

## BOOK REVIEW/J. Quinn Brisben

### Second City Renaissance

The late Robert Bone had a socialist background which impelled him to study African American history and literature long before those subjects became fashionable. From the 1950s on, his pioneering work produced much in this field, including such works as *The Negro Novel in America* (1959) and *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story* (1975). He had planned, and partially researched and written, a study of the Chicago African American Renaissance of the 1930s and later.

When his health began to fail, he gave his notes to Richard A. Courage, author of many articles on African American narrative and visual arts. Courage has completed Bone's research and writing seamlessly in *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950*. The result is a compelling book which will be a standard in its field for many years to come. The Chicago Renaissance of the 1930s and later was every bit as interesting and important as the better known Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

The new black middle class was helped by the work of Booker T. Washington and his friendship with Chicago millionaire Julius Rosenwald. They in turn brought to Chicago Charles S. Johnson, who connected many strands of the black renaissance, and Robert Park, the white sociologist at the University of Chicago who had many distinguished black students. Among these were St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, authors of *Black Metropolis* (1945), a study of the Chicago community in its days of prosperity.

The days of prosperity were over by the 1930s. The Binga Bank and other institutions that had supported an independent black community had failed.

African American intellectuals got jobs wherever they could, mostly in the post office and the Chicago public schools, where prejudice was less rampant than in the white business community.

Bone and Courage show the many links between the Harlem Renaissance and the later Chicago Renaissance and provide detailed criticism of the achievements of the latter group.

The paintings of the group are showcased in dazzling color reproductions. The stories of Ama Bontemps, the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright, the poems of Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks and others, and the paintings of Archibald Motley and Charles Wright are valuable additions to the nation's patrimony. One interesting aspect of the Harlem Renaissance is that many of its most important members and supporters were homosexual or bisexual.

An interesting aspect of the Chicago Renaissance is that nearly all of its participants were persons of the left, many of them close to or members of the Communist Party.

This led to their persecution in later years by the House Un-American Activities Committee and similar groups. Richard Wright made a memorable statement as to why he left the party, but he and others refused to betray their friends.

The Chicago public schools required all teachers to sign a loyalty oath. Margaret Burroughs took a year off to go to Mexico while the heat was on, but most signed the oath with few qualms of conscience and were never investigated.

Full disclosure: I was mentored by the late Robert Bone and my family provided house room to Richard Courage when he was completing research for the book. It is an excellent book, and I am proud to have had a small part in its creation.

J. Quinn Brisben is a retired Chicago high school history teacher with a long record of progressive activism. He was the Socialist Party USA candidate for president in 1992.

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