



## The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt

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Charles Chesnutt was the first commercially successful African American fiction writer. The three volumes of journals he kept as a young man between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four provide innumerable insights into his artistic gestation period. The introduction by editor Richard Brodhead places Chesnutt in the context of the post-Reconstruction South and also in the larger American tradition. Like his predecessor, Benjamin Franklin, and his contemporary, Booker T. Washington, Chesnutt was an American character type, self-made and individualistic. His journals reveal a hardworking and self-disciplined young man bent on self-improvement and determined to make a place for himself in a society that limited his options.

Brodhead's introduction makes it clear that Chesnutt was the beneficiary of a progressive school system for freed blacks that was superior even to the white school in Fayetteville, Chesnutt's hometown in North Carolina. Eventually becoming assistant principal of that institution after it became the Colored Normal School, Chesnutt was one of the leading black educators in North Carolina before he reached the age of twenty. That he decided to go North and seek his fortune in the face of this success is indicative of both his ambition and his frustration at the limitations imposed by Southern racial prejudice.

A light-skinned man, Chesnutt could pass for white and was part of what W. E. B. Du Bois would later call the talented tenth. As the journals show, being a member of such an elite did not confer much satisfaction. Chesnutt was alienated from the black lower classes, complaining of their ignorance and superstition, and he was barred from association with cultivated whites because of his African ancestry. Thus the journals give a glimpse into the real-life experiences that were to be given fictional treatment in his ingenious "color line" fiction a decade or two later.

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