What's in a name—to be precise, in the name Marcus Garvey? A century after his birth, what should we know about him and the extraordinary movement that bears his name?

The name Garvey has come to define both a discrete social phenomenon, organized under the banner of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League (ACL), and an era of black renaissance, in which Garveyism and the concept of black racial pride became synonymous. Before white America fell enraptured before the spell of what Claude McKay termed "the hot syncopated fascination of Harlem" in the Jazz Age, black America had already traversed the age of Garvey and the New Negro.1 Garveyism as an ideological movement began in black Harlem's thirty or so square blocks in the spring of 1918, and then burgeoned throughout the black world—nearly a thousand UNIA divisions were formed, and tens of thousands of members enrolled within the brief span of seven years. The reign of the Garvey movement, as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., wrote, "awakened a race consciousness that made Harlem felt around the world."2

Popular Hero

Borne along on the tide of black popular culture, Garvey's memory has attained the status of a folk myth. While the

1987 centennial of Garvey’s birth will be marked by formal ceremonies honoring his memory, on a more dynamic plane, Garvey is daily celebrated and re-created as a hero through the storytelling faculty of the black oral tradition.

As the embodiment of that oral tradition transmuted into musical performance, Jamaica’s reggae music exhibits an amazing fixation with the memory of Garvey. Re-evoking spiritual exile and the historic experience of black dispossession, the music presents a Garvey who speaks from the past directly to the present:

Marcus say, Marcus say, red for the blood
that flowed like a river
Marcus say, Marcus say, green for the land,
Africa
Marcus say, Marcus say, yellow for the gold
that they stole
Marcus say, Marcus say, black for the people
they looted from . . .

—“Rally Round,” Steel Pulse

In extending the legend of Garvey, the downtrodden have succeeded in rescuing his image from years of official neglect. In addition to carrying out this process of vindication, the music has succeeded in merging his name into an anthem of dispossession:

Marcus Garvey words come to pass
Marcus Garvey words come to pass
Can’ get no food to eat
Can’ get no money to spend

—“Marcus Garvey,” Burning Spear

In the transfiguration of Garvey in popular memory, historical time has been replaced with mythical timelessness. “Garvey soul yet young/ Older than Garvey/ Younger than Garvey,” lyrically muses Burning Spear, the Jamaican reggae
songwriter and performer, venerating the ongoing importance of Garvey.

In the course of this musical apotheosis, the mythic Garvey becomes the black race's prophet, as we hear in the exhortation calling people to account:

Marcus Garvey prophesy say, Oh yeah
Man a’ go find him back against the wall, yeah
It a’ go bitter . . .
'Dis 'yah a’ prophecy,
Hold ’dem, Marcus.

—"Right Time," Mighty Diamonds

If there is a moral in the music, it is that the memory of Garvey is a vital force—daily oral-musical performance has transformed the historic Garvey into a symbolic image that lives on in the popular imagination. Like the sacred African trickster-hero, who interprets the hidden to humans, the name Garvey serves to remind:

I'll never forget, no way
They sold Marcus Garvey for rice . . .
So don’t you forget, no way
Who you are and where you stand
in the struggle

—"So Much Things to Say,"
Bob Marley

These lyrics are testimony to that fact that in the struggle for the ultimate regeneration of Africa, Garvey has continued to inspire succeeding generations. "While Mr. Garvey might not live to see his dream come true," prophesied one of his followers in 1924, "what he has said from the platform of Liberty Hall will be repeated in the years to come by unborn generations, and some day in the dark remote corners of
Africa the Red, the Black and the Green will float." This statement, with its figurative depiction of the liberation of Africa and the international influence of Garveyism in the struggle for its attainment, has proved to be an accurate prognosis of political transformation in Africa. "The question may start in America," Garvey had promised, speaking in Washington, D.C., "but [it] will not end there."4

**THE MAN AND THE MOVEMENT**

While Garvey's name has achieved legendary proportions, and his movement has had an ongoing international impact, Garvey as a mortal being was a man who embodied the contradictions of his age. He was seen by his own contemporaries in a plethora of ways, both positive and negative. "A little sawed-off and hammered down Black Man, with determination written all over his face, and an engaging smile that caught you and compelled you to listen to his story" was how the veteran black journalist John E. Bruce ("Bruce Grit") recalled his initial encounter with the young Jamaican in the spring of 1916. Encouraged by Booker T. Washington, Garvey had come to America hoping to gather support for a proposed school, to be built in Jamaica, patterned on the model of the famed Tuskegee Institute. By the time Garvey could get to the United States, however, Washington was dead. Garvey started with a nucleus of thirteen in a dingy Harlem lodge room. Within a few short years, he was catapulted to the front rank of black leadership, at the head of a social movement unprecedented in black history for its sheer size and scope. Writing in 1927, six months before Garvey was to be deported from America, Kelly Miller, the Afro-American educator and author, reflected upon the phenomenon:

