



The Lure of Ethiopia and the Saga of Colonel John Robinson, 1935–1937

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Abstract

This essay is centered on the Ethiopian resistance to the Italian invasion of 1935–1936. Among other impacts, this war greatly disturbed African-American activists. They perceived in this uneven contest an extension of their own struggle against white domination, both at home and abroad. Despite forbidding obstacles, John Charles Robinson—black aviation pioneer from deep Dixie—journeyed to Ethiopia. There he led its small air force in battle against Italian conquest. In fighting for an African nation, he also advanced the cause of civil rights in the United States. Woven into this essay are ideas and interpretations developed by W. E. B. Du Bois in his famous study—*The Souls of Black Folk*—helpful to framing and grasping the Robinson tale. Overall, the essay sits at the intersection of African-American history, aviation history, and the international politics/U.S. foreign relations of the mid-1930s.

Keywords John Charles Robinson · W. E. B. Du Bois · Haile Selassie · Tuskegee Institute · “Night in Mississippi” (poem) · Mussolini · League of Nations · Herbert Fauntleroy Julian · *The Souls of Black Folk* · Malaku Bayen · William Leo Hansberry · Curtiss–Wright Aviation School · Imperial Ethiopian Air Force · William Miller Cramp

Emperor Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia in 1935 stood alone in Africa as a place unfettered to European rule. Along every frontier of the landlocked kingdom lay the outposts of bristling empires. London’s writ ran in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland. Paris held sway in French Somaliland with a naval installation at Djibuti. Rome ruled Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. No European appetite for Ethiopian concession matched that of Benito Mussolini. He hungered for Fascism’s glory and redress of the Ethiopian victory at Adowa, when on 1 March 1896 the forces of Emperor Menelik II had smashed Italy’s invading army.

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Haile Selassie pursued varieties of diplomacy to thwart Italy's renewed trespassing, begun on 3 October 1935. He tried energetically but unsuccessfully to involve the League of Nations, composed of fifty-three states, invoking that body's mission of ensuring members' safety—Ethiopia having joined in 1923—against aggression. He and his lieutenants worked vainly to rally non-League countries, notably the United States, behind Ethiopia's cause. Appeals were also issued to Africans and the African diaspora, especially in the New World. That endeavor produced modest material contribution, though it roused the ardency of countless black Americans, among whom the aviator John Charles Robinson, recruited in 1935 to head the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force (IEAF).

Robinson had assimilated much of the Pan-African faith, particularly the messianic Ethiopianist promise thriving among the diaspora: Christian Ethiopia, avatar of liberation and civilizational renewal, entailed future redemption for the fraternity of black oppressed from captive Africa to Jim Crow Dixie. To him, Ethiopia embodied ancestral home and spiritual wellspring, a veritable Zion.¹

American responses to war

Perceptions of the Italo-Ethiopian war varied in the United States. Yet diversity of viewpoint did not obviate a resolve to avoid entanglement in a conflict that, irrespective of outcome or justice, would have negligible impact on the republic's security/economy. In this connection, financial institutions or industrial enterprises with the wherewithal could continue to conduct business with their Italian counterparts. Italian-Americans, when so inclined, might march unmolested on behalf of the "old country" and solicit funds to support its Ethiopian venture. Similarly, African-Americans should be humored insofar as they sought to provide moral or other aid to aggrieved Ethiopia.

Inquiries conducted in 1934–1936 by the Senate's Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry reinforced Washington's aloofness. Chaired by North Dakota's Gerald Nye, this inquest, riding the crest of revulsion for the Great War, meant to expose the nefarious institutions and persons who caused gullible Americans in 1917 to plunge into a misconceived crusade against Germany: lending banks, arms manufacturers, and sly Anglo-French propagandists who duped President Woodrow Wilson. Never again, Nye and like-minded Senate colleagues implored, should the United States hazard innocent youths or sap its treasury for the sake of crafty foreigners and rapacious corporations. American intervention in the Great War had been a tragedy; sound statecraft would not permit a repeat. Consequently, Nye and allies approved Congress's passage of the Neutrality Act. Signed by FDR mere weeks before Italy invaded Ethiopia, this legislation forbade the exporting of war implements from America to nations in conflict, advised that citizens who travelled to combat zones did so at their own peril, and required arms

¹ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen* [pp. 62–63, 73–75, 77–78], Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941* [p. 69].



manufacturers to obtain export licenses. Blandly applied to all warring nations regardless of status as aggressor or victim, this neutrality meant Ethiopia need not apply to Washington.

President Franklin Roosevelt and cabinet officers disapproved of Mussolini's African war. The aims seemed dubious, the means employed odious. The White House, consistent with the temper of Depression-era Americans, also preferred an underdog against swaggering Fascism. Progressives, U.S. diplomats posted to Addis Ababa, and sponsors of Protestant missionaries in Ethiopia were vociferous in denouncing Italian aggression.² None of this outlook, though, translated into meaningful action on behalf of Haile Selassie. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull publically condemned Rome's aggression but cleaved to the Neutrality Act (despite anxiety that it infringed upon executive prerogatives). The administration's invoking of a "moral embargo" against Italy had no effect, exemplified by shrewd U.S. oil producers who tripled their sales to that country in 1935. American exporters of copper, trucks, tractors, steel, and scrap iron also thrived.³ The Italo-Ethiopian war, however disquieting, also impressed FDR as a distraction from more urgent international problems—specifically, Japan's pressure on China and Germany's subversion of the Versailles status quo. Impoverished and barely related to U.S. diplomatic concerns, Ethiopia did not matter in the grand geopolitical scheme.⁴

The salvaging of a limping national economy via New Deal improvisations continued to consume the White House's political energies, producing in 1935 the Works Progress Administration, National Labor Relations Act, and the Social Security Act. Were the president's economic-social preoccupations not enough to clinch the brief for neutrality, Breckinridge Long, ambassador to Rome, and unabashed admirer of the Duce, preached the virtue of benign detachment as a basis for "our having to deal on a friendly basis in the future with a much more important Italy."⁵

The Italian-Ethiopian crisis seemed remote to the broad U.S. public, far less consequential than ongoing difficulties related to labor unrest, unemployment, and ravaging dust bowls. The 1935 trial and sentencing of Bruno Richard Hauptmann for the abduction/murder of Charles Lindbergh's 20-month-old son meantime concentrated popular notice. The scandalous link between the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson, and Edward, Prince of Wales, also absorbed attention. Weeks before Italy's Ethiopian campaign began, populist demagogue Senator Huey Long was assassinated in Baton Rouge, an act shocking to the country and leaving millions of his

² The senior U.S. diplomat in Addis Ababa, Engert Cornelius Van H. Engert, wrote dispatches in which he expressed respect for Haile Selassie and indignation for his defeat while the western democracies failed to help. See, for example, in *FRUS 1936*, Vol. III: Engert to Secretary of State, 12 April 1936, p. 59; Engert to Secretary of State, 1 May 1936, pp. 63–64; Engert to Secretary of State, 2 May 1936, p. 65; Engert to Secretary of State, 5 May 1936, pp. 68–70; Engert to Secretary of State, 12 May 1936, p. 76.

³ Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933–1939* [p. 110], Strang, *A Sad Commentary on World Ethics: Italy and the United States during the Ethiopian Crisis* [p. 283] and Clarke, *Soviet Appeasement, Collective Security and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936* [pp. 144–145, 148].

⁴ Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936–1941* [p. 3].

