Introduction

George Wylie Henderson (1904–65) lived the transformations made possible by the Great Migration of blacks during the era of industrialization: born on a farm, he graduated from nearby Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and found work as a linotype operator in New York City. He also gained fame as an author. Chiefly known for his critically acclaimed 1935 novel about an Alabama farmhand who acquires a “farm of her own,” *Ollie Miss*, and the 1946 sequel narrating her son’s migration to Harlem, *Jule*, Henderson also enjoyed a widespread popular audience for his periodical fiction.¹ This book collects the seventeen stories Henderson published as a regular contributor to the *New York Daily News* and *Redbook* magazine. They are stories that have been surprisingly difficult to find: no published list of the stories had ever been established until I began this work, and despite their large circulations, both periodicals are available in only a few research libraries, on microfilm.² These carefully crafted, simple tales of life in Alabama, Memphis, and New York City are well worth recovering, in part because they dramatize the profound ambivalence many blacks felt about their participation in the Great Migration. Henderson’s stories of the rural South are sometimes nostalgic, but they never flinch from presenting the hard work and violence of everyday southern life. Similarly, those stories set in Harlem depict the glamour of city life, yet they also worry about urban poverty and social mores. Henderson wrote the stories during the same period in which he was writing his novels, and he often draws from the same set of characters to create these various fictional settings; the stories, then, enhance our view of the world of the novels. Moreover, because of his prolific output during this period and his access to a general audience, Henderson’s stature needs to be reevaluated. Though literary historians have characterized Henderson as a minor novelist of the period, we might instead describe him as one of the chief popular voices of the black migrant.
Henderson was born on June 14, 1904, in Warrior Stand, Alabama, a small hamlet in Macon County. This area was part of Alabama’s Black Belt, where many black farmers and sharecroppers grew cotton and corn in the shadows of decaying plantation houses; Henderson would later say that he started life planting cotton. He was in the third generation born in the vicinity of Warrior Stand. His paternal grandparents, Alex Henderson (b. 1854) and Caroline Moore Henderson (b. 1859), were married on Bird Weatherers’ Plantation in December 1874. They were sharecroppers for many years, though the 1900 census shows them living with their daughters in Montgomery, Alabama, where Alex worked as a woodcutter and Caroline worked as a laundress; meanwhile, their two sons worked the farm at Warrior Stand. Henderson’s father, George Wylie Henderson Sr., was born circa 1879. In 1901, he married Ella May Gresham (b. 1883), also a native of Warrior Stand and the oldest daughter of denizens John and Martha Gresham; they would eventually have eleven children together. The senior George Henderson graduated in 1899 from nearby Tuskegee and attended seminary in New Orleans shortly thereafter.

Though George Wylie Henderson Jr. was born in Warrior Stand, his early years were spent in the nearby town of Wetumpka, where his father worked as a preacher and the family lived in a rented house, according to the 1910 census. This same census shows Alex and Caroline farming land they now owned in Warrior Stand. But the family moved in 1915 to Tuskegee, where George Sr. became pastor of the Butler Chapel AME Zion Church. This was a position of some prestige, as the site of the chapel is also where Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee and held its first classes. All indications are that Henderson’s parents remained in Tuskegee for the remainder of their lives.

George Wylie Henderson Jr. would follow in his father’s footsteps and matriculate at Tuskegee in 1918. As befits the Hampton-Tuskegee model, Henderson’s curriculum provided a broad-based academic education (similar to our current secondary curriculum) with practical emphases: mathematics courses, for instance, covered measurement techniques for carpentry, while a geography course focused on agricultural production. Also emphasized was oratory, and this was an area in which Henderson excelled. He twice placed second in Tuskegee’s annual speech contest and was chosen as class orator in his senior year. One of the topics for which he won a prize was “Booker T. Washington,
the Apostle of Industrial Education.” Washington had founded Tuskegee in 1881 and had risen to national prominence for his accommodationist stance toward segregation and his advocacy of industrial training for black Americans. The Hendersons arrived in Tuskegee in 1915, the year of Washington’s death, but his philosophy held sway over the institute in the following years, and the famous statue of Washington lifting the “veil of ignorance” from his people was installed on the campus shortly before Henderson’s graduation in 1922. Washington’s politics and self-fashioning inspired much controversy, notably in his exchange with W. E. B. DuBois, who advocated the notion that a “talented tenth” of the African American community should form an intellectual vanguard to advance the race; Washington’s emphasis on industrial training, DuBois feared, would simply perpetuate the subordinate status of blacks in the industrial era. When Henderson emerged from Tuskegee some twenty years after the debate, his stated ambition in the senior yearbook was “to be a lawyer.” Yet he had also received practical training in the printing trade at Tuskegee, and this, more than his oratorical skills, served him as he made his way toward Harlem. Henderson’s career would form a synthesis between the models of DuBois and Washington: as a novelist, he was part of the intellectual vanguard DuBois imagined, yet as a printer, he worked consistently throughout the Depression era.

