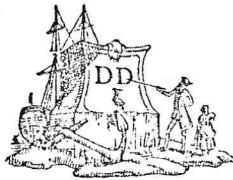


ARNA BONTEMPS AND JACK CONROY

*They Seek
A City*



1945

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN AND COMPANY, INC.

37 124
2 10

COPYRIGHT, 1945
BY ARNA BONTEMPS AND JACK CONROY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.
FIRST EDITION

AUTHORS' NOTE

Collaborations between writers may be of many kinds. The one that produced this book is best compared to separate mountain streams which, through circumstances of which neither is fully aware, flow together finally to a definite purpose. Several years ago Jack Conroy was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship to learn something about the rural Southern folk who came to Northern cities such as Detroit and Pittsburgh and Toledo to become industrial workers. A book did not result immediately, but a lot of material was gathered, much of it concerned with Negroes. Meanwhile, Arna Bontemps was put in charge of a study of Negroes in Illinois, under the sponsorship of the Rosenwald Fund. More and more, as his work progressed, he found himself dealing with the impulse that brought these people up from the South and with the experiences that followed. When Jack Conroy joined him on the assignment, the two commenced to pool their ideas. Somewhat later Bucklin Moon of Doubleday, Doran & Company suggested that the authors undertake a rounded account of Negro migration within the United States—a story he had long wanted to see written. Plans were sketched in a very general way and presently the book began to take shape.

Grateful acknowledgments are therefore made to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, to the Julius Rosenwald Fund, and to Bucklin Moon, of Doubleday, Doran who worked with us on this book as editor.

THE AUTHORS

nounced the name of Negro, given him against his will by a race other than his own. A subtle bait was embodied in the clause expressing the new member's willingness to proceed to Ethiopia to fill any position for which he might be qualified. Most of the positions represented as being open were important and lucrative ones.

During the trial Redding comported himself with a great deal more dignity than his white confederate, and resolutely and unrepentantly addressed the court:

My mission is marked in the Bible. Even if they have captured me, some other leaders will rise up and lead the Ethiopian back to Africa. The Bible says, "So shall the King of Assyria lead away the Egyptian prisoners and the Ethiopian captives, young and old . . . to the shame of Egypt." The Ethiopians do not belong here and should be taken back to their own country. Their time was up in 1919. They came in 1619. The Bible has pointed out that they were to appear in three hundred years. The time is up. The burning of the flag last Sunday night by me was a symbol that Abyssinians are not wanted in this country. That was the sign the Bible spoke of.

In 1925, as Garvey paced up and down his newly occupied cell in Atlanta, a small Negro wearing a flaming red fez similar to those worn by Turks appeared in empty lots and on street corners of Chicago's South Side to proclaim a startling new doctrine. He was Noble Drew Ali (born Timothy Drew in North Carolina), Prophet of Islam, and founder of the Moorish-American Science Temple. Little is known of Drew Ali's early history. He is reputed to have been an expressman in Newark, New Jersey, where he is said to have founded the first Moorish-American Science Temple as early as 1913. There is also some evidence to indicate that he had established branches of his cult in Pittsburgh and Detroit before he came to Chicago.

Drew's main contention was that the people commonly known in America as Negroes are of Moorish descent and thus Asiatics. He also insisted that they were not black at all, but olive-hued. Act six of his *Divine Constitution and By-Laws* reads:

With us all members must declare their nationality and their Divine Creed that they may know that they are a part and partial [*sic*] of this said government and that they are not Negroes, Colored Folks, Black

People, or Ethiopians, because these names were given to slaves, by slaveholders, in 1779 and lasted until 1865 during the time of slavery, but this is a new era of time now, and all men must proclaim their free national name to be recognized by the government in which they live and the nations of the earth, this is the reason why Allah the Great God of the universe ordained Noble Drew Ali, the prophet, to redeem his people from their sinful ways. The Moorish Americans are the descendants of the ancient Moabites who inhabited the North Western and South Western shores of Africa.

Prophet Noble Drew Ali did not immediately rally many disciples to his banner, the Moorish star and crescent on a field of red. But he persisted, and at length was able to set up permanent headquarters. Though semi-literate, he possessed an eloquent tongue, a persuasive manner, and a native shrewdness which enabled him to sway the poor and unlettered people who listened to him. Most of them remembered the race riots of 1919; all of them had experienced discrimination and other wrongs. Drew Ali was offering them pride of race and dignity. In 1927 a successful convention encouraged Drew Ali to expand his proselytizing activities to other cities. It is difficult to ascertain just how many temples resulted, but those in Pittsburgh, Detroit, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Charleston (West Virginia), Lansing, and Youngstown are fairly well authenticated.

