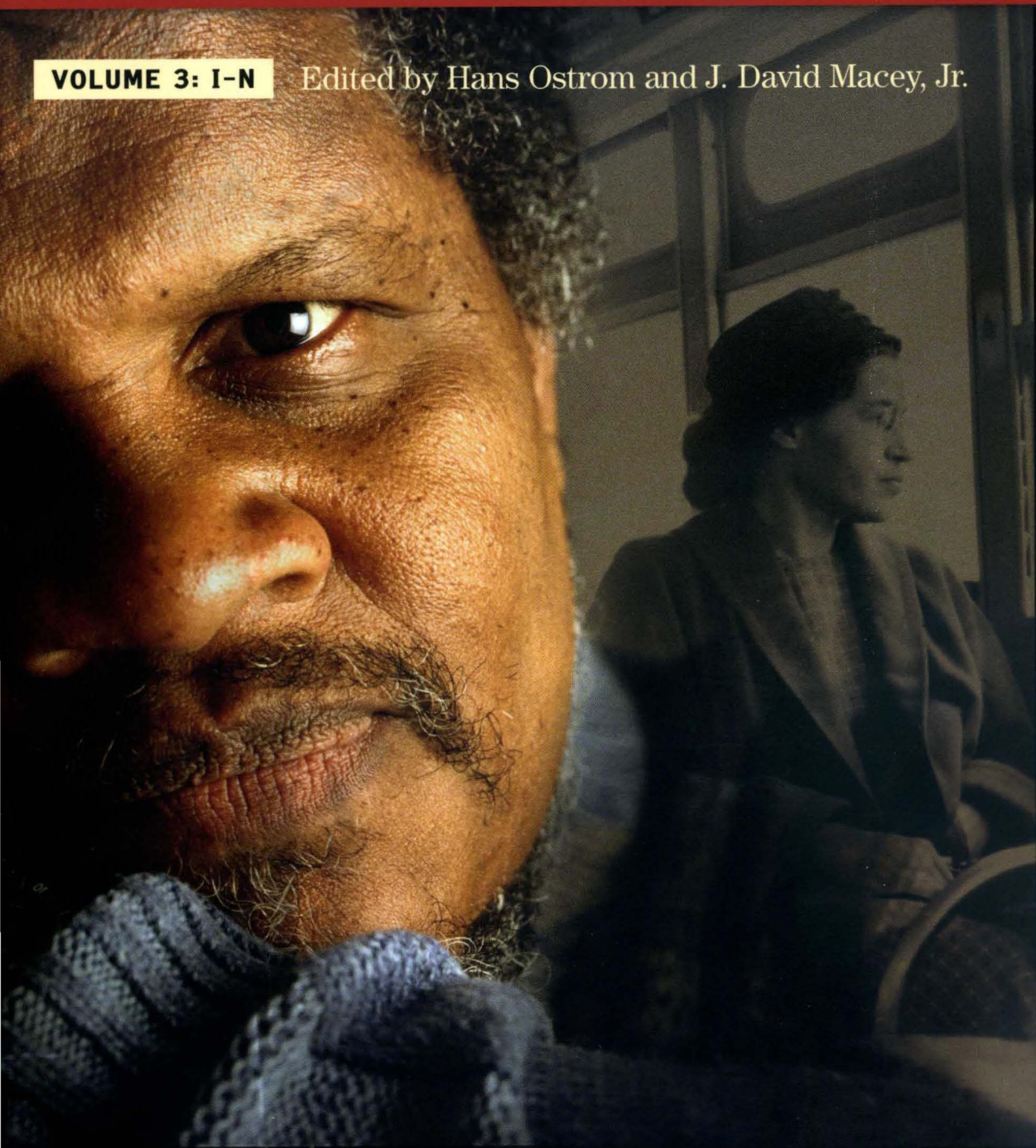


THE GREENWOOD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

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Messenger, The (1917–1928). Magazine edited by **A. Philip Randolph** and Chandler Owen. *The Messenger* was one of a plethora of publications circulating in Black neighborhoods during the early decades of the twentieth century. It was one of five important magazines that were established in New York City during the **New Negro** era and that have been of continuing importance. And it is only one of a handful of valued early twentieth-century African American radical publications. The other New York publications were *The Crisis* (1910), *Opportunity* (1923), *Negro World* (1918), and *Crusader* (1918); among the radical publications the *Boston Guardian* newspaper (1901) was an early twentieth-century leader. All of these magazines were venues where prominent New Negro/**Harlem Renaissance** era writers would publish. *The Messenger* was a nationally circulated magazine, as were *The Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *Negro World*.

The editors of *The Messenger* published literary pieces in their first issue in 1917, as well as later literature by New Negro writers: **Walter Everette Hawkins's** poetry; **Zora Neale Hurston's** "The Eatonville Anthology"; **Langston Hughes's** first published short stories as well as some of his poetry; **Countee Cullen's** poetry; **Georgia Douglas Johnson's** poetry; a short story by **Dorothy West**; and it reprinted **Claude McKay's** "If We Must Die" as well as other poems by this poet. An anthology of literature published in *The Messenger* appeared in 2000. *The Messenger* was distinguished in its early days as a magazine that emphasized political ideas influenced by the Left; its publishers were Socialists who called for labor alliances across color lines and a class consciousness along with group consciousness among Black people (see **Marxism**).

