The Garies and Their Friends must be reconsidered as valuable. For an early novel it is excellent. Regretfully, until the present, this novel has been ignored among the general public as well as black people. Arther P. Davis pointed out that:

In spite of its several shortcomings, The Garies and Their Friends is an exciting and significant novel. As an early work that foreshadows later important developments in Negro American fiction, it should be better known. (8)

MARTIN R. DELANY — A Revolutionary Romanticist

But Blake is more than merely a socio-historical account of Southern slavery and Cuban society in the 1850s. It serves, as Delany obviously intended it to do, as the vehicle for the expression of a racial philosophy as radical today as it was when originally conceived. Central to the novel is a racial consciousness which is expressed in a variety of ways. (9)

By Floyd J. Miller

I. His Career

Martin Robison Delany (1812 — 1885) was born on May 6, 1812 as the son of a free mother and slave father in Charlestown, Virginia. Martin's mother, Pati was a courageous woman. At that time, a black man, whether a slave or not, was prohibited to have an education by slave state legislation; however, Pati dared to committed the crime of teaching her children to read and write.
Eventually, her illegal action was discovered and she was summoned to court. To avoid the punishment, she escaped from Virginia and went to Chambersburg in Pennsylvania, a free state, with her son who was ten years old. A year later, her husband, Samuel, succeeded in buying his freedom and rejoined his family.

In 1831, Martin Delany left Chambersburg and went to Pittsburg to continue his education. There he worked as a barber, while he studied at a school which was run by a black Methodist Minister, Reverend Lewis Woodson. The twenty-five years he spent there were extremely valuable since he was able to accumulate much knowledge and experience that served as the foundation for his later activities. At the time he received training and inspiration from the Theban Library Society, an organization of young black men. Gradually he began taking an interest in social and political welfare.

In the winter of 1839, Delany became interested in the Republic of Texas and traveled to the South to research the possibility of emigration. Victor Ullman said about Delany's nationalism:

He went South to see for himself if the still-independent Republic of Texas might be a haven for the Negroes. All that summer white abolitionists had been agitating against annexation to the new republic. It was a major reason for the split among them, dividing the harassed ranks into those seeking political action, the moderates, and the Garrisonians, who would make no compromise with absolute emancipation, by revolution if necessary. (10)

On the way to Texas he traveled through Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, gathering information about slavery and talking with many slaves. In Arkansas, he met the Indian chief of the Choctaw tribe and found out why Indians held blacks as slaves. Even though I was unable to consult Delany's report about the travel, I was able to get an idea of the trip from his novel, Blake, or the Huts of America (1859) and to guess the fact from the broad knowledge expressed by his other book.

About 1843, he began the study of medicine and also became the editor of The Mystery, one of the few black newspapers at that time. From 1847 to 1849 Delany was associated with Frederick Douglass, whom he helped as co-editor of The North Star, issued from Rochester, N. Y. Like most abolitionists of the time, he delivered anti-slavery lectures and wrote articles for The North Star. However, as his speech was too radical and idealistic, in 1848 he was attacked by mobs in Ohio. Fortunately, he was rescued. He always asserted black rebellion and attacked the prejudice and social and economic discrimination practiced by white abolitionists. Consequently, he found himself ignored by all abolitionists.

In 1849, he entered Harvard Medical School. He completed his medical studies at the age of thirty-seven and became a physician. However, his motive is not clear. Probably he intended to make money to promote a black rebellion. In 1852 Delany published his famous work, The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered. However, it was ignored by his people. This book is a clear testimony of his idealistic and nationalistic ideas:

This, then, is precisely the position of the colored people generally in the United States,
compared with the whites. What is necessary to be done, in order to attain an equalitly, is to change the condition, and the person is at once changed. What can we do? What shall we do? This is the great and important question: — Shall we submit to be dragged like brutes before heartless men, and sent into degredaiton and bondage?

This important inquiry we shall answer, and find a remedy in when treating of the emigration of the colored people... Where shall we go? This we conceive to be all-important, of paramount consideration, and shall endeavor to show the most advantageous locality; and premise the recommendation with the strictest advice against any countenence whatever to the emigration scheme of the so-called Republic of Liberia.

