

DR. ALAIN LEROY LOCKE: Champion of Race Unity

Throughout his life, Alain Locke turned challenges into victories. As a child, a heart problem kept him from doing much physical activity. But Alain poured his energy into books, the piano, and the violin—and he became an excellent musician. Alain was also a brilliant student. Unlike many African Americans who, because of racism, had limited opportunities for schooling, his mother, father, and grandfather had all been teachers. Though his father had died when Alain was six, his mother gave him a good education.

After high school, Alain entered Harvard University to study philosophy. He was one of few African American students, and it upset him that black and white students stayed in separate groups. Still, he graduated with highest honors in 1907, and was the first African American to win a Rhodes Scholarship—a famous award for study at Oxford University in England.

Facing Intense Racism

Alain faced aggressive prejudice from other students at Oxford. Some even tried to have Alain's scholarship taken away from him. They didn't succeed, but their ongoing hostility was very difficult for Alain. He said, "I am a human being," and he felt color should



Alain Locke earned a doctorate from Harvard University in 1918, the year he became a Bahá'í. Today at Harvard, an Alain Locke Prize is given to the student with the highest grades in African American studies.

not make any difference. He wrote to his mother, "I am not a race problem. I am Alain LeRoy Locke."

In 1911, Alain returned to the U.S. and traveled in the South. He learned about the daily struggles of African Americans with racism, including segregated schools, unjust laws, and even physical violence. At times, he feared for his own life. These experiences drove him to change the negative attitudes many white people had about blacks. He went on a mission to promote the beauty of African and African American art and culture. He felt that change started with "a revolution within the soul."

A New Spirit

Alain later taught philosophy, English, and education at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He published *The New Negro: An Interpretation*—a collection of outstanding art, poetry, drama, fiction, and essays by himself and others. It shed light on the contributions of African Americans to society, and their growing pride and confidence.

Alain wrote, "the new spirit is awake in the masses" of black Americans. This spirit spread, inspiring appreciation for African American culture in the U.S., Europe, and Africa. Alain often traveled to Europe and Africa, building an extensive collection of African art.

In 1918, while Alain was writing about the beauty of diverse cultures, he became a Bahá'í. He wrote and spoke about his new faith. Shoghi Effendi, the head of the Bahá'í Faith at the time, wrote to him, "I have always greatly admired your exceptional abilities and capacity to render distinguished services to the Faith . . . I often remember you in my prayers . . ."

Until Alain passed away in 1954, he actively participated in the Bahá'í community's efforts to build unity among all people. He was, indeed, a leader of one race—the human race.