

WILLIAM OSCAR BROWN, 1899-1969

On February 1, William O. Brown, founder of the Boston University African Studies Center and past president of the African Studies Association, died after a heart attack at Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, eight months short of what would have been his seventieth birthday.

Born October 18, 1899 in Fayette County, Texas, about halfway between Brownsville to the southeast and Brown County to the northwest, in a place called Cistern not big enough to be on the map, he grew up in the vicinity of Flatonia, a small town where a road from San Antonio to Houston crosses a road from Dallas to Corpus Christie. Oscar, as he was referred to formally (he was "Ottie" to his family) was the oldest child of Robert William Brown, a tenant farmer, and Josephine Irene Darling Brown. Both parents were of Texas stock and proud of their English descent. The sandy loam was poor farming country, but peanuts, cow peas, and cotton were raised. Left to itself, the land yielded post oak; it was, he would later say, "what you would call the bush in Africa." Nearly a third of the population was Negro, mostly share-croppers, and there was a smaller number of Mexican-Americans. Most of the "Anglos" fell economically into two classes: the few land owners and the renters; but socially there were three groups, for the "poor whites" were so designated not only for their poverty but "because they had no standards as far as respectability was concerned." The Browns and the Darlings were strong on such standards.

Will Brown was a hardworking, capable man who hired himself out as a carpenter when possible and did barbering, but he was taciturn and gave little attention to his four children except to see that they were fed and did their share of work in the fields. The mother was a very strong influence and was "an egalitarian." She once insisted that a school prize be given to a Mexican boy who had received the best marks, when the teachers were going to pass him over with the other parents' acquiescence. He was also very close to talkative Grandfather Darling, who called himself a socialist and read the Ripsaw and the Appeal to Reason. His paternal grandfather was a "religious mystic." There were relatives by the dozen, and Oscar grew up with a strong sense of family and community.

His brother stopped schooling at the fifth grade. One sister went to high school; another went two years to college. Ottie was the pride of the family

scholastically, though some of the members soon failed to understand the direction of his interests. From Flatonia High School at eighteen he went to the University of Texas, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in history in 1921, and a Master of Arts in Sociology from Southern Methodist in 1924. From then on the methods of sociological analysis were to be a primary tool in his reasoning. Friends in later times were sometimes surprised to learn that his first degree was in history. He saw the relationship in this way: "A good deal of history is just getting rid of old institutions, shoveling them out of the way." Historians could learn about institutions from sociologists, but his concerns were too contemporary to worry much about old institutions that had been toppled. Present institutions were of pressing social and personal urgency.

Before he turned to sociology, however, he had obtained a Bachelor of Divinity at Southern Methodist Seminary. His mother had hoped he would be a minister. "My education was a series of emancipations. First, I got emancipated from the church, mostly because the good respectable Christians of Fayette County were such hypocrites, and then from the caste system notions of the south." The first emancipation was purely personal; the second was a life-long crusade. He never said or wrote anything that was intended to attack anyone else's religious beliefs, but his efforts were devoted to changing by rational means the iniquitous system of caste wherever it was found.

In pursuit of further study and a career he then left Texas and it turned out that, except for a few visits to his family, the departure from his native state was permanent. The cosmopolitan and secular outlook of many of the people in the circles in which he then began to move were comfortable to him, and he eventually came to find his Texan and Methodist background and the popular stereotypes of them, a subject to be viewed with a certain sense of humor. Once, listening to a colleague boast of the obstacles he had overcome to get from a big-city slum to the university, he dryly observed in a *sotto voce* aside that it was just as difficult to rise from a conservative rural area.

Bill Brown went to Chicago to do further graduate study at the time when Robert Park, Louis Wirth, E. Farris, and E. Burgess were making the University of Chicago the most stimulating institution in the country for young sociologists. The influence of Park remained with him throughout his career, notably in the concerns with urbanization and, especially, race relations. At one moment he could say that "Park was the greatest intellectual influence of my life," but at another he could say, "I guess my socialist grandfather influenced me even more than Park did." Brown felt that Park thought of the south largely in terms of plantation country; he did not know at first hand the kind of situation that existed in East Texas and in some other parts as well. And in "the history of race, Park's treatment suffers from certain distortions." But principally it was that Park, whose "remarks . . . were often very subtle but were not systematic," sometimes gave the impression that "prejudice was organic My thesis was in a way a reaction against Park's theories; I wanted to refute his errors."

