Brown, Sterling,


The son of a professor at Howard University, Washington, D.C., Brown was educated at Williams College, Williamstown, Mass. (A.B., 1922), and Harvard University (A.M., 1923). While teaching at several schools, he began collecting folk songs and stories from blacks. The people he met also served as the subject of the poetry he then began to write. In 1929 Brown began a 40-year teaching career at Howard, and in 1932 his first volume of poetry, Southern Road, was published. Musical forms, especially ballads, work songs, spirituals, and blues, were primary influences on his work. At a time when black dialect had been distorted into a stereotype by white writers, he boldly used authentic dialect and phonetic spelling in his poems.

Though Southern Road was widely praised, Brown found no publisher for his second collection, No Hiding Place; it eventually was incorporated into his Collected Poems (1980). As critic, essayist, and Opportunity magazine columnist, he supported realistic writing and harshly attacked literature that distorted black life. In 1937 he published the pioneering studies Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction, and in 1941 he was coeditor of The Negro Caravan, an anthology of African-American writing. Most of his major work was written by the mid-1940s; two decades later, students inspired a widespread revival of interest in his work, much of which was subsequently reprinted.