⁵ Long to Secretary of State, 9 October 1935, *FRUS 1935*, Vol. I, p. 669.



supporters to mourn. In sum, sensational happenings interacted with an introverted national mood to eclipse interest in faraway African events. Few Americans were disconcerted, or even knew, that Washington officialdom found it inconvenient to grant Haile Selassie's 1936 request to visit the United States.

Exceptions to this indifference, as mentioned, resided in two groups: Italian-Americans, African-Americans. Belittled in the United States by Protestants whose origins lay in northwestern Europe, many Italian-Americans found Mussolini's Ethiopian invasion exhilarating. It ratified the place of their ancestral homeland among the world's dynamic empires and, by extension, deepened respect for an ethnicity whose best representatives were deemed un-clubbable by WASPs. In support of the war, fraternal associations, abetted at times by Roman Catholic clergy, raised sizeable funds and medical supplies for the Italian Red Cross; sent food aid to Italy; disseminated propaganda touting the justice of Mussolini's war; sponsored public forums and sympathetic speakers; organized petition drives against would-be sanctions; and registered disgust, laced with threats of defection from New Deal ranks, for White House criticism of Fascist foreign policy. In major cities—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia—rallies were held in Italian neighborhoods, whence came hundreds of volunteers who, in defiance of neutrality prohibitions, went to Italy to join the Ethiopian expeditionary force.⁶ Also gratifying from this standpoint were those apologists who resided outside the Italian-American community. These counted the editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as literati like the poet Ezra Pound. He waxed lyrical on Italy's "noble" task. He scoffed at Haile Selassie as primitive superintendent of a patch of African desolation.

Further afield, Italian pleaders derived comfort in such persons as Pope Pius XI. He conveyed satisfaction in May 1936 at the deserved "happiness of a great and good people."⁷ That same year, British writer Evelyn Waugh, reflecting upon his Ethiopian experiences among "an inferior race," heartily endorsed Italian rule—ethical leap over an "archaic African despotism" that pretended to decency.⁸ Waugh's compatriot and fellow war correspondent, Muriel Currey, expressed herself similarly. After accompanying General Emilio De Bono's forces as they crossed the Ethiopian-Eritrean frontier, she recounted for readers "the welcome given by the poor people to the Italian Army." She predicted a radiant future for Ethiopia under Mussolini's benevolent leadership.⁹

African-American intellectuals responded vigorously to the opprobrium heaped upon Ethiopia. Founded at Howard University in 1934, the Ethiopian Research Council (ERC) featured such scholars as the innovative historian William Leo Hansberry and the political scientist Ralph Bunche. The ERC's aims included the debunking of falsehoods centered on Ethiopia's supposedly dreary past, atavistic

⁶ Dugan and Lafore, *Days of Emperor and Clown: The Italo-Ethiopian War 1935–1936* [pp. 190–191], Strang, "A Sad Commentary on World Ethics: Italy and the United States during the Ethiopian Crisis," pp. 156–161, Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis* [pp. 123–125], Diggins [3, pp. 302–303, 305].

⁷ Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939*, p. 130.

⁸ Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia* [pp. 34–35, 248–249, 253].

⁹ Currey, *A Woman at the Abyssinian War* [pp. 147].



culture, social waywardness, and similar racist tropes meant to validate Italian policies. Against such conceit, the ERC conducted researches and distributed findings on the art, architecture, literature, and Christian legacy woven into twentieth-century Ethiopia.¹⁰

In the October 1935 volume of *Foreign Affairs*, W. E. B. Bois of Atlanta University surveyed for readers the history of Ethiopia. He damned Mussolini's treachery as another chapter in the annals of white trespass upon the peoples of Africa and Asia. Italians in Ethiopia, he charged, had betrayed their Renaissance humanity:

We are going to subdue an inferior people not for their good but for ours. We are going to take Ethiopia just as we took Somaliland and as England took Kenya. We are going to reduce black men to the status of landless serfs. And we are going to do this because we have the power to do it, and because no white nation dare stop us and no colored nation can.¹¹

Similar condemnation of Italian imperialism refrained throughout African America—from church pulpits, to lecterns at historically black universities, to civic organizations, to professional associations. Moneys were collected for Ethiopian donation, help from white sympathizers offsetting black penury. Interracial assemblies protested, including a congregation of 10,000 demonstrators at Madison Square Garden.¹² Medicines, field hospitals, and foodstuffs were collected for shipment. Italian products and Italian-American entrepreneurs—grocers, landlords, restaurateurs, street vendors—were boycotted on the assumption that they supported Mussolini.

In spring 1935, while the African war loomed, white and black boxing fans eagerly anticipated the heavyweight championship bout between Italy's Primo Carnera and Alabama-born Joe Louis. Held on 25 June in Yankee Stadium, the match ended in Louis's sixth round knockout of Carnera. This triggered a joyful outpouring in African-American precincts but gloom elsewhere, particularly in Italian-American districts where voices rang of vengeance to be visited upon Ethiopia. Later in the year, stoked by reports of Italian atrocities (i.e., use of poison gases, massacres of civilians) in Ethiopia, feeling ran so high in places that protest rallies and pro-Ethiopian parades ended in violence. Street brawls in cities also erupted along the borders where Italian and African neighborhoods touched. In effect, urban areas experienced a type of low-intensity racial warfare, despite pleas for calm by the likes of Congress's lone black Representative, Arthur Mitchell of Illinois.

Thousands of African-Americans hoped to travel to Ethiopia to bolster its strength, among them were Great War veterans, doctors, nurses, and civil rights activists. But logistical problems ultimately defeated these people. The Justice Department strictly enforced against African-Americans prohibitions on enlistment

¹⁰ Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936–1941*, pp. 20–28; Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, p. 24.

¹¹ Du Bois, Inter-Racial Implications of the the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View, *Foreign Affairs* 14(1) [p. 89].

¹² Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot* [23, p. 191].



in foreign armies waging war against nations with which the United States enjoyed peace. An obdurate State Department refused to issue passports. Additionally, the steep cost of travel to Ethiopia exceeded the resources of most persons or would-be sponsoring agencies. This situation contrasted with those Italian-Americans who, endowed with greater political clout and financial capacity rare in African America, surmounted legal/financial obstacles to reach the theater of military operations.¹³

Addis Ababa subsequently did not hide its disappointment but faulted black Americans for dereliction of moral duty. Their verbal support, mingled with prayers, hardly compensated for the paltriness of useable aid, so said Dr. Malaku Bayen. Commissioned to secure African-American volunteers/donations, he reprimanded U.S. audiences soon after Addis Ababa's May 1936 downfall: "Had colored America taken a more active part, the outcome of the Ethiopian campaign might have been different. But instead of playing the part you should, all of you went to sleep, are still asleep, and are perfectly satisfied with your present conditions."¹⁴

Against this reproof stood John Robinson. His exploits in 1935–1936, which eventually blurred into legend, helped to soothe African-American conscience, unsettled (more than Bayen allowed) for not better delivering to Ethiopia in its direst moment. Robinson's efforts, as his black compatriots also felt and censorious Bayen might have guessed, amounted to proxy combat against homegrown injustice. To Robinson, Italian imperialism and Blackshirt savagery constituted seamlessness with Jim Crow restrictions and Klansmen lynchers.

The Brown Condor

Known during and after the Italo-Ethiopian war by his moniker, the Brown Condor, Robinson had been reared in rigidly segregated Gulfport, Mississippi. His widowed mother had repaired to that seaport to join a new husband soon after Robinson's birth on 26 November 1903 in Carrabelle, Florida. In the same year, two events occurred that illuminate aspects of Robinson, especially useful given the dearth of archival material about him and correspondingly thin scholarly literature.¹⁵ Near Kitty Hawk (North Carolina), Orville and Wilbur Wright launched their

¹³ Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, pp. 210–211; Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936–1941*, pp. 45, 158–159.