The thesis, successfully defended in 1930, was entitled Race Prejudice, A Social Study. He searched the literature looking for an area where there was no race conflict, or at least where this conflict was less intense than elsewhere. He sought the social causes of conflict to contradict the concept of an organic cause. In his study he gives credit to influence by G. Simmel and by Graham Wallace. He had learned a great deal from his reading not only about the Caribbean but also about South Africa, with which a fascination began, and he strove to understand the similarities and differences between that society and his own country's race problem. "What I was doing in my thesis was trying to escape from provincialism." He succeeded in more than merely winning his degree.

The financial struggle to get through had been grim. He had left Chicago to teach at the University of Cincinnati as an Instructor in Sociology, and then returned to finish his studies. One of his professors had given him a hand-down winter coat. A new period now began. He returned to Cincinnati as Assistant Professor. In 1933, on a leave of absence, he paid his own way to Africa on a research trip. Before returning to America, he met Ida Lonstein of Johannesburg, South Africa, and married her in 1936.

The following year there began to appear the results of his research: articles on race relations in South Africa and comparisons of the patterns of race relations in the United States and South Africa. These were topics on which he had already published in the years immediately after the completion of his doctorate, but then it had been an analysis of published material gathered and organized by others. Now he could use first-hand observations and interviews. This measure of control had previously been lacking in the discussion of the South African situation in American sociological journals.

In 1935 Brown left Cincinnati for Washington, D.C. and his first government position. He was Research Analyst for the Works Progress Administration, which in those mid-depression years created jobs for professional people as well as for laborers. He hoped to get an appointment at Howard University, where his friend and classmate at Chicago, E. Franklin Frazier, was Chairman of the Department of Sociology. With his experience he was a "good property," but appointments were not easily obtained. He left Washington in 1936 for the New Jersey College for Women, but after a semester he was offered the desired position at Howard, where he was Assistant Professor until 1943. At Howard he made several close and abiding friendships: with Ralph Bunche, with whom he was to work in other jobs later; with Sterling Brown; and with others. There was a distinguished faculty there at that time which included Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, and William Leo Hansberry. He taught at Cornell University in the summer sessions of 1939 and 1940; in 1941-1942 he was at the University of Puerto Rico as a visiting lecturer.

With the country at war, he became in 1943 an Analyst for the African Section, Research and Analysis Branch, Office of Strategic Services of the Department of State, and rose to become Chief of this unit. After the war he continued in government service. From 1946 to 1947 he was Chief, Colonial Section,

Division of International Labor, Social and Health Affairs, and Chief, African Branch, Division of Research, Near East and Africa, Office of Intelligence and Research. In 1950 he returned to Africa and from then on made frequent trips to all parts of that continent.

Until beginning his governmental appointments he was entirely a sociologist, but he then began to strive to comprehend all facets of African reality and the theories that were relevant to it so that these years were in effect an apprenticeship in political, economic, and anthropological analysis. It was at this time that he developed that impressive breadth of view that was inclusive of all regions and all disciplines and was the hallmark of his later work. Then, and subsequently in consultative capacity, Brown's voice always was a force for intelligent and humane governmental policy toward Africa.

At the invitation of President Harold Case, Brown joined the Boston University Faculty in 1953 as Professor of Sociology and created the African Studies Center for which the following year he obtained a Ford Foundation establishing grant. At the time there was at no American university an area studies center focusing on Africa which was not mainly within a single department, either of political science or of anthropology. The concept which Brown developed was to be influential in the later organization of African studies at other universities. Starting where there was no specialization, he put the emphasis on developing a multidisciplinary social science program of teaching and research which involved the departments of sociology-anthropology, government, and economics. His specified second stage was to add to this "core" other fields which he considered ancillary. The extent to which he was able to do this depended in the particular instance on the priorities of financing, agreement from department heads and administration, availability of personnel, and his own concepts of the most urgent needs. Due to the complexities of these various factors the growth never equaled his hope in most fields. However, one field -- history -- surprised him in the rapidity of its growth. Although he had, upon request, given a student a directed study in South African history within the first few years of the establishment of the Center, and although he soon afterward added a professional historian, who was in part at least a product of the Center, to the staff, he did not anticipate the great demand that would come from students in this field. Previously interested in this aspect not as something in its own right but as mere background, he absorbed the new historical writing and attended all the historical colloquia which were instituted at the Center with his approval and support.

