

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON · *Autobiographical Writings*

in 1900 and as a book in 1901, is one of the most widely read of American autobiographies. It has remained continuously in print and has become a minor classic of American literature. Many whites have gained from it their first insight into the black man's life in America, and many black persons have found in its story the inspiration to strive for similar achievements. Washington interwove myth and moral precept with hard fact, however, and covered only part of his life, up to the age of forty-four. Fortunately for the historian, *Up from Slavery* was not Washington's only effort to recount his life. He also wrote *The Story of My Life and Work*, which appeared in 1900, and some shorter autobiographical pieces.

Like most of his other works, Washington's autobiographies were to some degree ghostwritten. Their literary quality and accuracy of reflection of his real life were determined not only by Washington's own selective memory but by the talent of the ghostwriter, the time Washington could take from his busy schedule to write, dictate, and supervise, and the pace of preparation imposed by the publisher's deadline. The lesson Washington learned from his first ghostwritten autobiography was that neither the judgment of the ghostwriter nor the commercial motive of the publisher sufficiently guaranteed an acceptable quality of writing over his name. Thereafter he chose more wisely, watched the ghost and the manuscript more closely, and kept a sharp eye on publishers.

In Washington's voluminous private correspondence it is possible to trace every step of the writing and publication of his autobiographies in the context of his other activities. When Washington achieved fame after his Atlanta Compromise address in 1895, admirers and publishers urged him to write an account of his career and social philosophy. Walter Hines Page of Houghton, Mifflin and Company wrote Washington in 1896 after rejecting a collection of his speeches: "I have a notion — yet somewhat vague — of a possible book in a different form — not speeches but a history or narrative."¹ It was to J. L. Nichols and Company, of Naperville, Illinois, however, that Washington sent a prospectus of an autobiography in 1897. Why he offered such a plum to this obscure subscription book house is something of a mystery. It may have been because they had many sales agents and a substantial market in the black communities of both

¹ Page to BTW, Oct. 14, 1896, Con. 116, BTW Papers, DLC.