Henderson married a Tuskegee graduate, Lettie Horn, of Lake Charles, Louisiana, and they had a son in 1926. He began writing fiction shortly thereafter. It is not clear when the couple made the move to New York City, but by 1931 they were settled in the Dunbar Apartments in Harlem, enjoying friendships with such intellectuals as Langston Hughes and Zell Ingram. Henderson was working as a linotype operator at the plant for the Daily News and was proud of his membership in Big Six, the typographers’ union. By 1932, he and his family had moved to the Bronx. His location in the community would provoke attention from the black press when he emerged as a writer: the New York Amsterdam News, Harlem’s newspaper, ran an article on him in 1932 entitled “Young Bronx Printer Strides toward Fame.”

Henderson’s first story, “Sinner Man’s Wedding,” was printed in the Daily News in January 1932 as part of the paper’s “Daily Story from Real Life” feature; it was the first of nine Henderson would publish in this setting during 1932 and 1933. “Sinner Man’s Wedding” was reportedly bought several years before it first
The Cast of Characters in "Man in de Moon."

**SONNY BOY**

George Wylie Henderson's "Man in de Moon" is the eighth story by George Wylie Henderson to appear in the "Daily Story from Real Life" series. All of the stories in this feature were illustrated and appeared beneath the comic strip "Gasoline Alley." New York Daily News, September 15, 1932, 31.
appeared; it is likely that some of Henderson’s stories were stock-piled, with the idea that multiple publications in a short time would help him to build a readership.\textsuperscript{19} The stories published in the “Daily Story” feature appeared beneath the comic strip “Gasoline Alley” and covered the remainder of the page. They were always accompanied by captioned illustrations of key scenes or characters (see, e.g., fig. 1). Henderson’s portrait was featured along with a brief biography; his identity as an African American was clearly visible to readers. A box listing the “cast of characters” and provocative section headings helped interest readers in the stories. At the time, the \textit{Daily News} boasted the largest newspaper circulation in America, with 1.36 million daily readers and 1.77 million on Sundays.\textsuperscript{20} Self-proclaimed as “New York’s Picture Newspaper,” this early tabloid was accessible to readers with limited literacy skills. While exact demographic figures are not available for its readership, the prevalence of advertisements for women’s clothing, radios, furniture, and department stores and the paper’s regular “beautiful child contest” suggest an audience of young married couples and young single working women. The default race for models in the paper’s advertisements was white; it is difficult to gauge how many African American readers would have been attracted to the \textit{Daily News}. As a contributor of fiction, Henderson joined writers from around the country who offered readers accessible, slightly melodramatic stories. The “Daily Story from Real Life” was often sensational, like the real news presented in the newspaper.