W. O. Brown's library became an institution. Despite the attrition of losses, which he had to replace from his own funds, he continued to loan books to students and colleagues from a collection that ranks among the finest sets of Africana in this country and probably in the world. His knowledge of titles rivaled that of the professional bibliographer, but he also had an unparalleled knowledge of the contents. I believe that no one in his generation has had such an extensive and profound acquaintance with the writings on so wide a range of fields related to Africa. What A. L. Kroeber once said of himself was also true of Bill Brown: he grew up with the literature; there was little when he became

interested, and he thereafter kept pace with it. Probably no one from now on will be able to accomplish a comparable mastery of the literature. His search for "ephemera" was unremitting. His briefcase was always heavily loaded with the night's reading. He was a rapid and retentive reader. Specialists in fields other than the one in which he had been trained often commented on his grasp of the issues and opinions in their own fields. Over the years there were many indications of the respect and affection in which he was held by Africans and Africanists of many countries, positions, and persuasions. The door of Brown's office was always open and visitors, staff, and students made a constant procession for professional counsel, personal advice, or just to chat. He came early and often stayed late to get his work done. His relaxed unassuming manner, his never-failing cheerfulness, his dry wit, his genuine warmth and interest in people, no less than his amazing fund of knowledge, made him a magnet that drew all types of people to him. After fifteen years of working with Bill Brown as my "boss," and having listened to many who have worked under him at different points in his varied career, I can vouch that there are very few persons for whom it was so easy and so pleasant to work.

During these busy years, in addition to his duties as Director, he was a member of the Executive Council of the International African Institute (London); member of the Executive Council of the Institute for the Study of Differing Civilizations (Brussels); secretary of the Society for the Study of Race Relations in Cross-Cultural Perspective; and occasionally a consultant to the Ford Foundation. He was on the Selection Committee (African subcommittee) for the Foreign Areas Fellowship Program, 1965-1968, and the Management Committee of the U.S.-South Africa Leader Exchange Program. He was a member of the American Sociological Society, the American Population Association, the Academy of Political and Social Science, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Overseas Council of the South African Institute of Race Relations. He was invited to, and participated in, the American Assembly on Africa, 1958. The Senate of the Faculty of Boston University selected him to give the University Lecture for 1960. He was consultant on Africa to the Encyclopedia Americana.

He was a charter member of the African Studies Association, which he helped to found, and was elected its second President in 1960. He served on the Policy Committee and the Research Liaison Committee. Appointed by the Association as a member of the U.S. Delegation, he attended the First International Congress of Africanists at Accra, Ghana, in 1963, and was an alternate delegate to the Second International Congress of Africanists at Dakar, Senegal, in 1967, where he also served as Co-President of Section V. He was invited to the Libyan History Conference, University of Libya, Benghazi, in March, 1968, which was his last trip to Africa.

In keeping with university regulations, he retired in 1965 from the directorship of the center he had founded, but was appointed Professor Emeritus and continued to teach. He was also involved in research on the progress and needs of Africanist research by American scholars, and in drawing together accumulated notes and jottings into a book-length statement of his final ideas on race and ethnicity in Africa. It is to be hoped that this had progressed to the

point that it can be edited by another hand for posthumous publication. His administrative and consultative duties had the result that much of what he wrote was in the form of reports to institutions, so that his list of publications represented the smaller part of his output. In his own published work he restricted himself to a few themes, but in numerous book reviews he revealed his fuller range of understanding. He gave to the writing of reviews the dedication and care that the author had given to the book; there are few reviewers who have taken the task so seriously. He seems deliberately to have given time, that others in his position might have safeguarded for writing, to helping others in their beginning steps in the field in which he had already come so far. Brown was not under the illusion that a publication list is the measure of accomplishment; he was not impressed by such mechanical judgments. In this, as in his whole life, there was the gentle, modest, helpful humanity in him that responded first to people and secondarily to things. A volume of essays by colleagues and former students to be dedicated in his honor has been in preparation for some time.

Knowing that he would never willingly have accepted inactivity, one may imagine that he would have approved that death should come quickly while he was still in full control of his energies and faculties. His colleagues will console their loss by the memory of the enrichment he gave them. Secretaries will miss the flowers he brought from his garden in season to place on their desks before they arrived, but it is the students who above all will miss his familiar smile and encouragement.

He is survived by his wife, two sons, Steven, 28, Keith, 26, and a daughter, Susan, 23.

Daniel F. McCall