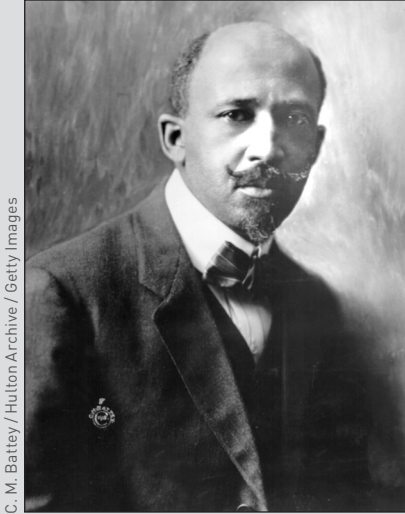


## W.E.B. du BOIS

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (D. Lewis, 1993). Compared to the vast majority of blacks of his day, Du Bois had a comparatively advantaged upbringing that led to college at Fisk University and later to a PhD from Harvard University, with a stop along the way at the University of Berlin. Despite earning the PhD from Harvard, Du Bois viewed his two years in Germany as the most important educational experience of his life. In Germany, he felt free from the stigma and discrimination of American race relations for the first time in his life. He learned to speak German, came to frequently quote German poetry, and had a love affair. Here he came to view himself as a man of destiny, caught up in the “development of the world” with plans to “raise his race” (Du Bois quoted in D. Lewis, 1993:135).

Du Bois took his first job teaching Greek and Latin at a black college (Wilberforce). He notes, “[T]he institution would have no sociology, even though I offered to teach it on my own time” (Du Bois, 1968:189). Du Bois moved on in the fall of 1896 when he was offered a position as assistant instructor at the University of Pennsylvania to do research on blacks in Philadelphia. That research led to the publication of one of the classic works of early sociology, *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996). When that project was completed, Du Bois moved (he never had a regular faculty position at Pennsylvania and that, like many other things in his lifetime, rankled him) to Atlanta University, where he taught sociology from 1897 to 1910 and played a leadership role in the development of the Sociological Laboratory at Atlanta University (A. Morris, 2015; Wright II, 2002). In Atlanta, Du Bois also took leadership of the annual Atlanta University Conference. This series of meetings brought together researchers to study and publish numerous reports on the black urban experience. It was also in this period that he authored the first and most important of his autobiographical memoirs, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1996). This was a highly literary and deeply personal work that also made a series of general theoretical points and contributed greatly to the understanding of black Americans and of race relations. Du Bois published a number of such autobiographical works during the course of his life, including *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* ([1920] 1999), *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* ([1940] 1968) and *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life From the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968). Of *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois (1968:2) says, “I have written then what is meant to be not so much my autobiography as the autobiography of a concept of race, elucidated, magnified and doubtless distorted in the thoughts and deeds that were mine.”

While at Atlanta University, Du Bois became more publicly and politically engaged. In 1905, he called for and attended a meeting near Buffalo, New York, that led to the formation of the Niagara Movement, an interracial civil rights organization interested in such things as the “abolition of

(Continued)