Of Henderson’s nine stories published in the \textit{Daily News}, seven are set in the rural South; the other two take place in New York City. The plots are sensational, with the majority featuring death or murder; the deathbed surprise was one of Henderson’s favorite conceits. Some stories, like “Dance of Death” and “A Brownskin’s Revenge,” portray a violent episode and then explore the motivations that led up to the spectacle. The characters in these stories are often poor but hardworking, as we see in “Whistlin’ Slim” and “Without Tears,” among others; Washington’s influence is felt here. Place names are drawn from the area around Tuskegee where Henderson was born, and minor characters like Ol’ Head and Liza appear in story after story. Indeed, Henderson created a fictive community based in the rural South from which he drew his stories. He had a habit, however, of revising key elements of a previous fiction’s characters and plotting in order to create a new work.
The story “‘Thy Name Is Woman,’” for example, is clearly a prototype for his first novel, *Ollie Miss*. In the story, a generically designated “Daughter” arrives on the farm of Alex and Caroline (characters no doubt based on Henderson’s paternal grandparents) and begs to exchange work for food. She is eyed with suspicion by Nan and Mae Jane, who ferret out the secrets of her past. A month after this story’s publication, Henderson announced in a biographical note that he was at work on a novel. He would lift much of the opening scene of *Ollie Miss* from “‘Thy Name Is Woman,’” though he gave Daughter the name of his title character and changed the secrets of her past; the other characters remain essentially the same.

As I have noted, *Ollie Miss* (1935) was a critical success. It was widely and favorably reviewed in the United States and England; most critics appreciated Henderson’s sensitive use of dialect, his suggestive descriptions of the Alabama countryside, and his compelling characterization of the heroine. When Ollie Miss wanders onto Alex and Caroline’s farm looking for work, she is something of a mystery; the members of the community are suspicious of her origins. The women gossip, while the men find her an object of sexual fascination. Her talent for farmwork is prodigious: she can plow row for row with the strongest men on the farm. She is given shelter in a cabin on the farm and settles for a bit. But her deepest emotional attachment, we learn, is to her former lover, Jule, who lives across the swamp. This attachment nearly proves to be fatal, however: she is seriously wounded in a fight with another woman over the rights to his affection. Recovering from this wound, she discovers she is pregnant with Jule’s child. Yet she ultimately determines to reject Jule’s support and to raise the child on her own. Alex gives her a plot of land, and she is proud to have a “farm of her own” that will allow her to provide for her child by the labor of her own hands. *Ollie Miss*, then, is a female bildungsroman in which the heroine achieves independence and learns Booker T. Washington’s maxim that one should “love work for its own sake.”21 It is a novel that imagines rural Alabama as offering a complete and satisfying way of life for its characters.

Shortly before the publication of *Ollie Miss*, Henderson changed his venue for short fiction and started publishing in *Redbook* magazine. The change of venue provoked some changes in his fiction. *Redbook*’s format afforded more flexibility as to length, since stories continued in the magazine’s back pages; the *Daily News*
always adhered to a one-page story format. Some of Henderson’s *Redbook* stories ran twice as long as the average *Daily News* story. Another change concerned setting: whereas the *Daily News* stories are mostly set in the rural South, all but one of the *Redbook* stories take place in New York City. Many concern the ambivalent feelings of recent black migrants from the South. In “Harlem Calling,” for example, the heroine is attracted to the glamour of the Sugar Hill neighborhood in Harlem but ultimately opts to surround herself with migrants who maintain down-home values. In these stories, the virtues of moral respectability are linked to the rural past and are opposed to the temptations of urban life. Yet the rural South is not seriously contemplated as a destination: in “Time for a Dance,” for example, the hero tries to recover his roots by taking a bus from New York to Memphis, but he finds that everything has changed and resolves to return to the city with the girl with whom he has danced. The stories from *Redbook* do not revisit the deathbed scenes so prevalent in the *Daily News* stories; they are typically less sensational. One common plot structure, however, involves a hero or heroine separated from a lover by the Depression or the war; these stories are sometimes resolved when the two are surprisingly reunited against all odds. Like the *Daily News* stories, these stories draw from a fictive community of characters. Some of these derive from the rural scenes Henderson sketched in earlier fictions, while others, like Jake Simmons and Link and Obelia Johnson, were created for the urban scene. The changes in Henderson’s writing may have been provoked by the different readership he was addressing: *Redbook* was a more prestigious venue for a fiction writer, with more “literary” values than the *Daily News*. Its readers were likely to be more affluent and urbane. The magazine’s target audience was female, and Henderson seems to have engaged this audience with romantic plots. Although *Redbook* did not run biographical notes, Henderson’s identity was occasionally implied: “Harlem Calling,” for instance, was promoted as “that rarest thing of all—a genuine Sugar Hill story written by one who still lives there.”

