Self-Styled Moses
Reviewed by Michael Anderson

Marcus Garvey remains the most confounding figure in the history of black America. Arriving in the United States in 1916, the 28-year-old Jamaican emigrant, of slipshod self-education and without connections, rapidly created what the distinguished black historian John Hope Franklin called the first black mass movement in the history of the United States. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association claimed a worldwide membership in the millions; his weekly journal, Negro World, had a circulation of 50,000. At the height of his influence, Garvey drew thousands of black people every night to rallies in Harlem.

He deliberately set himself in contrast to the fledgling NAACP. Garvey advocated racial separation, making common cause with white-supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan: “I regard the Klan, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, and White American Societies as better friends of the race than all other groups of hypocritical whites put together.” The NAACP was Fabian in its strategy of low-key lobbying and public education to protect black political and civil rights. Garvey roared, “The Ku Klux Klan is going to make this a white man’s country. . . . Fighting them is not going to get you anywhere.”

How, then, could Garvey command the almost hysterical devotion of the black masses? Through a commanding oratory that hypnotically invoked racial pride. “The man spoke,” James Weldon Johnson wrote in Black Manhattan (1930), “and his magnetic personality, torrential eloquence, and intuitive knowledge of crowd psychology were all brought into play.” Garvey vowed to “organize the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world into a vast organization to plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa.”

Johnson remarked upon Garvey’s “Napoleonic personality,” and he certainly dressed the part, sporting a “military hat tipped with white feathers, black broadcloth trousers with a gold stripe down the side, a Sam Browne belt across his chest, gold epaulettes, a gold sword, and white gloves.” Though the spectacle caused W. E. B. Du Bois to mutter that “a casual observer might have mistaken it for the dress-rehearsal of a new comic opera,” to his devoted followers Garvey was what he proclaimed himself to be: the Provisional Presi-
dent of Africa, the man who would reclaim the continent from its colonialist masters and establish a homeland where an oppressed people would rediscover its lost glory.

And the people were willing to put their money where Garvey’s mouth was. At its peak, in 1919 and 1920, Garvey’s movement amassed more than $600,000 (the equivalent today of more than $7 million), with which Garvey proposed to extend Booker T. Washington’s pastoral ideal of black economic self-sufficiency into the entrepreneurial age of the Roaring Twenties. He told his followers he would initiate a business venture every month: a lunchroom, a restaurant, a tearoom, an ice-cream parlor. These were, however, but overtures to the inauguration of a steamship company, the Black Star Line. As Colin Grant writes in his biography of Garvey, *Negro With a Hat*, not only would the steamship line “operate between American ports and those of Africa, the West Indies, and Central and South America,” but to devoted Garveyites the Black Star would also be the mechanism through which “a latter-day Moses . . . was going to lead them to the Promised Land.” Five thousand black people cheered the maiden voyage of the line’s first steamer as it left New York’s 135th Street pier in November 1919.

“Of course, the bubble burst,” Johnson wrote. Garvey and his entourage knew nothing about ships—not even how to shop for them. The vessel that thousands cheered was in such drastic need of repair that one Universal Negro Improvement Association official despaired, “She could not have been worth a penny over $25,000 when the Black Star Line acquired her for $165,000.” (Two other ships broke down on their initial voyages and never returned to New York.) By January 1922 the Black Star Line was bankrupt, costs outrunning capital by nearly $89,000 (just over $1 million today).

Garvey was convicted of federal fraud charges in 1923. His five-year sentence was commuted by President Calvin Coolidge in 1927, and Garvey, who had never become a U.S. citizen, was immediately deported to Jamaica. Irrepressibly, he announced plans for a new steamship company, as well as a campaign to collect $600 million for a worldwide program of global black uplift.

However, exiled from his base in Harlem, Garvey was a leader in search of followers. A newspaper account of his talk in 1928 in London’s Royal Albert Hall, which seated 10,000, was headlined, “9800 Empty Seats.” In 1940, five years after settling in London, he died there, at the age of 52, without ever seeing the continent he had promised to deliver.

Marcus Garvey “was not the worst kind of demagogue,” W. E. B. Du Bois conceded. “He believed in his program and he had a childish ignorance of the stern facts of the world into whose face he was flying.”

Writing on Garvey has lately been a polemical tussle between two camps,” Grant concludes, “one that wants to skewer him as a charlatan and the other that seeks to elevate him to the status of a saint.” On the one hand, there is Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche’s judgment from 1940: “When the curtain dropped on the Garvey theatricals, the black man of America was exactly where Garvey had found him, though a little bit sadder, perhaps a bit poorer—if not wiser.” On the other hand is the fact that a future prime minister of Jamaica, Edward Seaga, arranged in 1964 for Garvey’s remains to be returned for a funeral honoring him as the country’s first national hero.

But the forced choice Grant proposes is far too restricted. Himself of Jamaican heritage, Grant is unable to achieve a balanced perspective; though he is obviously aware of Garvey’s lunacies, his reservations are expressed only as snarky asides (as in the title of his book, a reference to that befeathered military hat that dominates the best-known photographs of Garvey). For the most part he writes as Garvey’s champion, praising his “genius,” snidely denigrating his opponents, even (most unforgivably) comparing him to Gandhi. The principal value of *Negro With a Hat* may be that it inadvertently immerses the modern reader in the spirit of Garveyism: a murk of inchoate exhortation, discur-
sive and digressive, lacking organization or over-
scrupulousness about facts. For example, Grant sit-
uates a Chicago beach on the Missouri River. Any-
one seeking an intelligent and accurate account of
Garvey and his movement must return to E. David
Cronon’s superb Black Moses (1955), still the only
scholarly account of Garvey’s life and movement.