Drew Ali had written and published his *Koran*, a slim pamphlet consisting of a curious mixture of the Mohammedan holy book of the same name, the Christian Bible, the words of Marcus Garvey, and anecdotes of the life of Jesus—the whole bound together with the prophet's own pronouncements and interpretations. Garvey was eulogized at every meeting as the John the Baptist of the movement. The prophet began to do a profitable business in various nostrums and charms he had concocted—among them Old Moorish Healing Oil, Moorish Purifier Bath Compound, and Moorish Herb Tea for Human Ailments.

More and more "Asiatics" flocked to the star and crescent standard. They flaunted their fezzes on the street and treated the white man with undisguised contempt. Many of them affected formidable-looking beards. Drew Ali announced that each devout Moorish-American must carry a card bearing his credentials and his real (or Asiatic) name, signed by the prophet with his seal. Often enough

"slave" names were transformed into "real" ones by the simple addition of "El" or "Bey," these being titles signifying Moorish dignity. The membership card and button, when displayed to Europeans, would convince them that the bearer was enlightened and a member of an organization to be feared and respected.

To the prophet this theory of new-found independence had been a more or less purely ethical or theoretical point, and he had not reckoned on its practical effect among his zealous followers. Alarming reports of street brawls, threats, insults, and minor violence centering around Moorish-Americans were brought to his notice. Members were accosting the white enemy on the streets, showing their membership cards and buttons, and proclaiming in the name of their prophet, Noble Drew Ali, that they had been freed of "European" domination.

Recalling the downfall of the militant Abyssinians and contemplating the current difficulties of the Garvey movement, Drew Ali issued this ukase:

I hereby warn all Moors that they must cease from all radical or agitating speeches while on their jobs, or in their homes, or on the streets. Stop flashing your cards before Europeans as this only causes confusion. We did not come to cause confusion; our work is to uplift the nation.

The increase in dues-paying members (estimates have placed the peak as high as 10,000 in Chicago alone) as well as the other rewards of temple leadership attracted a number of converts eager to be cut in on the benefits. Drew Ali, on the other hand, began to be hampered by his lack of formal education as the business affairs of the cult became more complicated. He enlisted the aid of several men who proved to be more cunning than scrupulous.

Drew Ali's leadership was soon contested. In 1929 he became embroiled in a quarrel with Sheik Claude Greene, small-time politician and former butler of the philanthropist, Julius Rosenwald. One day Drew arrived at his office to find that Greene had moved all the furniture outside and declared himself the grand sheik. A civil war ensued, each faction enlisting support from temples in other cities. Greene was shot and stabbed to death in his offices at the Unity Club on the night of March 15, 1929.

Drew Ali was arrested as he sat with his wife and a group of fol-

lowers celebrating (authorities charged) the murder of his rival. The prophet, from prison, issued a message to his flock:

TO THE HEADS OF ALL TEMPLES, ISLAM

I, your prophet, do hereby and now write you a letter as a warning and appeal to your good judgment for the present and the future. Though I am now in custody for you and the cause, it is all right and it is well for all who still believe in me and my father, God. I have redeemed all of you and you shall be saved, all of you, even me. I go to bat Monday, May 20, before the Grand Jury. If you are with me, be there. Hold on and keep faith, and great shall be your reward. Remember my laws and love ye one another. Prefer not a stranger to your brother. Love and truth and my peace I leave you all.

Peace from
Your Prophet
NOBLE DREW ALI.

This proved to be Drew Ali's final official proclamation. Released on bond, he died under mysterious circumstances a few weeks later. One theory is that he succumbed to injuries inflicted by the police during his imprisonment, another is that he was set upon by partisans of Greene and beaten so severely that he never recovered.

After Drew Ali's death the prophet's attorney attempted unsuccessfully to hold the group together. Each among several of the prophet's disciples announced that he alone was the rightful inheritor of Drew Ali's leadership—each established a little temple of his own. More than one sought to lend additional weight to his claim by professing to be the reincarnation of the prophet.

The following quotations from a sermon by a minister of the Chicago Temple of Islam outline certain primary beliefs of the sect, founded in Detroit sometime before 1930 by a Negro peddler:

The Asiatic black man is the original man, the ruler of the universe, the eight inhabited planets and of this planet earth. Islam is the true religion. A religion which can be proved by mathematics in a limit of time.

The Moslems have the wisdom. We're not afraid of the devil, this so-called white man. We talk right up to them. They're afraid of you if you've got the Truth. Just tell 'em, "White man, you're a devil. You were grafted from the original black man." He'll say, "Yes, you're right." He'll admit it 'cause you got the power. Just say, "You're a beast, you've got one third animal blood." He won't deny it, 'cause it's true. When they