In general, the changes to Henderson’s fiction during the *Redbook* era also pertain to his second novel, published in 1946. Whereas *Ollie Miss* and most of the *Daily News* stories are set in the rural South, *Jule* moves its hero from Alabama to New York. *Jule* is the story of Ollie Miss’s son. It begins on the farm in Alabama where Ollie Miss raised him. In a flashback, however,
Henderson revises the closing scene of *Ollie Miss*: in place of her refusal of the father’s affections, Henderson has her pathetically pleading him to stay. To compensate for the father’s absence, Ollie Miss names her son after him; where the first novel depicts her achieving independence on the farm, the second shows her desperately determined to raise her son in his father’s image. The son soon discovers that he cannot realize his mother’s desire for him “to be somebody” in Alabama: he is chased out of the South by a white man who lays claim to his girlfriend. The setting, as in the *Redbook* stories, shifts to Harlem, where Jule meets Jake Simmons and other characters from these stories. He ultimately achieves success, like Henderson, when he becomes an apprentice printer; Booker T. Washington would have been pleased. His success comes, Henderson insists, despite the disabling attentions of urban women, who cheat on him. When Jule returns to Alabama to attend his mother’s funeral, he discovers a land that is desiccated and cannot sustain daily life. He rescues his girlfriend, who has escaped from the clutches of the white man yet retained her country values, and they return to the city to enjoy the fruits of Jule’s success. The second novel, then, revises major elements of the first novel: the heroine of *Ollie Miss* does not achieve emotional independence, and the economic and geographical context in which she raises her son does not promise to sustain further success. The city, despite its moral dangers, is the locus of future successes for black Americans, Henderson argues.

*Jule* was also widely reviewed, but not so favorably as *Ollie Miss*. One critic complained that it was written in “primer style”; indeed, the dialogue is often tautological, simplistic, and slowly paced, and descriptive passages often consist of a long series of declarative sentences. Henderson published only one additional story after *Jule* appeared: “Only Mary and Me,” the sole fiction by Henderson to feature an exclusively white cast, appeared in *Redbook* in 1947. Some commentators have suggested that the negative reviews of *Jule* led Henderson to give up on his writing. It is unclear whether those reviews made it difficult for Henderson to publish again, but there is evidence to suggest that he continued to write in the years following *Jule*. The author’s papers include a catalog of writings that lists fifteen additional stories, all unpublished, undated, and lost. His stepdaughter, Roslyn Kirkland Allen, explains that some years ago a burglar broke into the family’s townhouse in Harlem and stole the copper pipes in the base-
ment to sell for scrap; many of the author’s papers were destroyed in the subsequent flood. Allen was fourteen when *Jule* appeared, but she remembers Henderson as an active writer during her childhood. In addition, she remembers that whenever they needed money for her college tuition he would write a story and send it to *Redbook*; five hundred dollars would appear shortly thereafter.\(^{26}\) On this evidence, it seems possible that Henderson had a contractual agreement with *Redbook* that continued even though the magazine did not publish his new work; indeed, an exclusivity clause may have prevented him from seeking other venues for his short fiction. My queries to *Redbook* on these matters have gone unanswered. At the very least, however, we have reason to doubt that Henderson was tragically silenced by bad reviews, as some have suggested.

One of Henderson’s unpublished works did escape the flood. Late in life, Henderson was at work on a third novel, *Baby Lou and the Angel Bud*, that would join *Ollie Miss* and *Jule* in a trilogy concerning his Alabama “folk.” The action of *Baby Lou* precedes *Ollie Miss* in time. Set in Alabama and featuring the male children of Caroline and Alex, Lou and Bud, the manuscript includes an eighty-nine-year-old character, Damma, who is a former slave. This recognition of the slave past is accompanied by scenes of racial violence—the Ku Klux Klan makes an appearance, for example. In general, this novel draws broader contours of collective life among black characters, and includes more scenes of black and white interaction, than do Henderson’s previous novels. The surviving typescript reveals an incomplete and unfocused narrative. Perhaps Henderson, who obviously felt great comfort working within the formal expectations of the bildungsroman, could not complete a work with a dual focus on two brothers and great attention to collective life.\(^ {27}\)