Marcus Garvey came to the U.S. less than ten years ago, unheralded, unfriendied, without acquaintance, relation-


ship, or means of livelihood. This Jamaican immigrant was thirty years old, partially educated, and 100 per cent black. He possessed neither comeliness of appearance nor attractive physical personality. Judged by external appraisement, there was nothing to distinguish him from thousands of West Indian blacks who flock to our seaport cities. And yet this ungainly youth by sheer indomitability of will projected a propaganda and commanded a following, within the brief space of a decade, which made the whole nation mark him and write his speeches in their books.  

In the world of the twenties, personalities quickly became notable and were fastened upon by admirers, detractors, and the merely curious. But even by the standards of the day, Garvey’s rise from obscurity was spectacular. Speaking to an audience at Colón, Panama, in 1921, Garvey himself noted that “two years ago in New York nobody paid any attention to us. When I used to speak, even the policeman on the beat never noticed me.”

Garvey voiced the marvelous nature of his own rise when he asked an audience in 1921 “how comes this New Negro? How comes this stunned awakening?” The ground had been prepared for him by such outspoken voices as those of Hubert H. Harrison, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, and W. A. Domingo. These and other stepladder orators—who began speaking along Lenox Avenue with the arrival of warm weather in 1916 and whose number rapidly grew with each succeeding summer—were the persons who, along with Garvey, converted the black community of Harlem into a parliament of the people during the years of the Great War and after. The World War I era was the time of the

rise of “the ebony sages,” as William H. Ferris termed the New Negro intelligentsia, who laid the foundation in those years for what would eventually come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Garveyism was fed in an environment where “in barber shops and basements, tea shops and railroad flats,” Ferris revealed, “art and education, literature and the race question were discussed with an abandon that was truly Bohemian.” By the middle of the decade, Ferris would go so far as to claim that “The New Negro is Garvey’s own Child, whose mother is the UNIA.”

When the UNIA was organized in Harlem in February 1918, its Jamaican leader merged not only with representatives of the New Negro, but with another minority: from the perspective of America’s polyglot of ethnic groups, Garvey was simply one more immigrant voice. The Garvey phenomenon began amidst the multiple migrations of America, and it was not unusual to find Garvey issuing pronouncements of confraternity with the causes of various immigrant groups. “Just at that time,” recalled Garvey, speaking in Liberty Hall in early 1920 about his start as a street orator in Harlem, “other races were engaged in seeing their cause through—the Jews through their Zionist movement and the Irish through their Irish movement—and I decided that, cost what it might, I would make this a favorable time to see the Negro’s interest through.”

A notable feature of Garveyism as a political phenomenon was the staunch manner in which it accentuated the identity of interests among blacks all over the world. For Hodge Kirnon, this quality of internationalism essentially defined the New Negro mood. He observed:

The Old Negro press was nationalistic to the extreme, even at times manifesting antipathy and scorn for foreign

11. NW, 6 March 1920.
born Negroes. One widely circulated paper went as far as to cast sarcasm and slur upon the dress, dialect, etc., of the West Indian Negro, and even advised their migration and deportation back to their native lands—a people who are in every way law abiding, thrifty and industrious. The new publications have eliminated all of this narrow national sentimental stupidity. They have advanced above this. They have recognized the oneness of interests and the kindredship between all Negro peoples the world over.  

A special feature by Michael Gold in the 22 August 1920 Sunday supplement of the *New York World* reported upon Garvey’s meteoric ascent, and registered as well his immigrant status and the international nature of his message. The headlines accompanying the story made the following announcement:

> The Moses of the Negro Race Has Come to New York and Heads a Universal Organization
> Already Numbering 2,000,000
> Which is About to Elect a High Potentate
> and Dreams of Reviving the Glories of Ancient Ethiopia

Gold captured a defining characteristic of the Garvey phenomenon, namely, its rapid spread throughout the world, including sub-Saharan and southern Africa. Writing from Johannesburg, South Africa, a number of years later, Enock Mazi-linka echoed the messianic vision of Garvey held by many in America when he wrote that “after all is said and done, Africans have the same confidence in Marcus Garvey which the Israelites had in Moses.”13 “Marcus Garvey is now admitted as a great African leader” concurred James Stehazu, a Cape Town Garveyite; indeed, Garvey was the embodiment

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for tens of thousands of black South Africans in the postwar years of the myth of an Afro-American liberator. "Already his name is legend, from Harlem to Zanzibar," allowed the venerable Guardian of Boston when it appraised the significance of his life in 1940.

