

Interpreting the Life and Activism of William Monroe Trotter

Pride, Aaron. *Apocalyptic Rhetoric and the Black Protest Movement: William Monroe Trotter's Civil Rights Activism in Early Twentieth-Century Boston*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2024. 228 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781666943610.

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William Monroe Trotter circulated among Boston's Black elite at the turn of the twentieth century. The son of a Civil War veteran who had served in the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment (United States Colored Troops), Trotter attended Harvard University alongside W. E. B. Du Bois. Later, with the money he inherited from family and accumulated from his own business ventures, he established the newspaper that would make him nationally famous. From its founding in 1901 and throughout the remainder of the decade, the *Boston Guardian* unflinchingly rejected Booker T. Washington's racial philosophy and programs and demanded an end to second-class citizenship for Black Americans. This position prompted Trotter to join Du Bois and other racial activists in launching the Niagara Movement, the precursor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

These features of Trotter's life are well known, thanks in large measure to the authoritative and rigorous biography written by historian Stephen R. Fox in 1970, as well as subsequent encyclopedia entries, journal articles, and an additional recent book. None of these studies, however, make the argument articulated by Aaron Pride in *Apocalyptic Rhetoric and the Black Protest Movement*. Pride maintains that Trotter adhered to a brand of evangelical Christianity called millennialism and that his religious outlook informed how he understood and framed his racial activism. Pride explains that the language, imagery, and symbology of the Bible—particularly passages related to the apocalypse and second coming of Christ—pervaded Trotter's political writings and provided the rhetorical medium through which he justified radical Black activism. Through his rhetoric, he became the “prophetic founder of African American Neo-abolitionist Christianity in the early twentieth century” (1). According to Pride, this Black “millenarian movement” provided the foundation from which other forms of Black radicalism developed. Pride states, “The black radical tradition derived from and developed within a preexisting black militant millennial tradition in the United States” (7).

According to Pride, scholars have either mistakenly argued that Black millennialism did not have a militant political dimension or, much more commonly, they have altogether excluded it from their discussions of early twentieth-century Black activism. He bases this historiographical position mainly on three books: Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), Cornell West's *Prophetic Fragments* (1988), and Jacqueline Dowd Hall's article on the “long civil rights movement” (2005). Pride points out, for example,

how “Genovese noted that African American Christianity lacked a ‘politically militant millennial tradition” (2).

The book’s eight body chapters focus mainly on the period from 1901 to 1911, when the *Guardian* most forcefully campaigned against Washington’s Tuskegee machine. Each chapter is devoted to a (marginally) different dimension of Trotter’s religio-political outlook. Chapters one through three explore the creation of the *Guardian* as both a vehicle for opposition to Washington and the main engine for an emerging radical Black millennialist movement. Chapters four through seven carry this narrative forward by considering Trotter’s writings on World War I and white segregationist Christianity. In both cases, maintains Pride, Trotter’s apocalyptic rhetoric is evident. He says that the First World War represented for Trotter the kind of apocalyptic event predicted in the Book of Revelation, and that Trotter cast white segregationists as examples of the moral decay in an existing social structure that was about to be swept away. The final body chapter pivots back to Washington and asserts that Trotter rhetorically framed his political rival as a false god.

In making his case about the *Guardian*’s religio-political orientation, Pride works harder than Trotter ever did. Pride repeatedly states that Trotter used apocalyptic rhetoric, but he only sparingly shares examples of Trotter doing so. Of these examples, most are not very convincing. Chapter one cites an excerpt from the *Guardian*’s opening statement in November 1909 to support Pride’s argument. Yet secular terminology and common rhetorical tropes characterize the excerpt much more than does biblical imagery. Trotter’s statement expressed concerns that many other Black editors—including Robert L. Vann of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and Robert Abbott of the *Chicago Defender*—articulated during this time, namely that white-run newspapers unfairly characterized Black life and that it was essential to support the Black press. Moreover, part of the statement more likely drew rhetorically from the “right to revolution” passage of the Declaration of Independence rather than from the Bible. When public opinion “has been usurped or monopolized by any one class to the detriment of another,” Trotter wrote, “it is the duty of the outraged class to enter an eternal protest against it” (19).