¹⁴ Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, p. 175.

¹⁵ The best works to date on Robinson are these: Tucker's *Father of the Tuskegee Airmen: John C. Robinson*; Chapter VI, "The Brown Condor" in Scott's *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, pp. 69–80, Israel's *The Lion and the Condor*, Thomas Simmons's *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*.

Concerning Simmons's scholarship: His first book on Robinson was published in 1988 by Bartleby Press—*The Brown Condor: The True Adventures of John C. Robinson*. Simmons's second Robinson book—*The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*—won a gold medal from the society of Military Writers of America and received a joint resolution from the Mississippi House and Senate. In the absence of Simmons's 1988 work and subsequent prize winning research/writing the Robinson story would have been lost.



heavier-than-air contraption. Also in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois published his trailblazing book, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

As with countless people at that time, the reality of flying and snipping earthly constraints fascinated Robinson. Airplanes, even flimsy early twentieth-century prototypes, promised to compress geographical distance, redefine conceptions of speed, and revolutionize travel. Such lionized pilots as Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart exemplified boldness and imagination. They also intimated to admirers a future of boundless possibility, not unlike a later generation's marvel for astronauts and space travel.¹⁶ Apparently, Robinson became enamored of airplanes at the tender age of seven, when daring aviator John Moisant landed his craft (pusher biplane with an amphibious wooden float) in the Mississippi Sound before appreciative Gulfport spectators whose number included Robinson and mother.¹⁷ From this infatuation developed his mature vocation: to advance the frontiers of aviation, which cause he also insisted black Americans ought to play an affirmative part.¹⁸

The romance, no less than the practical dividends of flying, armored Robinson against hazards that otherwise could have undone him.¹⁹ Perhaps in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) parish of his childhood, or as a student in chapel at Tuskegee Institute (class of 1924), he heard or read in Bible study these words from Psalm 55. The psalmist's yearning for deliverance by sturdy wings would have encouraged any black Mississippian, surrounded by white menace and pinched prospects.

Because of the voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked: for they cast iniquity upon me, and in wrath they hate me. My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me... Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest.

Nicknamed the Black Eagle, the Trinidad-born (1897), Harlem-based aviator Hubert Fauntleroy Julian—improvident, showy, and rival to Robinson for Ethiopian preferment—once delivered this statement with apt themes. Albeit chagrined to dignify the man, Robinson would nevertheless have seconded this utterance of Julian:

The one abiding love of my life has been flying. At the controls of a plane you feel free, complete master of your own destiny for once, clear of all the petty restrictions and annoyances of the world below, where it makes no difference what colour a man's skin may happen to be... on my own up there in the air suddenly all my dreams came true... At last I was free...²⁰

No less than Kitty Hawk and associated events, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* broadens the context for interpreting Robinson. A multifaceted work—combining

¹⁶ Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power* [p. 2].

¹⁷ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 3–5; Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*, pp. 4–6.

¹⁸ John Robinson to Barnett, 1 July 1936, Box 171, Claude Barnett Papers.

¹⁹ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 17–18, 254.

²⁰ Julian, *Black Eagle* [pp. 25, 35].



sociology, history, autobiography, political theory—*Souls* made passing reference to Ethiopia, constituent part of “a mighty Negro past.”²¹ More famously, Du Bois criticized Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee for promoting a species of manual agricultural-mechanical education. However, useful as means of African-American economic uplift, this would in the long-term perpetuate a class of black peonage and political impotence. The antidote lay in rigorous liberal arts education for the race’s gifted (the “Talented Tenth”), who should then lead their fellows as fully invested partners with white Americans.²² Product of Gulfport’s black public schools—poorly financed, underequipped, understaffed—Robinson majored in automotive mechanics at Tuskegee while stumbling through instruction in English, history, and other humanities curricula.²³ The resultant deficiency, traceable in the surviving fragments of his writing, disqualified him from attaining admission to Du Bois’s cadre of intellectual–political elite. Yet a mix of mechanical aptitude, self-discipline, and commitment to racial equality crystalized in Robinson at Tuskegee, allowing him in later years to contribute vitally, albeit in ways not elaborated upon by Du Bois.

Interlocking ideas developed in *The Souls of Black Folk* with bearing on Robinson’s life were these: (1) the refractory problem of “the color line” that, Du Bois warned, “men pass at their peril;” (2) an un-tearable “veil” that discouraged sympathetic understanding between advantaged whites and beleaguered blacks and kept them apart in sullen solitude and suspicion; (3) the black American’s “double consciousness,” rooted in membership in a traduced minority descended from slaves but aware of and seeking those rights of liberty promised (officially) to all U.S. citizens.²⁴ To realize their Constitutionally ordained place in society, Du Bois held that African-Americans, led by great-souled sages, had to perform multiple tasks: cross the “Valley of Humiliation” and the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” while resisting “hate,” furious and sterile, of all white peoples; overcome “despair” about the weight of accumulated cruelties and cosmic unfairness; suppress that subtle but insidious “doubt” about the innate ability and worth of black people, a psychological shackle forged link by link during centuries of the white ascendancy.²⁵

Whether Robinson had “faith in the ultimate justice of things” (language from *Souls*) must remain a matter of surmise.²⁶ Available evidence suggests that he faced the realities of “color line” and “veil” unblinkingly. He also seemed to cope adequately with that unresolvable tension in double-awareness borne by black Americans—in the United States but not wholly of it. Nor did Robinson succumb, despite momentary lapses, into hatred or debilitating doubt spawned by ancient attempts

²¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [pp. 3–4].

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 21–29, 51.

²³ Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*, pp. 24–25; Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, p. 22.

²⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 3, 46.

²⁵ See p. 44 and Chapter XII, “Of Alexander Crummell,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 103–109.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.



to deny the human personality of black men and women.²⁷ Without the benefit of illustrious guides or having read Du Bois—but with support from attentive parents, conscientious Tuskegee teachers, steady friends—Robinson traversed “valleys” rife with humiliation (in America) and dangers of death (in Ethiopia).

Reticent and serious, Robinson chose not to return to Gulfport upon his Tuskegee graduation.²⁸ Nothing in his youthful employments (delivery, stock boy, bootblack) had set a foundation there upon which to build. Moreover, white workers—determined to exclude any blacks no matter how proficient—dominated the auto mechanics guild in Gulfport, which he once hoped to join. The lynching of a black man, Alex Smith, by a Gulfport mob during Robinson’s Tuskegee days gave further indication, were any needed, that happiness and livelihood must be better served elsewhere.²⁹ Robinson reasoned in his own way, the language of Du Bois never tripping off his tongue, that the “color line” might dig less deep in the north and the “veil” hang less heavy. Consequently, Robinson headed to Detroit, joining the post-World War exodus of southern blacks that trailed out of Dixie.

