



Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr.: Complete Poems

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Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.: Complete Poems brings together for the first time all the poems of an accomplished African-American poet of the years just preceding the 1920s renaissance in black American literature.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1895, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., was a precocious child, reared in a strong family tradition of poetry. His father, a local educator, wrote poetry himself, and the family maintained a close friendship with the prominent poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Encouraged by this environment, Cotter displayed literary leanings from an early age. As his father recalled, Keats was his son's favorite poet among the many writers in their extensive family library: "He never tired of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.'" After completing high school, Cotter attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, for two years until he contracted tuberculosis and was forced to return home. Cotter then wrote almost incessantly and published one collection of poetry, *The Band of Gideon*, before his death in 1919 at age twenty-three.

Rejecting the popular dialect style of his father and other highly regarded poets of his day, Cotter reflected in his poetry the broad impact of the most devastating event of the time, World War I. Though not limited to war themes, Cotter was unquestionably among the finest poets of the Great War. Displaying empathy for the experience of black soldiers, he perceives that the true enemy of these servicemen is not Germany but racial injustice, as shown in Cotter's "Sonnet to Negro Soldiers": "They shall go down unto Life's Borderland, / Walk unafraid within that Living Hell, / Nor heed the driving rain of shot and shell / That 'round them falls; but with uplifted hand / Be one with mighty hosts, an armed band / Against man's wrong to man-for such full well / They know. And from their trembling lips shall swell / A song of hope the world can understand. / All this to them shall be a glorious sign, / A glimmer of that resurrection morn, / When age-long Faith crowned with a grace benign / Shall rise and from their brows cast down the thorn / Of prejudice. E'en though through blood it be, / There breaks this day their dawn of Liberty."

Cotter's poems, from the explorations of prejudice in *The Band of Gideon* through the later sonnet sequence "Out of the Shadows," place him among the poetic innovators of the second decade of this century.

In *Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.: Complete Poems*, James Robert Payne has assembled the entire canon of a diverse poet rarely included in contemporary anthologies because his work has been inaccessible. Payne established reliable text of all of Cotter's poetry, including seven recently discovered poems that are published here for the first time. This collection includes a biographical essay, the poems, a textual commentary, and an apparatus, bringing the productive final years of Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., sharply into focus.

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