

INTRODUCTION

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS of Booker T. Washington are a good beginning toward understanding the life and thought of this black leader. They provide a biographical introduction to an edition of his letters and other writings, and they present him as he wished to be seen by the world, as the American success hero in black.

Early in his career as a public speaker, Washington learned that his audiences responded to the drama of his struggle up from slavery, poverty, and ignorance to a place of power and affluence. Americans love a success story, particularly one that seems to represent their collective experience and that discounts social inequities as simply challenges in the struggle to get ahead. Washington's typical speech was autobiographical, beginning with his birth on the dirt floor of a log cabin, proceeding through his founding of Tuskegee Institute in a hen house with thirty students, and culminating in a glowing vision of his "city upon a hill." The humorous anecdotes, authentic or contrived, that sprinkled his speeches were also frequently autobiographical. When Washington sought to explain himself to the world, therefore, the anecdotal and autobiographical style came naturally.

Washington's two principal memoirs, published in 1900 and 1901, presented him as a black man who succeeded because he applied to his own life the lessons in the Puritan work ethic that white men had taught him. While this self-image was accurate as far as it went, it failed to reveal, as Washington's private papers do reveal, that behind his public mask was not simply a conventional self-made hero but a man of protean complexity who engaged in many private activities that contradicted the public image.

Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, published in serial form