As it happened, Detroit in the 1920s did not exude racial harmony. Physical reminders of riots in 1919 abounded. So did the psychological scarring, aggravated by a vociferous Ku Klux Klan colony and vaulting social-economic inequalities. The German-American Reinhold Niebuhr, in 1927 a young (b. 1892) parish pastor in the city, sighed: “The situation which the colored people of the city face is really a desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time in gathering the facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people, recently migrated from the south... they have a desperate fight to keep body and soul together.”³⁰ As for Robinson, he concluded after a few years in the Midwest that prevailing white attitudes in the north toward African-Americans were as hostile as in Dixie: “When I was a boy in Mississippi, I was told that things were a lot different in the North, and I guess there are better job opportunities up here, but when it comes to relations with white folks, well I find the North and South aren’t so different, ‘cept maybe the South is more honest about it.”³¹

Robinson obtained gainful employment in Detroit as a car mechanic. Following a move to Chicago, he worked as a Yellow Cab Company repairman. Then, having scraped together enough capital, he purchased an automobile garage in the South Side and hired employees of his own. He also married Earnize, whom he brought into partnership in supervising the garage’s operations and ledgers. With a like-minded chum, Cornelius Coffey, he also indulged a passion for everything aeronautical.³² During these same years Robinson imbibed elements of the “New Negro”

²⁷ Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*, pp. 114, 118, 121.

²⁸ Gubert et al. *Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science* [p. 252].

²⁹ “Negro Is Lynched By Gulfport Mob,” *Jackson Daily News*, p. 2, 22 March 1922.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* [entry 1927, p. 143].

³¹ Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*, p. 70.

³² Scott, *The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, pp. 70–73.



movement (Garveyism, protest poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, NAACP anti-lynching protests) and pan-African idealism—all notions filtering through the zeitgeist of Chicago's burgeoning black society.

By dint of audacity and tenacity, Robinson enrolled as the first African-American student in the Curtiss–Wright Aviation School, from which he graduated in 1931. A year later, the Commerce Department granted him a private pilot's license, then (1935) a transport pilot's license. Concurrent with these attainments, he became an instructor of (primarily) African-American students at Curtiss–Wright. With Coffey, he organized the Challenger Air Pilots' Association, a club composed of black aspirants centered on an airstrip in the Chicago suburb of Robbins. Their collective feats—aerial acrobatics, death-defying stunts, long-distance flights at breathtaking speeds—were usually overlooked by the mainstream media but warmly noted in the African-American press. At the center of this attention stood Robinson. In effect, he became a type of evangelist, spreading the good news of aviation: it had room for talented black pilots and airplane mechanics, who perforce ran a gauntlet of taunts and had (per Du Bois's injunction) to hurdle private hesitation implanted by the unconscious assimilation of defamations. One such appeared in a 1925 report prepared by the U.S. Army War College, "The Use of Negro Manpower in War." It pronounced that African-Americans lacked the intellect, physical dexterity, and strength of character to perform advanced functions, among which the flying of airplanes.³³ Ignoring the prowess of Texas barnstormer Bessie Coleman (1892–1926), the first black woman to earn a pilot's certificate (from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale), and Eugene Bullard (1895–1961), Georgia-born volunteer who shone with the French air corps during the Great War, white aviators cheerfully parodied black incapacity and timorousness: "No sah, it's terra firmah fo me—and de mo' firmah de less terra."³⁴

These slurs intensified Robinson's canvassing on the merits of black involvement in U.S. aviation, confidence buoyed by his own record of piling achievements. He particularly hoped that Tuskegee would create an aeronautics curriculum. To that end, in the early 1930s he engaged relevant administrators, but the conversations turned desultory and caviling. Not until 1941 did Tuskegee and the U.S. Army collaborate to create a program along the lines that Robinson had once recommended (see below). He had more immediate success when in 1935 the state of Illinois unexpectedly rewarded his lobbying effort to make the male membership of the Challengers Air Pilots' Association a unit of quasi-military formation loosely affiliated with the exclusively white Illinois National Guard. Selected planes were styled as military and sported a distinctive unit insignia designed by Robinson. The men were issued uniforms. He and Coffey, both appointed to the rank of lieutenant colonel, served as joint commanders of the newly designated Military Order of Guard, Aviation Squadron that also earned the War Department's endorsement. This conferral of military status by a Federal agency upon a set of black pilots aligned with such

³³ Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945–1946* [p. 2], Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Force During World War II* [pp. 1–3].

³⁴ "To Fly, to Brave the Wind," *Washington Post*, 26 September 1979.



turnabouts as Abraham Lincoln's permitting African-Americans to enlist in Union armies.³⁵

While the Military Order of Guard, Aviation Squadron assumed shape and tone, Haile Selassie's government cast about for foreign volunteers in expectation of Italy's invading. This eventually led via Dr. Bayen and Claude Barnett (director of the Associated Negro Press) to the well-regarded Robinson-Coffey outfit. Its membership included more than half-a-dozen men eager to join any Ethiopia-bound air unit. Not wanting to draw attention to themselves on (potentially illegal) errand to Ethiopia, they decided to travel serially to east Africa. Their senior commander, Robinson, led the way, despite the anxiety of his wife that the risks were overwhelming. After receiving a cabled invitation (April 1935) from Addis Ababa to serve as a commissioned officer in the IEAF and adviser on air force matters, Robinson booked ship passage for Ethiopia. A broken arm, suffered in vehicular accident just days before his leaving the United States, and bouts of seasickness, made for unpleasantness, as did the coldness of some white Americans during the Atlantic crossing. For the sake of plausible deniability, Robinson presented himself as an Ethiopian tailor returning to his homeland after a 25-year sojourn in America, a subterfuge that he briefly maintained once in Africa. Lengthy maritime travel (traversing Mediterranean routes, Suez Canal, and Red Sea), capped by rough train from Djibouti westward, landed him in late May in Addis Ababa and his first meeting with the emperor.³⁶

Over time, Robinson developed an unfeigned loyalty to Haile Selassie, whom he characterized as a devout Christian and patriot possessed of firm will.³⁷ The emperor reciprocated the feeling, entrusting (August 1935) his fledgling air force to Robinson, formally commissioned full colonel and chief of the IEAF with mandate to make ready for combat. Robinson also came to enjoy good relations with principal members of the royal household despite language barriers and yawning differences in habits of mind and culture. To the IEAF pilots and ground crews, he gave coaching and unstinting encouragement in their determination to master aerial warfare's novel demands. Of his private life, little is known, though phantoms of liaisons with Ethiopian women flit across Robinson's tale.³⁸

To Claude Barnett, who kept him on retainer for the Associated Negro Press, Robinson provided occasional reports on his doings. Of the country, he admitted (uncorrected text): "I... found things much different than I expected. In some cases much better and in other cases 100 percent worst. I can readily see for an American Negro to succeed here he must possess the following qualifications—First A strong Stomach—A Silent tongue—A Kind Heart—An Iron hand—The Patience of Jobe, and above all things know his line of work."³⁹

³⁵ Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race* [1994, p. 49].

³⁶ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 62, 70–73, 89–92, 95.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 99–100, 111; Simmons, *The Man Called Brown Condor: The Forgotten History of an African American Fighter Pilot*, pp. 174–175, 177–178.

³⁹ John Robinson to Barnett, 3 June 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.



Any African-American of deficient character risked playing into Ethiopian doubts about the timber of U.S. blacks, Robinson felt. Case in point was the flamboyant Hubert Julian, who in 1930 briefly led the empire's air force. He had in October of that year, in an impromptu performance to honor Haile Selassie and his pending investiture as emperor, taken his prized craft—a de Havilland Gypsy Moth biplane—on an unauthorized outing, the purpose being to perform acrobatics to entertain an audience of luminaries. Alas, Julian lost control of the plane. It crashed and though he survived his standing with the emperor did not. The kingdom terminated Julian's IEAF connection, and then, after toying with notions of more drastic punishment, expelled the hapless aviator.⁴⁰ But 5 years later, with imperialist attack in the offing, Julian returned to Ethiopia with hopes of recovering a responsible position in the IEAF. In this aim, and incorrigibly his own worst enemy, he again failed. As Robinson told Barnett, Julian combined indolence with hucksterism and preyed upon the unwary (language slightly amended):

Hubert Julian is here owes a \$450 Hotel bill, which includes money borrowed, Board, Laundry, room rent a intaining people. Beats the servants and walks around bragging about his 60 Airplanes in America and his \$60,000 bank account in America...