In his 1958 study, *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone paired Henderson with Zora Neale Hurston in a section entitled “Aspects of the Racial Past.”\(^ {28}\) While Hurston has deservedly received extensive critical attention in the intervening years, Henderson has been discussed in only three academic articles. Hurston’s output was more substantial, and her neglect was more extreme: there is no need for critics to mark Henderson’s grave, as Alice Walker did for Hurston in 1973. But why has Henderson continued to languish as a “minor novelist” despite his critical and popular successes? In part, writers and critics coming out of the
black aesthetic and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s were looking for other things: Richard Wright’s radicalism, for example, and Hurston’s implication in gender issues caught the attention of these readers. Henderson’s individualist ethos and his debt to Booker T. Washington would not have been so attractive in this context. Also, historians of the Harlem Renaissance would not have found Henderson particularly well connected: he came to the scene late, and he was setting type when other writers were networking in intellectual circles. Although he was written up by the black press and reviewed in its pages and in the pages of intellectual magazines, his publishers were mainstream commercial presses and mass media publications. His two periodical venues, despite their wide availability at the time, are not indexed; he became invisible in the scholarly record. But as I have tried to suggest, his situation as a migrant from Alabama with a Tuskegee education, a working-class life, and a popular audience for his fiction makes him a unique and revealing figure. I am drawn to his work by the way in which he tries to think about this situation through fictional form. His restless revisions of sensational fiction, romantic fiction, and the bildungsroman show him grappling with, if never fully resolving, the contradictions of trying to tell stories about black American lives in these popular genres. With the “discovery” of these lost stories from the periodical market, the scholarly community has an opportunity to reassess Henderson’s marginal status in African American literary history. Historians of the literary response to the Great Migration will find his work to be indispensable. And readers in general will continue to find interest in these well-crafted, simple, and engaging stories from a transformative moment in American life.

—David G. Nicholls

NOTES


6. This information on Ella Gresham Henderson is found in the program from her funeral, archived at the Tuskegee University Library. See Butler Chapel AME Zion Church, “Funeral Services for Mrs. Ella Gresham Henderson” (Tuskegee, Ala.: Butler Chapel AME Zion Church, May 23, 1959), 3.

7. *Tuskegee Student*, May 13, 1916, 5. A 1903 letter by George Wylie Henderson Sr. establishes his association with the Department of Theology at Straight University, New Orleans. Archived at Howard University, it is partially reprinted in a biographical essay about his son (and the letter is wrongly attributed to the son, who had not yet been born when it was drafted): see Emmanuel S. Nelson’s entry in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 51, “George Wylie Henderson.”


9. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population, Alabama: Macon District*, 128 (Washington, D.C., 1910), sheet 16B. With the assistance of county authorities, I was able to locate the Hendersons’ farm on a visit during June 2000. The main house had recently burned, but a cornerstone indicated that the house had first been constructed in 1900 by A. H. Henderson and was rebuilt in 1953 by Reverend T. A. Henderson, who was the brother of George Wylie Henderson Jr. A faded sign announcing the Henderson Place hung at the entrance to the driveway.

10. See Butler Chapel AME Zion Church. According to his tombstone at the Ashdale Cemetery in Tuskegee, George Wylie Henderson Sr. died on November 2, 1960, about a year and a half after the death of his wife.

11. *Thirty-eighth Annual Catalog* (Tuskegee, Ala.: Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1918–19), 156.


13. *Fortieth Annual Catalog* (Tuskegee, Ala.: Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1920–21), 149; *Tuskegee Student*, August 13,
1921, 1; Forty-first Annual Catalog (Tuskegee, Ala.: Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1921–22), 147; Tuskegee Student, May 27–June 10, 1922, 1–2.

14. Carver (Tuskegee, Ala.: Senior Class, Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1922).


18. See Robertson, “Young Bronx Printer.”

19. Robertson, “Young Bronx Printer.”


27. The typescript survives in the collection of Roslyn Kirkland Allen.