

GRAPES FROM THORNS

When they say the name John Ruskin, there is one that I will mention. At the raising of the glasses to Ruskin College, Oxford, I shall raise mine also, to Frelinghuysen University, Washington. During the celebratory gathering, in tribute to pioneers of Adult Education, I will proudly stand and speak, of Anna Julia Cooper.

As an academic and writer, she doesn't appear to have spent much time in their ivory tower; she was too busy downtown. Throughout her life, she interwove speech with action.

A life dedicated to teaching; focused on the urban poor. Alongside her faith in the reformative qualities of Christianity, she had an abiding belief in the transformative potential of education. A former principal of the renowned M Street School, renamed as the Paul Dunbar School. It was during her headship, that links were made with the Ivy League Universities; students at this popular high school got the chance to study at Harvard and at Yale.

While serving the youth, she catered for the adults. Involved in its initial stages, this great teacher, from 1930-1941, became the president of Frelinghuysen University. Founded by educators Jesse and Rosetta Lawson, previously known as the Inter-Denominational Bible College, in 1917 it was renamed in tribute to a New Jersey senator who'd supported civil rights and education for the black community in the post-Civil War period.

It was a night school; accommodating the working class population who wanted to continue their formal education. A prospectus that offered courses in subject matter such as Fine Arts, Law, Sociology, Theology and Pharmacy. The university motto was '*Sic Itur Ad Astra*' – *Such is the way to the stars, or to immortality*. The life of its second president was a living example of that phrase.

They say she worked long hours, without remuneration. It was a school of varied and available locations, until it found its first base in 1921. Facing difficulties later on, it was housed in the home of Cooper. Charging low tuition fees, she made sure that courses and venues were accessible to all. Even after retiring from the presidency, which she accepted when she was in her early seventies, she continued to teach at Frelinghuysen: age could not diminish her. She remained involved as Registrar, until the mid-fifties, when the school closed. This was the woman who after being born into slavery, went on to write her dissertation in French; gaining a doctorate from the Sorbonne, at the age of sixty seven. A massive achievement, when it is remembered that at the time, she was high school teaching during the day, degree teaching in the evening; while looking after five adopted children.

Married and widowed by twenty one she never remarried; dedicating her life to others – through education. Even as a high school pupil at St. Augustine's she

taught other students. After graduating from Oberlin College, where she received two degrees, she taught at Wilberforce University. She came across other channels to education, through her involvement in literary societies, the "Coloured" YWCA and women's clubs, of which she was a seminal figure; part of her lifelong struggle, to raise the aspirations of Black women. Talking of women, in a 1893 speech she said....." We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favouritisms, whether of sex, race, country or condition....". It seems that wherever she found a possible link to learning, she strove to make that connection.

A long time resident of Planet Pedagogy, she came to us, on an energising mission – as Special Envoy for Education. Her self-appointed mission, "the education of neglected people"; like an eager evangelist, Anna Julia Cooper, became the Miraculous Matriarch; generator of blossoming and fruit, in the places of traditional aridity.

She found the time to write too. As well as writing articles for newspapers, such as *Crisis* and *Washington Tribune*, she wrote a book - a collection of essays, entitled *Voice from the South*, widely thought of as the first treatise on Black feminism; a powerhouse of reasoning and erudition, it was published in 1892. In 1897, she was the only woman invited to become a member of the American Negro Academy; founded by such luminaries, as Alexander Crummell and William DuBois. Three years later, she was one of two African American female delegates, a guest speaker, at the first international Pan- African Conference, held in London. This congress was organised by the Trinidadian lawyer, Henry Sylvester Williams.

Some people never stop. They just keep going, until that farewell breath. Anna Julia Cooper was such a person. Enduring, indomitable. Here is an excerpt, from a 1941 letter she wrote...'I am thankful to say my health is good and though I retired from public schools ten years ago I am still teaching and carrying on the work in Adult Education at Frelinghuysen. At 81 I read without glasses and write occasionally for publication'.

During her 100th year, a poem of hers was published, entitled, '*Grapes From Wrath*'.

She left here physically, in 1964, at the age of 105.

Like a beloved godmother from a favourite folk tale, she came amongst us, sprinkling the dust of aspiration.

At the event of eulogies, when they pay homage to Frederick Maurice, founder of the Working Men's College, London; I shall await my turn, then stand - and with a smile on my face, I'll happily tell the gathering, of a teacher of Languages, Mathematics, and Science, called Anna Julia Cooper; a life long supporter of Adult Education, through literary societies, YWCA, Women's Clubs, Coloured Settlement House – and Frelinghuysen University.

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