[He] is telling every body I am an American aviator and he sent for me to come here. You would be surprised of the lies he tells. He is not working here and has never worker here in any way. The leading people don't speak to him. Only the poor class of people talks to him, because he tells them he is going to start a school for all the poor people as soon as can see the King. The Police beat him real hard [recently] for interfering with a police arresting a man...

[He] is going to run a racket when he comes back to America saying he is employed to get people to living back here, it will be a racket for him to raise more money.

I really believe the higher Abyssinian wants the American Negro but Julian [complicates the picture]... everybody know Julian because he goes down the street and preaches to poor people about the schools he is going to give them free and teach 100 boys a week to fly in the 60 Airplanes he going to bring from America.⁴¹

Robinson and Julian came to fisticuffs on 8 August, whereupon the Ethiopian government assigned the latter to training 3000 infantry troops at a provincial encampment in Ambo, ninety miles from the capital.⁴² Rusticated Julian never got near to an IEAF airplane. His fortunes continued to sag, disastrously when rumors circulated that Italian paymasters had enticed him to assassinate the emperor. As precaution, Ethiopian authorities expelled Julian from the country on 15 November

⁴⁰ Nugent, *The Black Eagle*, pp. 74–79; Julian, *Black Eagle*, pp. 89–91.

⁴¹ John Robinson to Barnett, 3 June 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.

⁴² "American Negro Aviator Heads Ethiopian Air Force," *Daily Journal-World*, 22 August 1935.



1935.⁴³ Robinson counted among the happier recipients of this news: “Well the great Julian left Ethiopia last Sunday. He liked to have starved to death before leaving here. From some of the things he did here I really think he is a little off in the head. He laid [sic] down in front of the Emperiors [sic] automobile three or four times. When the car would stop he would get up and beg for money. He was ignored each time, but they put him out Sunday.”⁴⁴

Julian headed for New York. Upon disembarking in December from the Cunard liner *Aquitania*, he informed waiting journalists: “I have come to the unanimous [sic] conclusion that Ethiopia does not need or deserve help.”⁴⁵ Ever resourceful, he later ingratiated himself with Italian grandees. He made his way in mid-1936 to Rome, took Italian citizenship, and changed his name to Huberto Fauntleroyana Juliano. Fascist hosts feted him as forthright critic of Ethiopia and advocate of Italian policies, which he helpfully called “the answer to a cry for help from suffering humanity.”⁴⁶ He probably flattered himself as a future adviser to the Duce regarding African matters. In the event, Julian played no such role or held any office connected to the occupation regime in Ethiopia. Just as well for the sake of what remained of his reputation, as Harlem and other black communities came to loathe him as race traitor and Fascist stooge. To this accusation, he rejoined (many years later) in typically outlandish fashion that his actual aim in Rome involved getting near to Mussolini so that he could shoot him, from which tyrannicide Ethiopia should regain independence.⁴⁷

Julian’s antics infuriated Robinson, understandably. Yet they never threatened to demoralize him, in contrast to his anguish over the failure of Chicago colleagues to reach Ethiopia. Not one member of the Military Order of Guard, Aviation Squadron embarked for the war zone. Reasons varied among the individual pilots: from barriers erected by the State Department, to doubts about fighting for a cause likely to lose, to the difficulties and expense (to have been partly defrayed from Ethiopian coffers) involved in travel to a place sublimely distant from Illinois. Nevertheless, the men’s absence mortified Robinson, originally understood by the emperor’s councilors as the advance figure of a force to come. As Ethiopian doubts rose about the reliability of black Americans, Robinson cabled urgent inquiries to Chicago, offered reassurance (emphasizing well-paid employment in the IEAF), and appealed to the honor of men who had earlier expressed outrage at Italian aggression and said they wanted to fight.⁴⁸ Robinson’s embarrassment turned by degrees to anger, then sense

⁴³ Nugent, *The Black Eagle*, pp. 96–103; Julian, *Black Eagle*, pp. 106–108; Scott, *The Sons of Sheba Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, p. 90; Israel, *The Lion and the Condor*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ John Robinson to Barnett, 21 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.

⁴⁵ David Shaftel, “The Black Eagle of Harlem: The Truth Behind the Tall Tales of Hubert Fauntleroy Julian,” *Air and Space Magazine*, December 2008.

⁴⁶ Julian, *Black Eagle*, p. 116.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–119; Scott, *The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, pp. 94–95; Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936–1941*, pp. 57–60.

⁴⁸ John Robinson’s letters to Barnett, 21 November 1935 and 28 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.



of betrayal—much centered on Coffey, who, contrary to repeated pledges, stayed in Chicago (and married Willa Brown, an elegant African-American aviatrix and one-time aviation student and paramour of Robinson). Coffey, meanwhile, having forfeited moral authority by his own example, did not compel men against their will to forsake families or jobs for eastern Africa. Still, he tried, in vain as it happened, to arrange for the sale and shipment of sorely needed airplane parts to Ethiopia. Those he collected never reached Robinson but were impounded and kept in U.S. government warehouses, adding to Robinson's frustration and dismay over what he regarded as Coffey's perfidiousness.⁴⁹

Robinson's interactions with long-term U.S. residents in Ethiopia were few. The tiny colony of black American expatriates that resided on the fringes of Ethiopian economic-social life went unnoticed by Robinson. Most members anyway had appealed to the U.S. legation for help in obtaining passage back to the States as war approached and had left Ethiopia, or intended to, by the time he arrived. Similarly, American missionaries in Ethiopia, mostly distributed outside of Addis Ababa, did not have occasion to mingle with him. Very likely he became familiar with the handful of white U.S. nationals employed by Addis Ababa for their expertise, notably Everett Colson (financial/foreign affairs) and John Spencer (foreign affairs). Alas nothing survives in published memoirs or other records about the substance of such conjecturable encounters.

The sole documented dealing of Robinson with a compatriot centered on a junior Foreign Service officer attached to the U.S. legation, William Miller Cramp. Details are sparse, but enough remain to conjure under Du Bois's "veil" concept. Not face-to-face but through the "veil" darkly, the two young Americans (both in their early thirties) viewed each other with scant understanding or sympathy. Scion of a wealthy Philadelphia shipbuilding family, 1922 graduate of Princeton University, hunter of wild game, and later wed (1938) to a socialite (Elsie Neel Kellogg), Cramp surely found Robinson astonishing, if not disturbing.⁵⁰ From Cramp's standpoint, not overtly bigoted but saturated in class-racial assumptions and flecked with officiousness, a rough-hewn black Mississippian—in other context assignable to the serving staff at a Princeton eating club—who had trained in a vocational program at a so-called Alabama college and worked as a garage mechanic had mysteriously materialized in Addis Ababa, where he presumed to lead the air force of an African potentate. During their interviews Cramp probed Robinson's pan-African ideas, part of a discourse unfamiliar to hallowed Princeton halls, and that he viewed askance. In third-party correspondence referring to Robinson, Cramp ostentatiously forbore from calling him colonel or making any mention of his claim to elevated military title.⁵¹ For his part, Robinson recoiled from the diplomat and provided this testimony on 21 November 1935—an angle on the ineluctable "veil" (uncorrected text).

