Locke, Alain Leroy (September 13, 1885–June 9, 1954), philosopher. Best known for his literary promotion of the H Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Alain Locke was a leading spokesman for African-American humanist values during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Born into what he called the “smug gentility” and “frantic respectability” of Philadelphia’s black middle class, Locke found himself propelled toward a “mandatory” professional career that led to his becoming the first African-American Rhodes scholar, a Howard University professor for over forty years, a self-confessed “philosophical midwife” to a generation of black artists and writers between the world wars, and the author of a multifaceted array of books, essays, and reviews.

Locke was descended from formally educated free black ancestors on both maternal and paternal sides. Mary and Pliny Locke provided their only child with an extraordinarily cultivated environment, partly to provide “compensatory satisfactions” for the permanently limiting effects that a childhood bout with rheumatic fever imposed. His mother’s attraction to the ideas of Felix Adler brought about Locke’s entry into one of the early Ethical Culture schools; his early study of the piano and violin complemented the brilliant scholarship that won him entry to Harvard College in 1904 and a magna cum laude citation and election to Phi Beta Kappa upon graduation three years later.

Dr. Alain Locke on the Town Hall Show. (McNeill Photo)
Locke’s undergraduate years, during Harvard’s “golden age of philosophy,” culminated with his being selected a Rhodes scholar from Pennsylvania (the only African American so honored during his lifetime) and studying philosophy, Greek, and humane letters at Oxford and Berlin from 1907 to 1911. There Locke developed his lasting “modernist” interests in the creative and performing arts, and close relationships with African and West Indian students that gave him an international perspective on racial issues. Locke’s singular distinction as a black Rhodes scholar kept a national focus on his progress when he returned to the United States in 1912 to begin his long professional career at Howard University. His novitiate there as a teacher of English and philosophy was coupled with an early dedication to fostering Howard’s development as an “incubator of Negro intellectuals” and as a center for research on worldwide racial and cultural contacts and colonialism. He managed simultaneously to complete a philosophy dissertation in the field of axiology on “The Problem of Classification in Theory of Value,” which brought him a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1918. In 1924, he spent a sabbatical year in Egypt collaborating with the French Oriental Archeological Society for the opening at Luxor of the tomb of Tutankhamen.

On his return in 1925, Locke encountered the cycle of student protests then convulsing African-American colleges and universities, including Hampton, Fisk, and Lincoln, as well as Howard. Subsequently dismissed from Howard because of his allegiances with the protestors, he took advantage of the three-year hiatus in his Howard career to assume a leadership role in the emerging Harlem Renaissance by first editing the March 1925 special “Harlem number” of Survey Graphic magazine. Its immediate success led him to expand it into book form later that year in the stunning anthology THE NEW NEGRO, which—with its cornucopia of literature, the arts, and social commentary—gave coherent shape to the New Negro movement and gave Locke the role of a primary interpreter.

More than just an interpreter, mediator, or “liaison officer” of the New Negro movement, however, Locke became its leading theoretician and strategist. Over the following fifteen years, and from a staggering diversity of sources in traditional and contemporary philosophy, literature, art, religion, and social thought, he synthesized an optimistic, idealistic cultural credo, a “New Negro formulation” of racial values and imperatives that he insisted was neither a formula nor a program, but that confronted the paradoxes of African-American culture, charting what he thought was a unifying strategy for achieving freedom in art and in American life.

A return to formal work in philosophy found him producing a series of essays in the 1930s and 1940s on cultural pluralism. And his early interest in the scientific study of global race relations was revived in his coediting with Bernhard Stern of When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts (1942).
During a year as an exchange professor in Haiti, Locke had begun a potential magnum opus on the cultural contributions of African Americans, which occupied the last decade of his life, when his preeminence as a scholar and the lessening of segregation in American higher education kept him in demand as a visiting professor and lecturer within the United States and abroad. The effects of his lifelong heart ailments led to Locke's death in June 1954. His uncompleted opus, *The Negro in American Culture*, was completed and published posthumously by Margaret Just Butcher, daughter of a Howard colleague.

REFERENCES


JOHN S. WRIGHT