But not everyone shared this concept of Garvey. Detractors labeled him a madman or the greatest confidence man of the age. "We may seriously ask, is not Marcus Garvey a paranoiac?" enquired the NAACP's Robert Bagnall in his 1923 article "The Madness of Marcus Garvey." An earlier psychological assessment by W. E. B. Du Bois diagnosed Garvey as suffering from "very serious defects of temperament and training," and described him as "dictatorial, domineering, inordinately vain and very suspicious." In the view of the organ of South Africa's African Political Organization, "the newly-created position of Provisional President of Africa [was] an empty honour which no man in the history of the world has ever held, and no sane man is likely to aspire after."

It was mainly as an embarrassment to his race, however, that Garvey was dismissed. "The Garvey Movement," reported Kelly Miller in 1927, "seemed to be absurd, grotesque, and bizarre." "If Gilbert and Sullivan were still collaborating," commented one African editorial writer, "what a splendid theme for a musical comic opera Garvey's pipe-dream would be." W. E. B. Du Bois echoed this


18. NW, 28 January 1922 (The African Political Organization was later renamed the African People's Organization).


opinion when he described UNIA pageantry as like a “dress-rehearsal of a new comic opera.”21 A West Indian resident in Panama, writing in the April 1920 issue of the Crusader, offered an ironic commentary on what he took to have been Garvey’s assumption of the grand title of African potentate: “Pardon me,” the gentleman interposed, “but this sounds like the story of ‘The Count of Monte Cristo’ or the ‘dream of Labaudy,’ or worse still, ‘Carnival,’ as obtains in the city of Panama, where annually they elect ‘Her Gracious Majesty, Queen of the Carnival,’ and other high officials.”22 White commentators were not excluded from this game of describing Garvey’s conduct through the metaphor of entertainment. Borrowing from Eugene O’Neill’s surrealistic play about the dramatic downfall of a self-styled black leader, Robert Morse Lovett referred to Garvey as “an Emperor Jones of Finance” to convey Garvey’s financial ineptitude to highbrow readers of the New Republic.23

The wide variety of contemporary opinion about Garvey serves as a backdrop for his own eclectic descriptions of himself. He once announced that: “My garb is Scotch, my name is Irish, my blood is African, and my training is half American and half English, and I think that with that tradition I can take care of myself.”24 While Garvey told his audiences that his mind was “a complete machine,” one “that thinks absolutely in the original,” and, on another occasion, that his mind was “purely Negro,” he also lamented that “the average Negro doesn’t know much about the thought of the serious white man.”25 His own ideology encompassed these two contradictory conceptions. For him, the thought

22. Letter to the Editor, Crusader, April 1920, p. 28.
of the New Negro had to be a new thought, for it was incumbent upon the race to develop intellectual (as well as economic and political) independence as a precondition of survival in a world ruled by Darwinian ideas of the survival of the fittest. Nevertheless, the New Negro had to build this original thought on a strong foundation in the mainstream intellectual tradition, borrowing from that tradition while creating new racial imperatives. The present collection is a testimony to the diverse origins of Garvey’s thought and to the ways in which he consciously embraced many of the dominant intellectual traditions of his age, reshaping them to the cause of pan-African regeneration.

**The Era**

Garvey’s career spanned the years of the climax of the Victorian era of empire and its denouement in the period of revolution and counterrevolution. Born in 1887, just after Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, Garvey grew up as a black colonial during the Edwardian era. He arrived at political maturity in the era of the nationalist revolution in Ireland and the October Revolution in Russia. He died on 10 June 1940, the day that Fascist Italy declared war on the Allies and a month after Nazi Germany invaded France. He had predicted in 1937 that “the Negro’s chance will come when the smoke from the fire and ashes of twentieth-century civilization has blown off.” His thought was of a piece with the dominant ideas of his tumultuous age, while at the same time offering a new response for blacks to the paradigm of white supremacy.