Pride apparently could find just one phrase from the opening statement to support his argument. In warning his readers about Black leaders like Washington, who depended on financial support from whites, Trotter wrote that “the mouth of the foolish is a present destruction” (20). Pride dwells on this phrase for the next three pages by pointing out other places in the Bible where readers may find references to fools and “the mouth of the foolish,” such as Proverbs, Revelation, Psalms, and Zechariah. Other than a mainly secular political cartoon, Trotter’s “mouth of the foolish” remark serves as *the* central supporting example in chapter one.

Interpretive stretches characterize other parts of the book. Trotter verbally assailed Washington through the first decade of the twentieth century, often in personal terms, calling him a miserable toady, the Exploiter of All Exploiters, the Great Traitor, the Great Divider, Pope Washington, and the Benedict Arnold of the Race. Whereas many scholars (including Fox) identified this tendency as vituperative name calling, Pride sees biblical meaning. “[T]he *Guardian*’s usage of the terms ‘Benedict Arnold of the Negro Race’ and ‘Great Traitor’ correlated to the traitors prophesied in second Timothy,” he writes (36). While fighting Washington, Trotter unceasingly opposed Jim Crowism in all its guises and urged Black America to demand that Congress take “definite steps to re-establish justice and to secure for all the blessings of liberty.” Pride again reads religious significance into this fight. For him, Trotter’s conscious use of the phrase *blessings of liberty* clearly “evidenced and underscored the millennial dimension of Trotter’s thought” (128). Yet Trotter may simply have gotten the phrase from the preamble of the U.S. Constitution.

Since the early nineteenth century, activists and organizations have commonly drawn from the rhetoric of the founding documents to support their causes.

The main problem with this book is not how Pride interprets primary sources, however, but how few of them he uses and where they originate. For instance, aside from the Bible, chapters two and five each draw from just ten primary sources. The limited selection of primary sources that *do* inform this book come overwhelming from Trotter's own *Guardian*. This analysis is fair, to a point, given Pride's stated purpose of examining Trotter's rhetoric. But if Trotter was as zealous as Pride maintains, why did his contemporaries so often fail to mention it? In their obituaries for Trotter, neither W. E. B. Du Bois nor Kelly Miller wrote anything about his apocalyptic rhetoric or religious beliefs.¹ Columns in major Black weeklies such as the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Pittsburgh Courier* likewise were virtually silent on this issue.² Several important speeches and open letters by Trotter himself contained no biblical allusions whatsoever.³ Ultimately, while Pride correctly states that extant scholarship does not discuss how Trotter's religious convictions animated his racial activism and shaped Black radicalism, it may be that there is a good reason for it.

Notes

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, "William Monroe Trotter," *Crisis* 41 (May 1934): 134; Kelly Miller, "The Noblest Roman of Them All," *New York Amsterdam News*, Apr. 21, 1934.

2 For example, see "William Monroe Trotter," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 9, 1915; "William Monroe Trotter Addresses Negro Fellowship League—Chicago Branch," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 9, 1915; "New Yorkers Mourn Death of William Monroe Trotter," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Apr. 14, 1934; "Bars Part of The Birth of Nation," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Apr. 24, 1915; "Local News," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1911; "Monroe Trotter: Agitator at 60," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Mar. 19, 1932.

3 See, for example, "William Monroe Trotter's Address to the President," *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 21, 1914; "Send Open Letter to Gen. Dawes: National Equal Rights League Declares Vice President Has Deserted Them," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 4, 1925.

William Hanson: From a "Position in the Shadows" to Enforcer of the Imperial-Gatekeeper State

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John Weber's research for *William Hanson and the Texas-Mexico Border: Violence, Corruption, and the Making of the Gatekeeper State* began, Weber admits, as