In order to actualize this scheme he planned to establish the National Emigration Convention and began raising funds from black people. In 1858, he moved to Chatham in western Canada. In 1858, in Chatham, he met John Brown, who later attacked Harper's Ferry (1859). Jean Fagan Yellin writes about Delany's part in this revolt:

There is no question that Delany’s role in the Chatham convention was crucial, but there is debate as to whether he knew of Brown’s plan to attack the United States Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. The entire affair was of course cloaked in secrecy. In a statement later prepared in prison while on trial for his life, one of Brown’s men clearly implied that the plans were discussed at Chatham, and another, in testimony before the United States Senate Harper’s Ferry Investigation Committee, stated that Brown had said he would use the mountains as base of operations... After the convention, Brown delayed his attack because of betrayal, and Delany returned to his emigration project.

Despite these testimonies, Delany did not participate in Brown’s plan because he had left the United States to go to Africa. However, as far as Brown’s plan was concerned, Delany did agree with Brown’s intentions and, in fact, arranged for a number of black men to meet with Brown.

From 1859 to 1861, Delany went to Africa as a leader of the Niger Valley Exploiting Party. There he met his colleague from Philadelphia, Robert Campbell, a young Jamaican. At Abbeokuta, in late December 1859, Delany and Campbell signed a treaty with a group of native chiefs to facilitate Delany’s scheme of emigration. However, he had to give up the treaty because British imperial policy was changed.

In 1865, his devotion to the cause of freedom led him to meet with President Lincoln to propose a black army, commanded by blacks. Although he could not persuade the President to implement his plan, he was appointed as the first black major in the United States and also served with the 109th Regiment. After the war, he served as a sub-assistant commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau until 1868. After that he engaged in politics in South Carolina. Floyd J. Miller point out the inconsistencies in his behavior:

His role here again is contradictory. At times especially in the early 1870's, he supported black political participation and the election of black officeholders within
the framework of the dominant Republican party. In 1874, however, he bolted from the party and ran for lieutenant-governor on an independent ticket which was supported by dissident (although not necessarily reform-minded) Republicans and some white conservatives. Defeated in a close race by the Black incumbent, Richard Gleaves, Delany returned to the Republican party in 1875 and was appointed a trial-justice in Chaleston County. Removed later that year in the midst of charges of petty theft committed several years earlier (a charge which although substantially accurate was minor and was motivated by the political ambitions of his detractors), Delany turned to the 'redeeming' Democratic party and Wade Hampton is the ferociously-contested gubernatorial election of 1876.\(^{(13)}\)

He then again engaged in the attempt to emigrate to Liberia with great passion. In January 1885 he died in Xenia, Ohio, after his dream of emigration to Liberia was shattered.

II. Blake, or the Huts of America

The distinguished scholarship of Professor Froyd J. Miller helped bring *Blake, or the Huts of America* to the attention of the public. Until 1970, it was thought that there were eighty chapters to the novel even though only twenty-six chapters were available. Professor Miller recovered seventy-four chapters and now only six chapters are still missing because some issue of *The Anglo-African Magazine* can not be found. *The Anglo-African Magazine* printed chapters 1 — 23 and 29 — 31 between January and July, 1859. From November 26, 1861 to April, 1862 the eighty chapters which comprise the complete novel appeared in *The Weekly Anglo-African*.

The novel consists of two parts. The first part is set in the South and the latter part in Cuba. The story begins when a run-away slave, Henry Holland returned to his master, Steven Franks, learns that his wife, Maggie, has been sold even though Franks promised to set Maggie free. Holland begins rebelling against his master and mistress, and finally, decides to escape from the plantation before he is sold as well. When he leaves the plantation he reveals to his close friend that he plans to organize a black insurrection. He travels from plantation to plantation all over the South and meets with slaves to gather information about each plantation and to teach them how to organize slaves for the insurrection. He then returns to his plantation secretly and helps his family and friends escape. Afterwards he travels to Canada with a friend, and after reaching Canada, makes up his mind to go Cuba to search for his wife.