**Life and Lessons**

The present volume, *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, is a compendium of Garvey’s eclectic philosophy. It is arranged in six sections. The first section, entitled “African Fundamentalism,” contains the 1925 creed by that name—

Garvey's attempt at a modern race catechism. The second section contains his abstract vision of the ideal state. Garvey's little-known serialized autobiography supplies the third section, and the fourth features Garvey's epic poem, The Tragedy of White Injustice. A series of dramatic dialogues from the Black Man makes up the fifth section. The sixth, and final, section consists of the lessons in leadership from Garvey's School of African Philosophy. The whole—garnered from materials created in the last fifteen years of Garvey's life—constitutes vintage Garvey and makes possible an enriched understanding of the popular allegiance that his ideas inspired.

**The Doctrine of Success**

Garvey's strong belief in the success ethic, a theme that forms a constant thread throughout his speeches and writings, is reflective of the popular culture of his times. Speaking in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1937, Garvey summed up for his audience the principle that he claimed life had taught him. "At my age I have learnt no better lesson than that which I am going to impart to you to make a man what he ought to be—a success in life. There are two classes of men in the world, those who succeed and those who do not succeed."27 Rejecting the class analysis being embraced by some of his black contemporaries, Garvey regularly illustrated his speeches with rags-to-riches stories, and offered examples from the fields of business and industry to his followers as models to emulate. In 1927 Joseph Lloyd, a Garveyite in Cuba, won a UNIA-sponsored "Why I am a Garveyite" contest with an essay on Garvey-inspired aspirations to become a black captain of industry or political leader. Garvey "has taught me," Lloyd wrote in the 6 January 1927 issue of the Negro World, "that I can be a Rockefeller, a Carnegie, a Henry Ford, a Lloyd George, or a Calvin Coolidge." Garvey himself had earlier asked readers of the Negro World in a 6 November 1926 editorial, "Why should not Africa give to the world its

black Rockefeller, Carnegie, Schwab, and Henry Ford?" In the following year he spelled out the connection between such economic achievement and political power, informing his audience that

there is no force like success, and that is why the individual makes all efforts to surround himself throughout life with the evidence of it. As of the individual, so should it be of the race and nation. The glittering success of Rockefeller makes him a power in the American nation; the success of Henry Ford suggests him as an object of universal respect, but no one knows and cares about the bum or hobo who is Rockefeller's or Ford's neighbor. So, also, is the world attracted by the glittering success of races and nations, and pays absolutely no attention to the bum or hobo race that lingers by the wayside. 28

Garvey's gospel of success was distinguished from more traditional versions of the doctrine because he merged personal success with racial uplift and established a link between these twin ideals and an overarching vision of African regeneration. In Garvey's perspective, success of the individual should serve the ends of race, and vice versa. "There are people who would not think of their success," Garvey insisted, "but for the inspiration they receive from the UNIA." 29 Speaking in New York in 1924, Garvey claimed to have "already demonstrated our worth in helping others to climb the ladder of success." 30 Reciprocally, the UNIA relied for its own success on the organized support of individuals. "Help a Real Race Movement: The Way to Success Is Through Our Own Efforts" was the entreaty printed on the UNIA's contribution card in the early 1920s.

28. NW, 29 January 1927.
29. BM 3 (July 1938): 8.
30. NW, 14 June 1924.
Garvey offered a doctrine of collective self-help and racial independence through competitive economic development. “As a race we want the higher success that is within humanity’s grasp,” Garvey was quoted in the 21 February 1931 “Garvey’s Weekly Digest” column of the Negro World: “We must therefore reach out and get it. Don’t expect others to pave the way for us towards it with a pathway of roses, go at what we want with a will and then we will be able to successfully out-do our rivals, because we will be expecting none to help us.” Garvey also told his followers that the achievement of a higher class status among black people was the most direct route to obtaining opportunities and individual rights. “Be not deceived,” he wrote, in the spirit of Andrew Carnegie, “wealth is strength, wealth is power, wealth is influence, wealth is justice, is liberty, is real human rights.”

This imperative of success was tied to what a 21 March 1922 Negro World article termed “a universal business consciousness” among blacks in all parts of the world. By featuring the slogan “Africa, the Land of Opportunity,” emblazoned on a banner draped across a picture of the African continent, the official stationery of Garvey’s Black Star Line graphically illustrated this philosophy of racial vindication and uplift through capital investment and development.

Self-Made Man

Garvey himself was frequently cited in the pages of the Negro World as a prime example of a self-made man, one of those “who worked their way to the top of the ladder by the long, steady climb.” Garvey’s interest in conduct-of-life literature and the persistent echoes of it heard in his speeches and writings reflect the impact that such classic success treatises as Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery and Andrew Carnegie’s Gospel of Wealth made upon

32. NW, 23 August 1924.
him. These works were in turn part of an older genre dating back to Emersonian treatises on self-reliance, slave narratives of personal endurance and triumph such as Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and Benjamin Franklin’s colonial guide to practical behavior and economic success. Garvey’s racial ideal was built upon the concept of success, and he saw himself as a black version of the Horatio Alger myth.