In 1917, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen were recruited to edit *Hotel Messenger*, a journal for the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters of Greater New York. As a result of differences between the labor union and the two men, the editing pair soon departed from the union's publication and published their own magazine. The first issue *The Messenger* appeared in November 1917. By September 1918, Owen had been drafted to serve in **World War I**. Both he and Randolph were conscientious objectors, but neither had declared his status by formal application to the draft board. Randolph's marriage to Lucille E. Green kept him from being drafted.

As a result of the political ideas that Owen and Randolph advocated in speeches and in *The Messenger*, both men were arrested in the spring of 1918 in Cleveland, Ohio, for treason, and the Postmaster General of the United States revoked the magazine's bulk rate postage status, which was not reinstated

until 1921. The treason charges against the men were dropped because the judge believed the two Black men were lackeys who were incapable of producing the ideas that appeared in print under their names.

Chandler Owen was born to a financially comfortable family in Warrenton, North Carolina, in 1889. He earned his undergraduate degree from Virginia Union University, which was established for young Black men and was, then, well known for its students' independent thought and for their rejection of accommodationist ideas; social and economic accommodation was often associated with the writings and speeches of **Booker T. Washington**. Owen went on to attend Columbia University's program in social work and its law school. When he met A. Philip Randolph in New York in 1915, Randolph was a student at City College and had been working in a variety of low-paying jobs. Asa Philip Randolph was born in Crescent City, Florida, also in 1889. His father was a tailor as well as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church; his mother took in sewing and laundry. Randolph earned a high school diploma from the Cookman Institute (later Bethune-Cookman College), another educational facility that was established for Black youths and that, like Virginia Union University, rejected accommodationist ideas.

By 1923, the radical politics that had previously been found in the pages of *The Messenger* had diminished. This year also found Chandler Owen living in Chicago, and by 1924 he had little to do with the magazine that he helped found. His name, however, remained on the masthead. In 1923, **George S. Schuyler**—who earlier had joined the Socialist Party in Syracuse, New York—was employed as office help. By 1924 Schuyler became managing editor of *The Messenger*, a position he held—except for a leave of absence to travel through **the South** in 1926—until the paper's demise in June 1928. Schuyler's column, "Shafts and Darts," which he started in 1923, was one of the highly regarded items in *The Messenger*. Also in 1923, **Theophilus Lewis** joined *The Messenger* as the theater critic. His essays provide some of the most perspicacious reviews of theatrical performances as well as of literature from the era. In 1925, Randolph began organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, using the pages of *The Messenger* as the mouthpiece for this group.

During their early radical years, the editors of *The Messenger*, rather than establishing themselves as doctrinaire participants in any one particular script for radical change or as orthodox practitioners of a particular political ideology, instead operated from a position that advocated the most efficacious means and methods available for a complete transformation of the position of Black people in the United States. The stories that Randolph heard from his activist parents helped him see that direct and practical action was revolutionary, and more valuable than reading socialist theory and imposing those ideas on the lived reality of Black people in the United States. This approach might be viewed as cynical, yet perhaps would be more accurately described as radically pragmatic about the entrenched power of supremacist narratives in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. In its last years, however, *The Messenger* gained a reputation for being banal and insipid.

Wallace Thurman, who was managing editor for several months in 1926 and whose interest was in publishing great literature by Black writers, said that the politics of the *The Messenger* “reflected the policy of whoever paid off best at the time.” Langston Hughes reported that the politics of *The Messenger* was “God knows what” (Hughes, 233–234, 236). Even so, series and articles that appeared in *The Messenger*—including “An Analysis of Negro Patriotism” (August 1919), “These ‘Colored’ United States,” (January 1923–September 1926), and “A New Crowd—A New Negro,” a topic that consistently appeared from 1919 to 1927—are invaluable for a full and rich understanding of the New Negro and the literary, intellectual, political, and cultural discourses that were in operation at the time. Notwithstanding the shifting political positions found in *The Messenger* (which was marketed on its masthead variously as “The Only Radical Negro Magazine in America”; “A Journal of Scientific Radicalism”; “The World’s Greatest Negro Monthly”; and, finally, “New Opinion of the New Negro”), the magazine’s founders managed to make it a venue for important cultural and intellectual exchanges that early on refused to replicate for its primarily Black readership both the dominant discourse among New Negro intellectuals as well as the dominating discourse in the country.

Resources: Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940; repr. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995); Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979); Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and The Messenger, 1917–1928* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975); Tom Lutz and Susanna Ashton, eds., *These “Colored” United States: African American Essays from the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Adam McKible, “Our(?) Country: Mapping ‘These “Colored” United States’ in *The Messenger*,” in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 123–139; Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed., *The Messenger Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from The Messenger Magazine* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

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