From the time of his ascent, Garvey evoked con-
flicting responses, even from opponents such as the
black newspaper The Chicago Defender, which
wrote in an obituary editorial: “Had Garvey suc-
cceeded in his undertakings, he would have been
incontestably the greatest figure of the 20th
century. Having failed, he is considered a fool.”
Though he might have been a buffoon, a crook he
was not: His endless and strident appeals for black
people to purchase shares in the Black Star Line
(“Any Negro not a stockholder in the BSL will be
worse than a traitor”) were not designed to line his
pockets but to support his crackpot fantasies of
racial grandeur. (When one of the line’s steamships
finally managed to take on coconuts as paid cargo,
Garvey’s insistence that the vessel make unsched-
uled stops, that more people might marvel, ensured
that the fruit rotted before it could be delivered.)

And had the man himself not appeared, the
times might have created him. In the wake of the
Great Migration of southern blacks to the North
and their subsequent bitter discovery of a subtler
segregation, in their disillusionment with the failed
promise in Woodrow Wilson’s flatulent, if ringing,
rhetoric of democracy, in their newfound determi-
nation to confront racial violence during the series
of white mob actions of the “Red Summer” of 1919,
“the mingled emotions of the race were bitterness,
despair, and anger,” Johnson wrote. “There devel-
oped an attitude of cynicism. . . . There developed
also a spirit of defiance born of desperation.” These
conditions called for a demagogue, and Garvey
answered.

But he was “not the worst kind of demagogue,”
Du Bois conceded. “If he had been simply a calcul-
lating scoundrel, he would carefully have skirted
the narrow line between promise and performance
and avoided as long as possible the inevitable cata-
strophe. But he believed in his program and he had
a childish ignorance of the stern facts of the world
into whose face he was flying.” Garvey certainly had
the right enemies (colonialism, racial oppression,
economic exploitation), and though his appeals for
racial self-respect could be shrill and silly (he
bestowed endless titles on followers: “Baron of the
Zambezi,” “Knights of the Nile,” “the Distinguished
Service Order of Ethiopia”; even the humblest Gar-
veyite was called “Fellowman of the Negro Race”),
they could not be wholly despised at a time when
Congress refused to outlaw lynching.

He may have been wrong-headed, but at
least he was sincere: Such has been the
case made for Garvey. Just as he ignored
the ancient dictum when he acted as his own law-
ner in his mail fraud trial, far too many commenta-
tors cite his good intentions without acknowledg-
ing that they cobbled the pathway to perdition. Yet
in the cold light of history, what did he accomplish,
what good did he do? Garvey’s putative importance
as precursor to racial self-esteem is as greasy as that
CURRENT BOOKS

Pity the poor sleep researcher. There he (and it is usually a “he”) is at a sleep convention, and along comes Gayle Greene, a professor of literature with chronic insomnia who has made a specialty of trying to cure herself. The researcher is pumped up on recent successes in the field: the growth of apnea treatments or the development of a pill that quiets restless legs syndrome. The “sleep switch,” a central trigger in the brain that divides sleeping from waking, has been located. Then Greene, who teaches at Scripps College in Claremont, California, starts her rat-a-tat of questions. What do we know about how our diet affects sleep? she might ask the researcher. Er, nothing. Do our parents’ sleep habits affect our own? Er, we don’t really know. Well, surely you can tell me how the best-known sleeping pills work? No, actually, Professor Greene, we can’t. They just sort of seem to help.

Insomniac is an odd kind of book: It’s not a whodunit but a why-don’t-they-do-it. It asks questions, then asks why no one really qualified is exploring them. Greene wants answers, and, unfortunately, there are few in the world of sleep research. Those we have are bought and paid for by Big Pharma, with a predictable distorting effect. For instance, we know a lot about how breathing affects sleep patterns, but next to nothing about how menstruation affects sleep patterns. That’s because there’s money to be made in treating breathing problems. Insurance companies will cover the costs of the things sleep clinics can sell you to ease your apnea. Not so if your insomnia is linked—as Greene suspects hers is—to hormonal fluctuations.

Insomniac is, along the way, an alarming, uncomfortable portrayal of how researchers in the field fail the sufferers they are supposed to treat. Desperate for funds, bent over by insurance companies, whiplashed by the National Institutes of Health, researchers do not treat insomnia as it is actually experienced. If you cannot cure me, Greene seems to be saying, at least hear me. Don’t tell me how insomnia ought to be, but let me tell you how it really is. “What is missing from everything I read about insomnia is—the insomniacs,” she writes. And earlier she confides, “No doctor I ever saw showed the slightest curiosity about the cocktail of hormones, estrogen, progesterone, thyroid, that I ingest daily.” “This is a somewhat cranky book,” she writes. Indeed it is.

And with reason, as Greene makes clear. Certainly insomnia came early to her and has stayed for a long time. Greene was born wide awake. “There is no sleep in that baby,” her mother wrote to...