**NEW THOUGHT**

Garvey’s pragmatic philosophy, with its emphasis on self-mastery, determination, and willpower, also contained elements of New Thought, which emerged during the Gilded Age out of the allied branches of the mental healing phenomenon. With its emphasis on mind mastery, New Thought offered a set of metaphysical theories that proffered to its millions of adherents a system of mental hygiene to equip them for the journey along the road to success. In 1920 Hodge Kirnon commented on the pervasiveness of ideas from the teachings of Christian Science and the New Thought movements in the black community. “The Negro has been seized by this spirit,” Kirnon declared, “he has taken a real change of attitude and conduct. So great has been the change,” he continued, “that he has designated himself under the name of The New Negro.”33 Another member of the New Negro phalanx, William Bridges, also alluded to the subsistence of a link between the “spirit of radicalism and new thought.”34 Garvey was assessed by one of his closest colleagues in the leadership of the UNIA, Robert L. Poston, as “the man who is truly the apostle of new thought among Negroes.”35 Indeed, what was deemed a new racial philosophy was in fact Garvey’s wholesale application of the dynamics of

34. *Challenge* 2, no. 5 (1919): 140.
35. *NW*, 8 September 1923.
New Thought to the black condition. “I have come to you in Jamaica,” Garvey announced on his tour of the Caribbean in spring 1921, “to give new thoughts to the eight hundred thousand black people in this land.” Speaking before the UNIA’s fourth international convention, he declared: “The Universal Negro Improvement Association is advancing a new theory and a new thought . . . ;” and in 1937 he stated that “to rise out of this racial chaos new thought must be injected into the race and it is this thought that the Universal Negro Improvement Association has been promulgating for more than twenty years.”

Metaphysics and politics were explicitly linked in Garvey’s mind. Turning to New Thought to explain the “African vision of nationalism and imperialism,” Garvey advised that “the African at home must gather a new thought. He must not only be satisfied to be a worker but he must primarily be a figure.” This New Thought philosophy permeated many UNIA functions and was a strong influence in the literature surrounding the movement. In 1930 the Black Cross Nurses of the Garvey Club of New York City held a medical demonstration at the facilities of the New York branch of the Field of New Thought on 94th Street. The *Negro World* regularly advertised books that showed New Thought influences, including I. E. Guinn’s *Twelve of the Leading Outlines of New Thought*. Alonzo Potter Holly’s popular book on blacks in sacred history, *God and the Negro*, was, according to Holly, inspired by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Wilcox, whom Holly described as “an impassioned apostle of ‘the New Thought,’” was in turn one of Garvey’s favorite poets.

38. *BM* 3 (July 1938): 5.
Besides its affinity with the gospel of success and the New Thought movement, Garveyism shared the strong emphasis on boosterism that pervaded the popular culture of the Progressive period. On 28 April 1921 Garvey informed an audience in Colón, Panama, that he admired “the white man’s spirit for he boosts for race and nation.”42 A few months earlier he had written that “no sensible person objects to any man boasting, booming, and advertising the work or cause that he represents. The old adage still applies: ‘He who in this world would rise/ Must fill his bills and advertise.’”43 One of the Negro World’s own advertisements read “If it is Success You Need in Business, Advertise in the Negro World”44 and advertisements heralding various pathways to success and self-promotion regularly appeared in its pages under such titles as “Develop Your Power of Achievement,” “How to Get Rich,” “Key to Progress, Success, and How Attained,” “Knowledge is Power: Make Your Life Yield its Greatest Good,” and “Read This Book for Wealth and Health.”

**Victorian Sensibility**

While Garvey’s speeches and writings display the influence of popular success ideologies and a racial interpretation of international politics, they also reflect an adherence to a Victorian historical sensibility and literary taste. An admirer of the great and forceful men of history—statesmen, emperors, and conquerors (e.g., Alexander, Charlemagne, Hannibal, Napoleon, Genghis Khan)—Garvey called blacks to rise to a similar vision of political patriarchy and racial leadership. Likewise, while urging his readers and audiences to know and respect the works of black writers and artists, he consistently held up to blacks the work of minor

42. National Archives, RG 165, file 10218-418-18.
43. NW, 5 February 1921.
44. NW, 7 February 1925.