In part two he experiences the tyranny of white Cubans who harass slaves. He finds his wife, whom he succeeds in setting free, and meets with Cuba's revolutionary poet, Placido. Holland reveals that his name is actually Carlos Henrico Blacus and that Placido was his cousin and schoolmate. When he was seventeen years old, he went to sea on a Spanish man of war which was seized by Steven Franks who took him as his slave. After renewing their old friendship, the cousin promises to fight for black Cuban revolution. Holland changes his name to Blake and borads a slave ship going to Africa with the intention of pirating the ship to implement his revolutionary plans. However, his scheme fails. During his absence, Placido organizes the revolutionary cabinet and Blake is appointed General-in-Chief of the emancipation of the oppressed men and women.
of Cuba. American white rulers in Cuba enforce strict regulations which threaten slaves, while the whites begin to feel increasing uneasiness because of the extraordinarily terrible condition of slaves. One day, when Placido goes to a book store, the white proprietor seizes him, pushing him down after insulting him. Because Placido receives a serious wound, this incident creates a great sensation among the members of the organization for the emancipation of the oppressed people. Maggie, Blake's wife's reaction is “... I would rather be dead at once! O, must I again become slave! Is there no mercy in Heaven for us!”(14)

There are many valuable things about Delany's novel which is quite different from William Wells Brown's and Frank J. Webb's novels. Rather than portraying Blake in the conventional manner as a mulatto, he portrays him as a pure Negro.

Henry was a black – a pure Negro – handsome, manly and intelligent, in size comparing well with his master, but neither so fleshy nor heavy built in person... He was bold, determined and courageous, but always mild, gentle and courteous, though impulsive when an occasion demanded his opposition.(15)

Secondly, the affirmation of blackness was an important step towards consciousness-raising. Floyd J. Miller said that "Racial consciousness, however, meant more to Delany than direct and indirect affirmations of blackness. It clearly involved a self-consciousness conceived in terms of self-reliance and self-elevation."(16) In answering a question of Madame Cordora, black revolutionary, Placido said:

I hold that colored persons, whatever the complexion, can only obtain an equality with whites by the descendants of Africa of unmixed blood... Let us prove, not only that the African race is now the principal producer of the greater part of the luxuries of enlightened countries... but that in Africa their native land, they are among the most industrious people in the world, highly cultivating the lands, and that ere long they and their country must hold the balance of commercial power... from their own native shores, the most extensive native territory,... and the race and country will at once rise to the first magnitude of importance in the estimation of the greatest nations on earth, from their dependence upon them for the great staples from which is derived their national wealth.(17)

Madame Cordora understands Placido's explanation:

Indeed I do, Senor Placido; and although I thought I had no prejudices, I never before felt as proud of my black as I did.of my white blood. I can readily see that the blacks compose an important element in the commercial and social relations of the world. Thank God for even this night's demonstrations, if we do no more. How sensibly I feel, that a people never entertain proper opinions of themselves until they begin to act for themselves.(18)
Thirdly, in this novel, as William Wells Brown pointed out, it is clear that the only obstacle which prevents black racial pride or revolution is Christianity. Brown sought after true Christianity, revealing the hypocrisy of Christianity at that time, but he was unable to deny the value of religion or Christianity itself. However, Delany regards revolution or emancipation of the oppressed people as God's will, and the revolution itself is a religion for him. Naturally, he denied institutionalized religion:

Don't tell me about religion! What's religion to me? My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong! Put my trust in the Lord!... I'm tired looking the other side; I want a hope this side of the vale of tears. I want something on this earth as well as a promise of things in another world... Well, mammy, it is useless for me to stand here and have the same gospel preached into my ears by you, that I have all my life time heard from my enslavers. My mind is made up, my course is laid out, and if life last, I'll carry it out. I'll go out to the place today, and let them know that I have returned.\(^{(19)}\)

The religion which caused him to seek redemption from bondage and degradation transcends all sects of Christianity. He said:

