

J. Saunders Redding

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J. Saunders Redding, Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters Emeritus, was widely regarded as being the dean of Afro-American literary critics. The author of eight books and three dozen essays, and joint-editor of an anthology of Afro-American literature still much used in college teaching, he became— with his acceptance in 1970 of his chair at Cornell—the first Afro-American to hold an endowed professorship in literary criticism at an Ivy League university.

Not only an eminent colleague but an unforgettable friend, Saunders joined the Department of English at the culmination of a singular career. He was born in Wilmington, Delaware, the third of seven children in— as he writes — “an upper-class Negro family,” both his parents were graduates of Howard University. His father served as secretary of the Wilmington branch of the NAACP and founded the first black YMCA in that city. His mother, as Saunders tells us in his autobiography, *No Day of Triumph* (1942), taught him and his siblings the lost art of oratory and introduced them, through oral readings, to the canonical works of the Western tradition, especially to those of Hans Christian Andersen, Longfellow, and Shakespeare, but also to the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose widow, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, would be the young Saunders’s English teacher at Wilmington’s all-black Howard High School.

Upon graduation at the age of sixteen, he followed his brother Lewis, later a noted civil-rights lawyer, in matriculating at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, from which he transferred after a year to Brown University, where he earned the Ph.B. and M.A. degrees in English in 1928 and 1932; he was awarded the D.Litt. in 1963. A faithful alumnus of Brown, he served on the Board of Fellows of the Corporation from 1969 to 1981. In 1929 Saunders married Esther Elizabeth James, who together with their two sons, Conway Holmes and Lewis Alfred, survives him. He taught at Morehouse College in Atlanta from 1928 to 1931, when he was dismissed by the conservative administration of that prestigious black college for being “too radical.” After graduate study at Brown and at Columbia University, he taught at Louisville Municipal College from 1934 to 1936, at Southern University in New Orleans from 1936 to 1938, at Elizabeth City (North Carolina) State Teachers College from 1938 to 1943, and at Hampton Institute from 1943 to 1966, where he was named Johnson Professor of Creative Literature in 1955. In 1949-50 he served as visiting professor at Brown, becoming the first black person ever to teach at an Ivy League university, and he was visiting fellow in the humanities at Duke University in 1964-65. In 1952 he traveled to India as exchange

lecturer for the Department of State, and to Africa in 1962 to lecture under the auspices of the American Society for African Culture.

In 1966 Saunders Redding was named Director of the Division of Research and Publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in which office he served until he joined the Cornell faculty, serving thereafter as consultant to the Endowment. During his last year in Washington, he was also professor of American History and Civilization at George Washington University. In 1975 he was named to the Board of Directors of the American Council of Learned Societies and in 1976 to that of the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Virginia. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, he served from 1954 to 1962 and from 1970 to 1973 on the Editorial Board of *The American Scholar*. He was a life member of the National Book Committee and from 1973 to 1976 served as honorary consultant in American culture to the Library of Congress. The holder of eight honorary degrees and recipient of the Mayflower Award in 1944 for *No Day of Triumph*, he was Rockefeller Foundation Fellow in 1940-41 and Guggenheim Fellow in 1944-45 and 1959-60.

Redding's first book, the pioneering *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), has been called "the first comprehensive [and] serious critical work devoted exclusively to Afro-American literature and written by an Afro-American." In it Saunders Redding sought to chart the contours of the canon of the broader black tradition, of his "Great Tradition," and not simply to supplement or refine the three or four broader, inclusive listings he inherited from the work of earlier scholars; he at the same time provided a system of criticism that with great subtlety and acumen formalized the basis for defining that tradition. He was the first scholar to show that, in the first century of its existence, "the literature of the Negro in the North (as of his brother in the South) was. . . essentially an oral literature," and he enunciated a nationalist ideology and esthetic that emphasizes the crucial roles both of black vernacular and of the growth of a free — and literate — black urban culture in the North. To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its first publication, Cornell University Press is now publishing a new edition of *To Make a Poet Black*.

The Saunders Redding we at Cornell came to know later in his career is the Saunders whose voice we clearly recognize in a memorable passage of the Phi Beta Kappa address he delivered at Brown University in June, 1968:

Preferential treatment must be accorded the Negro and other disadvantaged minorities if "racial equality" is not to remain a delusion....[However, the] Negro American...is no more African than the fairest Anglo-Saxon Protestant is...His destiny is one with the destiny of America...Let us not deceive ourselves. As the comic strip character, Pogo, once remarked, "We have seen the enemy, and they is us".

When in his senior year he was the only black student at Brown, he wrote of having felt as if he were “fighting the whole white world. ... I hated and feared the whites. I hated and feared and was ashamed of Negroes.” But at the same time, he recalled, “it was at college that I began to give serious attention to writing, not as a career but because I liked it; though only heaven knows why, since even then the effort used to tear me apart.” The complexity and trenchancy of those remarks (“trenchant” was a favorite adjective of Saunders’s, signifying a special sort of incisiveness that defines differences or categories with great sharpness and clarity) suggest both why that effort cost him so much and why we so prize its fruits — notably, in addition to the books already mentioned, *Stranger and Alone* (1950), *They Came in Chains: Americans from Africa* (1950), *On Being Negro in America* (1951), *An American in India: A Personal Report on the Indian Dilemma and the Nature of Her Conflicts* (1954), *The Lonesome Road: The Story of the Negro’s Part in America* (1958), and *The Negro* (1967). In 1949 the National Urban League cited Saunders Redding for outstanding achievement, and it is characteristic of Saunders that, when Cornell offered him the Ernest I. White Professorship in American Studies, he asked that it carry in addition the denomination “Humane Letters.” Since his retirement in 1975, the chair has in his successor’s hands retained the expanded title.

Saunders and Esther then continued to make their home in Ithaca and to travel widely, and for the better part of a decade Saunders continued his active schedule of writing, lecturing, and consulting. Shortly before his death, the University established in his name and honor a program of doctoral fellowships with which to bring outstanding minority students to Cornell. Like Saunders’s writings, this program stands as a memorial to an extraordinary colleague, to his elegance of manner and morals, to his pointed curiosity and his scrupulous care with words, to the combination of finesse and toughness that so contributed to the integrity of his character and brought him to a settled conviction of what his work in life was to accomplish.

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