⁴⁹ Cornelius Coffey to American Consul, 20 April 1936, and William Cramp to Coffey, 4 June 1936, RG 84: Consular Posts, Addis Ababa, Vol. 65.

⁵⁰ *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 2 July 1931, p. 964 and 10 March 1939, p. 500.

⁵¹ William Cramp to Cornelius Coffey, 4 June 1936, RG 84: Consular Posts, Addis Ababa, Vol. 65.



Since my rapid advancement here in the Air Force one of the American consuls attached to the American Legation, has made it his business to call me to the Legation and ask me many annoying questions. I don't pay any attention to him, because I don't intend to be bluffed by a narrow minded person. The last time he called me I asked him if he wanted my American passport. He at once changed his attitude, and assured me that he was proud of me as an American citizen, and hoped that I will always remain one. That the American government is behind me one hundred percent. And any time I need their help he would only be to glad to help me in any way. Of course I told him that I appreciated what he said, but I didn't think I would ever need their help in anyway whatsoever. He hasn't called me any more.⁵²

Quite apart from this Cramp episode, Robinson disliked the workings of diplomacy, which he judged a cynical game played for the exclusive benefit of white nations. All others had to abide by and suffer their deliberations, as evidenced in Europe's captive Africa. When competition arose over the fate of one African territory or another, or Africans resisted European intruders, then white diplomats resolved the dispute lest their common cause against peoples of color miscarried. Little wonder, Robinson held, that the League of Nations while issuing condemnations—cheap salve to the collective conscience—did nothing concrete to save Ethiopia from Italy. The essence of the matter lay in a purpose that transcended state rivalries (text uncorrected): “The League of Nation is just another White man's bluff. That White people will all ways stick together in the end when it comes to the color question.”⁵³

This analysis of the Italo-Ethiopian crisis not only reflected Robinson's view on the decisiveness of race in explaining international competitions of power but also dovetailed with Du Bois's judgment about the primacy of the “color line.” Yet Robinson's lived experience of the “color line” in Ethiopia did not adhere tidily to theoretical formulae. True, on first arriving in Ethiopia, he had been taken aback by the prominence of white people (an elastic category for him that subsumed Indians, Turks, and Egyptians among others) in the country's economy. He may have been miffed too that Haile Selassie's government employed more Europeans and white Americans than a sovereign African polity should tolerate.⁵⁴ Crucially, he believed that this white assemblage had undermined Ethiopian confidence in African-Americans by dripping calumny into Haile Selassie's ear.⁵⁵ Still, preponderant evidence attests to Robinson's maintaining satisfactory relations with numerous white acquaintances in Ethiopia, just as he had done in Detroit and Chicago. He welcomed the contributions to Ethiopian wartime medicine made by European doctors, nurses, and ambulance brigades.⁵⁶ Most important, he worked well with the Europeans (French, German, Russian, Swedish) who, beside their Ethiopian

⁵² John Robinson to Barnett, 21 November 1935, Box 170 Claude Barnett Papers.

⁵³ John Robinson to Barnett, 28 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.

⁵⁴ Norberg, *Swedes in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia 1924–1952* [pp. 43, 71–73].

⁵⁵ John Robinson to Barnett, 3 June 1935 and 28 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.

⁵⁶ John Robinson to Barnett, 21 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.



counterparts, served in varying capacities in the army or as Robinson's subordinates (pilots, mechanics, instructors) in the IEAF. In the best of all possible worlds, Robinson would have preferred an all-black air force to defend an African land, but he respected those white comrades who worked with him in severe conditions that demanded mutual trust.

The "double consciousness" posited by Du Bois, as applied to Robinson in Ethiopia, took an unexpected, practically an inverted, turn. Neither the first nor last black American to do so, Robinson qua American discovered faults with his African hosts. Slavery in Ethiopia, despite attempts to abolish it, perplexed him, as did the purported tendency of court officials and aristocrats to disavow racial kinship with various African peoples unalloyed by Semitic or other admixture.⁵⁷ Disparaging attitudes periodically manifested by Ethiopians toward New World blacks for the taint of being descended from slaves and occupying low rungs in America's social order also gave Robinson pause.⁵⁸ An imbedded preference among Ethiopians, high and low, for lighter complexions ("colorism") may have also irked him, though he was pleased by his own acceptably shaded appearance: "I look just like an Abyssinian."⁵⁹ Most tellingly, to him Ethiopian standards of efficiency and policymaking were substandard. He somberly admitted in late November 1935: "I am begining [sic] to get fed up in fighting here, because... of the [feckless] officials. I think they should take a definite stand win or lose. If we all have to die, I think we should all die like men and have it over with." In effect, he judged Ethiopian methods of war as inadequate, even risible. Overly confident at first in their ability to defeat Mussolini, the Ethiopians had failed to adapt to galloping changes in warfare that had arisen since the 1896 Adowa battle (uncorrected text):

It looks like the begining of the end for this country to me. The officials have begin to loose their boisterous idea about Ethiopia can beat the Italians at any time. They realize now that they have been sleep for the last forty or more years. They are wondering who will save them from the Italians, instead of let the Italians come that they could beat them.⁶⁰

Robinson's IEAF contributed its utmost against the Italian invaders. The dearth of spare parts, munitions, qualified pilots, and airworthy craft told calamitously, however. At peak, the IEAF had an eclectic inventory—Beechcraft, Breda, Farman, Fokker, Heinkel, Junker, Potez—of two-dozen craft. These were of obsolete serial, rarely armed, and when armed only lightly so. The small fraction of these planes airborne at any one time could not realistically challenge Italy's swarm (450–500 planes) of modern fighters and Caproni bombers that swept Ethiopian skies. Consequently, aerial melees did not occur comparable to those of the later battle of Britain

⁵⁷ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 147–148, 154–155.

⁵⁸ Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1942*, pp. xv, 8, 164, 201, 216–219.

⁵⁹ John Robinson to Barnett, 3 June 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers. See also Spencer [22, pp. 123–124].

⁶⁰ John Robinson to Barnett, 28 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.



between the RAF and Luftwaffe. Even so, by May 1936 nearly every Ethiopian air force plane had been obliterated in the air or destroyed on the ground in Italian attacks on nominally defended airfields. So, too, hospital planes donated from abroad and flown by non-Ethiopian pilots and doctors were destroyed (mostly) on the ground. Of the 200 Italian planes lost or damaged, all owed to ground fire, never air-to-air fire.

Given the impossibility of conducting combat operations, the IEAF contented itself with second-order tasks. The most important of these related to communications between the battlefronts and headquarters—which meant, in view of the few and poorly functioning radios in Ethiopian possession, delivering confidential dispatches between commanders in the field and Addis Ababa. The IEAF also evacuated wounded men from battlefields to hospitals, monitored Italian army troop movements and similar reconnaissance, ferried Ethiopian leaders to strategic points of rendezvous, and provided food/medical parcels to frontline soldiers. In these missions, Robinson assumed conspicuous roles, enough so that Italian pilots determined to intercept him in the air and blast him and machine to smithereens.

