

James Weldon Johnson

**Fifty years &
Other Poems**

 Publio

Fifty years & Other Poems

James Weldon Johnson

Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

FIFTY YEARS 1863-1913

O brothers mine, to-day we stand Where half a century sweeps our ken, Since God, through Lincoln's ready hand, Struck off our bonds and made us men. Just fifty years—a winter's day— As runs the history of a race; Yet, as we look back o'er the way, How distant seems our starting place! Look farther back! Three centuries! To where a naked, shivering score, Snatched from their haunts across the seas, Stood, wild-eyed, on Virginia's shore. Far, far the way that we have trod, From heathen kraals and jungle dens, To freedmen, freemen, sons of God, Americans and Citizens. A part of His unknown design, We've lived within a mighty age; And we have helped to write a line On history's most wondrous page. A few black bondmen strewn along The borders of our eastern coast, Now grown a race, ten million strong, An upward, onward marching host. Then let us here erect a stone, To mark the place, to mark the time; A witness to God's mercies shown, A pledge to hold this day sublime. And let that stone an altar be, Whereon thanksgivings we may lay, Where we, in deep humility, For faith and strength renewed may pray. With open hearts ask from above New zeal, new courage and new pow'rs, That we may grow more worthy of This country and this land of ours. For never let the thought arise That we are here on sufferance bare; Outcasts, asylumed 'neath these skies, And aliens without part or share. This land is ours by right of birth, This land is ours by right of toil; We helped to turn its virgin earth, Our sweat is in its fruitful soil. Where once the tangled forest stood,— Where flourished once rank weed and thorn,— Behold the path-traced, peaceful wood, The cotton white, the yellow corn. To gain these fruits that have been earned, To hold these fields that have been won, Our arms have strained, our backs have burned, Bent bare beneath a ruthless sun. That Banner which is now the type Of victory on field and flood— Remember, its first crimson stripe Was dyed by Attucks' willing blood. And never yet has come the cry— When that fair flag has been assailed— For men to do, for men to die, That have we faltered or have failed. We've helped to bear it, rent and torn, Through many a hot-breath'd battle breeze; Held in our hands, it has been borne And planted far across the seas. And never yet—O haughty Land, Let us, at least, for this be praised— Has one black, treason-guided hand Ever against that flag been raised. Then should we speak but servile words, Or shall we hang our heads in shame? Stand back of new-come foreign hordes, And fear our heritage to claim? No! stand erect and without fear, And for our foes let this suffice— We've bought a rightful sonship here, And we have more than paid the price. And yet, my brothers, well I know The tethered feet, the pinioned wings, The spirit bowed beneath the blow, The heart grown faint from wounds and stings; The staggering force of brutish might, That strikes and leaves us stunned and daezd; The long, vain waiting through the night To hear some voice for justice raised. Full well I know the hour when hope Sinks dead, and 'round us everywhere Hangs stifling darkness, and we grope With hands uplifted in despair. Courage! Look out, beyond, and see The far horizon's beckoning span! Faith in your God-known destiny! We are a part of some great plan. Because the tongues of Garrison And Phillips now are cold in death, Think you their work can be undone? Or quenched the fires lit by their breath? Think you that John Brown's spirit stops? That Lovejoy was but idly slain? Or do you think those precious drops From Lincoln's heart were shed in vain? That for which millions prayed and sighed, That for which tens of thousands fought, For which so many freely died, God cannot let it come to naught.

TO AMERICA

How would you have us, as we are? Or sinking 'neath the load we bear? Our eyes fixed forward on a star? Or gazing empty at despair? Rising or falling? Men or things? With dragging pace or footsteps fleet? Strong, willing sinews in your wings? Or tightening chains about your feet?

O BLACK AND UNKNOWN BARDS

O black and unknown bards of long ago, How came your lips to touch the sacred fire? How, in your darkness, did you come to know The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre? Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes? Who first from out the still watch, lone and long, Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song? Heart of what slave poured out such melody As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains His spirit must have nightly floated free, Though still about his hands he felt his chains. Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh, "Nobody knows de trouble I see"? What merely living clod, what captive thing, Could up toward God through all its darkness grope, And find within its deadened heart to sing These songs of sorrow, love, and faith, and hope? How did it catch that subtle undertone, That note in music heard not with the ears? How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown, Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears. Not that great German master in his dream Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars At the creation, ever heard a theme Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars, How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir The blood. Such are the

notes that men have sung Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were That helped make history when Time was young. There is a wide, wide wonder in it all, That from degraded rest and servile toil The fiery spirit of the seer should call These simple children of the sun and soil. O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed, You—you alone, of all the long, long line Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed, Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine. You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings; No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings You touched in chord with music empyrean. You sang far better than you knew; the songs That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed Still live,—but more than this to you belongs: You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

O SOUTHLAND!

O Southland! O Southland! Have you not heard the call, The trumpet blown, the word made known To the nations, one and all? The watchword, the hope-word, Salvation's present plan? A gospel new, for all—for you: Man shall be saved by man. O Southland! O Southland! Do you not hear to-day The mighty beat of onward feet, And know you not their way? 'Tis forward, 'tis upward, On to the fair white arch Of Freedom's dome, and there is room For each man who would march. O Southland, fair Southland! Then why do you still cling To an idle age and a musty page, To a dead and useless thing? 'Tis springtime! 'Tis work-time! The world is young again! And God's above, and God is love, And men are only men. O Southland! my Southland! O birthland! do not shirk The toilsome task, nor respite ask, But gird you for the work. Remember, remember That weakness stalks in pride; That he is strong who helps along The faint one at his side.