I, first a Catholic, and my wife bred as such, are both Baptists; Abyssa Soudan, once a pagan, was in her own native land converted to the Methodist or Wesleyan belief; Madame Sabastina and family are Episcopalians; Camina, from long residence out of the colony, a Presbyterian, and Placido is a believer in the Swedenborgian doctrines. We have all agreed to know no sects, no denomination, and but one religion for the sake of our redemption from bondage and degradation, a faith in a common Savior as an intercessor for our sins, but one God, who is and must be our acknowledged common Father. No religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but He who owns us as his children will we serve. The whites accept of nothing but that which promotes their interests and happiness, socially, politically and religiously. They would discard a religion, tear down a church, overthrow a government, or desert a country which did not enhance their freedom. In God's great and righteous name, are we not willing to do the same?\(^{(20)}\)

Meeting with accord from Madame Cordora, he continues:

Our ceremonies, then are borrowed from no denomination, creed, no church: no existing organization, secret, secular, nor religious; but originated by ourselves, adopted to our own condition, circumstances, and wants, founded upon the eternal word of God our Creator, as impressed upon the tablet of each of our hearts.\(^{(21)}\)

Blake who symbolizes "the Arm of Lord", at last, shouts:
You know my errand among you; you know my sentiments. I am for war upon the whites, 'I come to bring deliverance to the captive and freedom to the bond.' Your destiny is my destiny; the end of one will be the end of all.\(^{(22)}\)

This novel embodies Delany's dream of revolution and romance. He couldn't participate in John Brown's insurrection because he was in Africa at the time. His idealism caused him to attack white abolitionists, and consequently, he was attacked by almost all abolitionists in return. Between his ideal and reality, however, there was a big gap. Perhaps it was this dilemma which caused him to write this novel. Part one of the novel is based to a large extent on his experiences in the South in 1839 – 1840. Part two is based on his revolutionary dream and his colorful experience in Africa. His socio-historical analysis of Southern slavery and Cuban society in the 1850's is excellent; however, his character lives more in the world of romanticism than the world of action. In this respect William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass were more realistic. Having been ex-slaves, they knew the hard facts of slavery. As a free black, Delany had no such experience. Of course, as a black man, he probably met with many difficulties. Still, in comparison with William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, he was inexperienced. And moreover, he had difficulty taking concrete action. We can see evidence of this in the characterization of Henry and also in the scene of escape from Frank's plantation. Unlike similar scenes in Brown's novels, these scenes lack strong tension. When Blake was captured, he escaped easily. In the scene on the slave ship, he fails to takeover the ship in spite of having a good chance.

However, on the contrary, because of his idealistic character Delany finds racial pride and self-reliance and he became radical and finally nationalistic. In this sense his role was very important in the pre-Civil War, especially, because he wrote his novel with racial-consciousness.

* * *

In the pre-Civil War period, Brown, Webb and Delany wrote anti-slavery propaganda and tried to break down the racial discrimination. Their themes were adopted and further developed by later novelists. In this sense their novels were models for modern black American literature, for better or worse. Although they are the literary ancestors of American black literature, regrettably, their novels were often given little attention or were ignored in Afro-American literature. Perhaps, part of the reason for this is that their novels had so many shortcomings. Robert A. Bone's opinion is that:

The early Negro novel contained contradictions which could not be resolved within the framework of 19th-century Romanticism. The advent of literary realism was necessary before Negro characters could be fully emancipated from the stereotype, and before the theme of racial protest could find a suitable stylistic medium. Unfortunately, the Negro novelist did not break with Romanticism until the 1920's. Meanwhile, the early novel foundered on the rocks of characterization and style.\(^{(23)}\)

When we take account of the social circumstance with which they were confronted, we must consider the efforts of these three novelists as great and valuable for American black literature.
NOTES


7) ibid., p. 351.

8) ibid., p. xiii.


13) Floyd J. Miller, op. cit., p. xviii.


15) ibid., pp. 16-17

16) Floyd J. Miller, Blake..., p. xxiii.


18) ibid., p. 262.

19) ibid., p. 16.

20) ibid., p. 258.

21) ibid., p. 258.

22) ibid., p. 290.

23) Robert A. Bone, op. cit., p. 28.