For no particular reason, except for luck and his own ingenuity, Robinson survived the war and more than 700 hours of flying missions, but just barely.⁶¹ When, in belated revenge for 1896, unhampered Italian bombers hit Adowa in October 1935, he and his Potez biplane were in the town on the ground and unable to get skyward. Only after the raid ended, amid dead and injured civilians and burning buildings, did Robinson lift off to tell Addis Ababa of the damages. Robinson afterward testified without embellishment but a touch of bravado (text uncorrected):

I was in Aduwa the day it was bombarded twice; the day after I started back to Addis Abeba with some important papers and was attacked by two Italian airplanes. I really had the closest call I have ever had in my life (and I have really had some narrow escapes in my life time) One part of the wing on the airplane I was flying had ten holes in it when I landed. I didnt mind being attacked, but I wish my airplane had been of a later type, I think I would have given them a wonderful lesson. Any way I think they will remember what I did for a quite a while.⁶²

On another occasion according to lore but not confirmed in available records, Robinson, unaided by other IEAF planes, assaulted an Italian bomber, apparently without destroying it. He also engaged, or was said to have done, the notorious Vittorio Mussolini (son of the Duce) in an inconclusive aerial duel. During the war's course, Robinson suffered wounds, including ones caused by mustard gas, and experienced levels (indeterminate) of "shell shock." By late April 1936, when he left collapsing Ethiopia, Italian agents were hard on his trail to capture or kill him.⁶³

After a harrowing escape, via ships and multiple ports of call where assassins prowled, Robinson landed in New York on 18 May aboard the *Europa*. Throngs of

⁶¹ Israel, *The Lion and the Condor*, p. 185.

⁶² John Robinson to Barnett, 21 November 1935, Box 170, Claude Barnett Papers.

⁶³ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 179–180, 187, 194–195, 201–202.



admirers greeted him as military hero and “colored Lindy.” Harlem residents in the thousands celebrated him, Chicagoans too. Black journalists and newspaper editors, community activists, members of the learned class, and clergy also arranged events where he spoke to rapt audiences about Ethiopia’s travails and IEAF deeds.⁶⁴ Yet impaired physical health and frayed nerves drove him into weeks of convalescence. During this period of recuperation, what remained of his tattered marriage deteriorated further—collateral casualty of the Ethiopian war.⁶⁵

Albeit not fully recovered from wounds and exhaustion, but basking still in the glow of wide acclaim, Robinson embarked in late 1936–1937 on publicity/fund-raising tours. These concentrated on southern and Midwestern locales, enabled by creative impresarios: Claude Barnett, P.M.H. Savory of United Aid for Ethiopia, and Anselm Finch, managing editor of an African-American publication, the *Mississippi Weekly*. These tours served interrelated aims, markedly to heighten awareness of Ethiopia’s continued plight while collecting relief moneys for such aid organizations as Dr. Bayen’s Ethiopian World Federation. Also important to Robinson, the tours helped retain the interest of black Americans in aviation, even though Great Depression hardships persisted and air disasters dominated newspaper headlines (Earhart’s 1937 disappearance over the Pacific, the fiery destruction of the dirigible *Hindenburg*). Moreover, he hoped, the tours would attract young recruits and funds for an aviation school that he established in autumn 1936—located on the grounds of Chicago’s Poro College, a beauty school and cosmetics emporium run by the black entrepreneur/millionaire and Robinson-backer, Annie Turnbo Malone.⁶⁶

Robinson’s several tours lifted African-American morale but nowhere more than in Mississippi, rattled by the torture/lynching of Roosevelt Townes and Robert McDaniels in April 1937 in the hamlet of Duck Hill. That gruesomeness occurred while southern white readers, and readers elsewhere, delighted in Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling *Gone With the Wind* (awarded 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), stocked with sentimentalized portraits of master–slave relations in the Confederacy. Proposed Federal anti-lynching legislation meanwhile languished in Washington, thanks in part to Mississippi’s congressional delegation, which featured the implacable Senator Theodore Bilbo (a Klansman) and Representative John Rankin. Thomas Fortune Fletcher’s 1937 “Night in Mississippi” underscored the pervading reality:

Night in Mississippi
Is a black mother
Mourning for murdered sons
And ravished daughters.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ “Col. Robinson, Brown Condor, Returns Home,” Associated Negro Press, ? May 1936, John C. Robinson (vertical file), Howard University.

⁶⁵ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, p. 219.

⁶⁶ John Robinson to Barnett, 1 July 1936, Box 171, Claude Barnett Papers; Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 214–216.

⁶⁷ Thomas Fortune Fletcher, “Night in Mississippi,” *The Crisis*, June 1937, p. 189.



Silhouetted against this dread, Gulfport's black residents cheered Robinson and his new plane, a five-passenger Stinson that he flew around the state in 1937. In Gulfport, where his war exploits had been followed via the local press, the ladies of the AME Church arranged festivities and a picnic by which they raised funds for their church. This welcoming home celebration included raffles for rides with Robinson in his aircraft. Several dignitaries including Gulfport's (white) mayor, Joseph Milner, took rides with him.⁶⁸ In the state capital, Jackson, equally keen crowds turned out in August to greet Robinson at the municipal airport, then attended his speechifying at a local high school and a gala dinner/dance.⁶⁹ Reassured in advance that Robinson did not harbor exotic ideas or agitate for rash change, white businesses let employees attend the festivities, as did some housewives willing to indulge the whims of their black domestics. Anselm Finch, chief promoter of Robinson's Mississippi visit, had lain on thick to Jackson's white citizenry that the aviator meant no harm a la Du Bois or any mischievous outsider:

With Robinson's saneness, good manners, politeness and his thorough understanding of race relations in the South, this trip will mean much to us all. He is a graduate of Tuskegee and believes profoundly in Booker Washington's philosophy of life.⁷⁰

After the Robinson visit, Finch proclaimed that it had generated racial "good will and peace," measurably expanding every Mississippian's felicity. To this gush, he added: "A program more gratifying could not have been planned for any aviator, despite his race."⁷¹ When at the October contest of two football teams from historically black Mississippi colleges, Tougaloo and Rust, Robinson assumed an obliging role: dropping a football on the gridiron from his circling airplane to start the game and later taking fee paying passengers for brief rides.⁷²

Robinson's 1937 Mississippi itinerary included the self-contained black town of Mound Bayou (vaguely utopian and of Booker T. Washington ethos), sixty miles from grim Duck Hill. Also visited that year by the gold medalist Olympian Jesse Owens, Mound Bayou hosted Robinson during sweltering July days. He took plucky riders aloft in his Stinson. He let the curious inspect fuselage, propeller, and cockpit controls. When occasion permitted, he spoke to Mound Bayou audiences of Ethiopia's forlorn ruler, deceived by a faithless League of Nations and victim to European chicanery.⁷³

⁶⁸ I am grateful for the useful comments and helpful suggestions by this journal's referee/reader regarding Robinson's visit to Gulfport.

⁶⁹ "Col. Robinson Lands In City," *Clarion-Ledger*, 6 August 1937.

⁷⁰ Anselm Finch to My dear Friend, 27 July 1937, John C. Robinson (vertical file), Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁷¹ "Negro Editor Thanks Public," *Clarion-Ledger*, 15 August 1937.

⁷² "Tougaloo Host To Principals," *Clarion-Ledger*, 9 October 1937.

⁷³ "Famous Negroes to Mound Bayou," *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, 6 July 1937; "Negro Mayor to Greet Robinson," *Clarion-Ledger*, 24 July 1937.





