

7-7-2010

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Recommended Citation

"From Dunbar, to His Friends" (2010). *News Releases*. 1153.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/1153

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From Dunbar, to His Friends

07.07.2010 | Campus and Community

Paul Laurence Dunbar scholar Herbert Woodward Martin sometimes wonders just how deep his connection with the famous American poet goes.

Two unpublished Dunbar poems found their way recently — and out of the blue — to Martin, a poet and University of Dayton professor emeritus, known nationally for his scholarship and unforgettable performances of Dunbar's dialect poems.

"In the span of a few months, these are gifts that just fell into my hands," Martin said of the poems. "It's as if Dunbar wanted me to have them."

Martin came upon the first poem in February when Cincinnati resident Patrick Orsary called him to say he had an original, 1893 first edition of *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar's first published collection of poems, and would sell it for \$50.

Martin could hardly believe his good fortune — he'd been searching for an original *Oak and Ivy* for decades. But it wasn't the offer of the book alone that caught his attention. Inscribed on the inside cover of the book was a personal, unpublished Dunbar poem, written and signed by the poet himself.

"I am delighted first of all just to have *Oak and Ivy* in my possession," Martin said. "But then to have a poem written by Dunbar, in his own hand, to another African-American poet who was his contemporary is truly exciting. I'm touching something that Dunbar touched, I'm connecting with that history."

The poem, untitled, was addressed "To My Friend, Joseph S. Cotter, December 18, 1894."

The first stanza reads: "I had searched thro' the world for the world's greatest treasure —/In the temple of Art, in the palace of Pleasure;"

Martin's research on Cotter, a poet living in Kentucky, revealed that he was a friend of Dunbar. Cotter founded the Paul Laurence Dunbar school in Louisville, Ky., in 1893 and became the school's first principal. Dunbar visited Cotter the next year and possibly gave him the book as a gift, Martin said.

Orsary said the book sat for years on his mother's bookcase until one day about 10 years ago, she was cleaning out her house and asked him if he wanted anything.

"I picked up the book and saw it was autographed by the author, and I thought 'This is nice,'" Orsary said. "I would read it every

now and then, but recently I decided it shouldn't be sitting here on my bookshelf, somebody should be enjoying it."

He found the University of Dayton's Paul Laurence Dunbar website (url: <http://www.dunbarsite.org>) , and sent a message to Martin that he had a book to sell.

Orsary said his mother had received the book from her father, Robert Ertel, who had received it from his uncle who raised him, James Averdick, a Covington, Ky., resident. Neither Martin nor Orsary knows how Cotter's book came into Averdick's possession.

"I'm just real excited that it ended up in the right place," Orsary said. "You never know what you're going to find hiding on a bookshelf or in a basement."

The poem is eight lines written in standard English. Based on the verifiable relationship between Dunbar and Cotter and the original handwriting and signature, Martin believes the poem is authentic.

The *African American Review*, the Modern Language Association's official journal of black literature and culture, is scheduled to publish the entire Cotter poem in its first 2011 issue.

The second poem, also untitled and addressed to a personal friend, "Anna C," appears to be a love poem. A Dayton family donated the original poem to Wright State University in 2006. Wright State presented a framed copy of the poem to Martin at its commencement ceremony June 12 when Martin received an honorary degree.

"It was something that had lain dormant in their archives, which someone had thought would make a great gift for me," Martin said.

For two unpublished Dunbar poems to find their way to Martin without him actively pursuing them certainly seems appropriate for the man who even in childhood attracted comments from classmates about his uncanny resemblance to Dunbar.

Martin, a Toledo native, rekindled his connection with Dunbar in the early 1970s when he came to Dayton, Dunbar's hometown, to take a job as an English professor at the University of Dayton.

For decades, Martin has performed Dunbar's poems dressed in a turn-of-the-century morning coat, striped trousers and wire-rim glasses, "borrowing" Dunbar's voice to captivate audiences and keep alive the memory of the first black American to gain national eminence as a poet.

This is not the first time Martin has encountered previously unpublished or unknown Dunbar works. In 1993, he located the original manuscript of Dunbar's never-published, three-act play, *Herrick*. Martin included the play with other uncollected works in a 2002 book titled *In His Own Voice*. In addition to performing Dunbar's poetry, Martin has written a monograph about Dunbar, arranged an opera using several of Dunbar's poems, and in 1996 was named The Paul Laurence Dunbar Laureate Poet of Dayton, Ohio.

In 2009, documentary filmmaker David Schock released *Jump Back, Honey* (url: <http://www.jumpbackhoney.com/>) , a film celebrating Martin's own legacy and works of poetry and which honored his efforts to preserve the legacy of Dunbar.

The "Anna C" poem:

"To Anna C"

You laugh, my friend, and say I dote
 Upon some maiden's fancied charms.
 Well, list and I will picture you
 The maid who stirred my love to arms.
 Her beauty is like the star that crowns
 The jeweled brow of beauteous night.
 Hair like spun gold, that ripples down
 Above her shoulders, warm and bright.
 A brow that Sappho might have sung
 When she and poesy were young.
 The sweetest eyes — half filled with fun,
 Blue gray and steadfast as the sun.
 Lips like the Grecian Helen had
 Whose ruby red drove Paris mad;
 So Helen smiled — with glances coy —

Whose smile was death to ancient Troy.
A breast whose every rise and fall
Makes me each moment more her thrall.
A waist whose gentle tapering charm
I love to circle with my arm.
A foot that Venus in her day
Molded altho from Jove's best clay
Might well have envied. This is she
Whose glance is all the world to me.
Who wonders then, that at her sight
My bosom burn with passion's plight.
That when she smiles, the day is bright
And when she frowns, for me 'tis night.
Alas! Well, some men are born to err —
The Fates will never give me her.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.