A young admirer with Robinson in his Stinson.
Mound Bayou, Mississippi. July 1937.
Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

No more than in Ethiopia, where the outgunned IEAF hardly counted against Italy, Robinson's southern visits made little palpable difference. Useful in publicizing Ethiopia's distress and in drawing attention to Robinson's Chicago aviation academy, the Jackson and Mound Bayou stopovers could not diffuse "the tainted air" that "brood[ed] fear" in Mississippi or anywhere else in Dixie (Du Bois's words).⁷⁴ Yet in both instances—Ethiopians struggling for independence, African-Americans for human rights—Robinson could have consoled himself that he had made moral contribution by the example of intrepidity. Certainly, countless black Americans in 1937 idolized him. To them, Ethiopia and the United States may have existed in a

⁷⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 20, 51.



single mesh of woe but the battle-tested aviator personified the courage indispensable to liberation.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The 1935 bombing of unprotected Adowa anticipated the assaults on civilians conducted by Axis and Allied air forces in World War Two. A common experience eventually tied Adowa via Guernica to Rotterdam to Dresden to Nagasaki and all the rest in the catalog of targeted cities. Resultant physical damage required years of repair and vast sums of money, never mind the prodigal destruction of human life. Among the first recipients of organized international aid, Ethiopia won goods and services from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which did its main work in 1944–1946.

Related to this reconstruction project, Robinson returned to Ethiopia in 1944 for the first time since his 1936 exiting. He had devoted the intervening years to his flying career and the placement of African-Americans in aviation. Through no fault of his own and not for want of trying, he never joined (except for a brief teaching stint) the enterprise at Tuskegee that produced the storied airmen. But through his Chicago flight school and the Army's Chanute Field (Rantoul, Illinois), he played a respectable role in training African-American pilots and ground crews that deployed during the war to Europe and North Africa: the fabled 99th Pursuit Squadron.⁷⁶ Although resenting the Army's offer of commission as a second lieutenant, which he rejected as beneath the dignity of an IEAF colonel, Robinson derived relative satisfaction with his lot as teacher/administrator. In similar capacity he went in 1944 to Addis Ababa, where he led a small Lend-Lease task force of African-American technicians charged with helping to resuscitate the IEAF. Upon completing their assignment, all the men but Robinson went back to the United States.

As with much else in his biography, the known history of Robinson in post-Italian Ethiopia lacks detail and clarity. This much, though, can be reasonably asserted. He expected to build upon his original Ethiopian experience, springboard in his view to a better future than America offered. In September 1944, in Addis Ababa, a flight school opened, under his direction and staffed by competent subordinates. Alas, the school failed to thrive; fewer students than originally envisioned successfully graduated as full-fledged pilots. Robinson in the meantime hoped to resume command of the IEAF, which he thought he deserved as a black aviator of proven worth. In the event, the position went to Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen, a Swedish national who during the Italo-Ethiopian war occasionally served as personal pilot to Haile Selassie and had flown Red Cross missions. As with Hubert in 1935, Robinson and Rosen became estranged. The Count let it be known that he would not serve under a black American and flung racial epithets to Robinson's face. The nastiness culminated in August 1947 in a fistfight and the Count's broken jaw. This time Robinson paid the

⁷⁵ Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, p. 80.

⁷⁶ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 228–244.



price of disgrace: denial of all future association with the IEAF. Swedish personnel and Swedish manufactured planes, as the Count had calculated hopefully, became the dominant element of aviation expertise/training and so remained through the 1950s.⁷⁷

Robinson next tried his hand at forming a commercial air company, underwritten by Haile Selassie's second son, the Duke of Harrar.⁷⁸ This enterprise, Sultan Airways, established in 1948 and centered on American DC-3 aircraft, eventually gave rise to Ethiopia's national airline, although here also Robinson never enjoyed the credit or position that he sought.

By no means conclusive, evidence indicates that Robinson's life became increasingly disordered. Heavy drinking, tangled romances (in which darted a mysterious Austrian recorded only as Madame Eisner), uncertain finances, failed stab at establishing an import business, and festering physical and emotional wounds conspired against him. All of this disappointment may have inclined him to seek American repatriation. If so desired, fate again thwarted him. He died in late March 1954 from injuries sustained in a plane crash while on a mercy errand to retrieve a young man from the outback in need of medical attention in Addis Ababa.

Once mythologized, by 1954 Robinson had been essentially forgotten in the United States—his death barely noticed. Following his interment at Gulalle cemetery (reserved for foreigners) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopian memories of Robinson also faded, notwithstanding Haile Selassie's eulogy of him.⁷⁹ With allowance for obvious differences in context, this question phrased by Du Bois in 1903 can be applied to the case of Robinson: "And all this life and love and strife and failure—is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?"⁸⁰

Only in the long view can the abundant "strife and failure" that befell Robinson be vindicated. Like Du Bois in Ghana in 1963, he drew last breath in Africa while in self-imposed exile from America. Yet the United States always remained for Robinson a key point of reference. His going to Ethiopia in 1935 aligned with his search to know and reaffirm his African roots. Equally important, he meant through his Ethiopian example to persuade Americans of every race that black men could fully master the technology and science of aviation, including the requirements of strenuous aerial warfare. In this task, and against improbable odds, he succeeded, furthering the goal for black acceptance. In the year of Robinson's death, Benjamin Davis, Jr., formerly commandant of cadets at Tuskegee and decorated war veteran, became the first African-American in the U.S. Air Force advanced to the rank of brigadier general.

In September 1963, after the (June) murder of the NAACP's Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi and Du Bois's gentler (August) passing at ninety-five in Kwame

⁷⁷ Jan Forsgren, "The Imperial Ethiopian Air Force 1946–1961" in *Small Air Forces Observer*, March 1996, p. 23; Norberg, *Swedes in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, 1924–1952*, pp. 193, 195, 197, 206–212; Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia 1936–1941*, p. 148.

⁷⁸ "Ethiopia Organizes Commercial Airline," *Greenwood Commonwealth*, 23 February 1948.

⁷⁹ Tucker, *John C. Robinson: Father of the Tuskegee Airmen*, pp. 253–255, 257–258; Israel, *The Lion and the Condor*, pp. 54, 78, 101–132.

⁸⁰ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 36.



Nkrumah's Accra, Hansberry meditated aloud upon the psychological makeup of past leaders. Evers and Du Bois doubtless dominated his thought. Not entirely far-fetched—did Hansberry, who met Robinson in 1936 when the Ethiopian Research Council invited him to Howard University, also have the aviator in mind?

[T]here always have been strong and independent minded Africans and Americans of African descent who not only successfully resisted all attempts to undermine their ethnocentric self-esteem; but who spent much, if not most, of their lives in efforts to keep the flickering torch of self-respect from being altogether extinguished in their less stalwart fellowmen.⁸¹

Two acknowledgments—explicit, official, public—of Robinson and his bridging of Ethiopia and the United States occurred in the twenty-first century. During a July 2015 state dinner in Addis Ababa, President Barack Obama lauded Robinson and his legacy on two continents.⁸² And in June 2018, Embassy Addis Ababa, successor to the legation that employed William Cramp, honored Robinson in a wreath-laying ceremony. With Ethiopian ecclesiastical dignitaries present, Ambassador Michael Raynor spoke of Robinson's dual contributions—to Ethiopian aviation, to American civil rights—and hailed the sympathy between nations that able individuals operating outside of formal government channels have fostered. Raynor called Robinson a “model and hero” who bided in the faith “that tomorrow can be better.”⁸³ Perhaps, even the contemplative revolutionary Du Bois would have allowed that the brighter future, of which he dreamt in 1903, Robinson had nudged forward. The mechanic/pilot had lived, if imperfectly, for what Du Bois prayed: “[T]hat we may be able to preserve for future civilization all that is really fine and noble and strong, and not continue to put a premium on greed and impudence and cruelty.”⁸⁴

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⁸² Israel, *The Lion and the Condor*, pp. ix, 188.

⁸³ <https://et.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-honors-the-legacy-of-colonel-john-c-robinson> and <https://et.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-michael-raynor-honoring-the-legacy-of-colonel-john-c-robinson-gulalle-cemetery>

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