

The Marion Thompson Wright Reader**Edited by Graham Russell Gao Hodges****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021****368 pages****ISBN: 9781978805378****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.294>**

The Marion Thompson Wright Reader, edited by Graham Russell Gao Hodges, the George Dorland Langdon Jr. Professor of History and Africana and Latin American Studies at Colgate University and the author of *Black New Jersey* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), is the long-awaited collection of writings by historian Marion Thompson Wright. Born September 13, 1902, Wright is considered the first Black woman to earn a PhD in history from a U.S. institution of higher education. She earned her doctoral degree, where she studied with noted historian Merle Curti, from Teachers College Columbia University in 1940 as “one of ten scholars at Columbia working on topics related to Blacks.”¹ Wright subsequently went on to teach at Howard University, her undergraduate alma mater, for 30 years, becoming a full professor, and also eventually became involved in the civil rights movement by completing historical research for litigation in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. Her most notable work is the research that she completed on the history and implications of segregation in the U.S. educational system, evidenced in her dissertation, essays, and journal articles.

Hodges has organized a wealth of important writings authored by Wright in this *Reader* that now might be used by scholars interested in continuing to discuss Wright’s life, and significance, not only in the history of African Americans in New Jersey but also in the history of the United States. Hodges has organized this text around several sections, including a biographical sketch; Wright’s doctoral dissertation, *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey* (published as a book by Columbia University Press in 1941); four significant essays by Wright published between

¹ Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *The Marion Thompson Wright Reader* (Rutgers University Press, 2021), 29.

1943 and 1954; book reviews and notes authored by Wright; and an extensive encyclopedia entry on Lucy Diggs Slowe also written by Wright. This biographical sketch, supplied by Hodges, is to date likely the most extensive biography that exists on Marion Thompson Wright. Drawing upon a wealth of both primary and secondary sources, such as historical African American newspapers, letters written by and to Wright, published writings by Wright, and journal articles and book chapters, Hodges has supplied a much-needed extended 73-page biography of Wright for this volume. He has done this using the Marion Thompson Wright Papers housed at Pepperdine University and, reportedly, papers from his personal collection. A newly organized assortment of papers made available to the public, this Pepperdine collection includes photographs of Wright and her children, colleagues, and family; personal letters; legal documents; and newspaper clippings, as well as essays, articles, and the key writings produced by Wright as a professional scholar and public intellectual.

Though she has a lecture series named in her honor at Rutgers University, and several scholars, such as Clement Price, Giles Wright, Margaret Corocco, Pero G. Dagbovie, Stephanie Y. Evans, and Hettie V. Williams, have written about her for years in dissertations, journal articles, books, and book chapters, there was no book-length work or expansive biography on Wright until the publication of this text.

Wright was a prolific letter writer, and this collection includes letters to her son, Alfred Moss; her daughter, Thelma Moss; and friends, including Lucy Diggs Slowe, that are most revealing. Though letters to her daughter, Thelma, were focused, at times, on “more pedestrian concerns” (55). These letters also indicate that Wright traveled within an extensive network of intellectuals, such as Lucy Diggs Slowe, Walter G. Daniel, Lorenzo Greene, Rayford Logan, and Merle Curti. She corresponded regularly with friends and former professors, as was the case with

her letters to Slowe and Curti. Wright's more provocative correspondence with Greene is also featured here to help get at the interior life of a woman with "deep personal sorrows" who was clearly suffering over the personal choices that she made in becoming a Black woman scholar and noted intellectual during the height of the Jim Crow era.

This text is a commendable work defined by a fastidious attention to detail. Hodges offers us some indispensable biographical information about Wright's marriages, personal relationships, and mental health struggles in his opening commentary. These details seem largely gleaned from personal letters from the Wright Collection at Pepperdine. Some details about Wright's parents, their parents, Wright's many siblings, and her two marriages are contained in the biographical sketch section of the book. According to Hodges, as revealed in a series of letters to her son, Wright did make an effort to develop some type of relationship with her children on a fairly regular basis, though the letters also reveal that she maintained a marked level of distance at the same time. Hodges here offers his readers a more intimate portrait of Wright's life that no other scholar has yet been able to share. Several photographs of Wright and her children, mother, and husbands (or photos of her with friends) help to complete this comprehensive biographical sketch.

Though this is a necessary and worthy text, with few shortcomings, some minor criticisms are warranted. *The Marion Thompson Wright Reader* is organized around writings with *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey*, Wright's dissertation, as the centerpiece coupled with some more notable essays and journal articles she wrote. There are several other aforementioned documents contained in the text, but these are the primary published writings of Wright. Given that we now have access to photographs, documents, and letters authored by Wright, and these constitute materials never before accessed by scholars who have written about Wright, a more useful organization might have been to include a section here that contains letters and other

documents (including her birth certificate, death certificate, or legal papers). Her book reviews and journal articles, as well as her dissertation, have been pored over by scholars for decades. Hodges uses some letters that help him craft a more intimate portrait of Wright; why not include some of these letters in this book?

Stephanie Y. Evans, author of *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954* (University Press of Florida, 2007), is the nation’s foremost scholar working on Black women in higher education. Her work might be more directly engaged here to better contextualize Wright as one of the earliest Black women to secure a doctoral degree within the biographical sketch. There is also some awkward phrasing in a few sections of the book. Scholars of women’s history tend to avoid use of the phrase “female” (to refer to women in history), as it is considered to be reductionist or essentialist. Hodges uses the phrase “female colleges” to refer to top colleges for women at the time, and later uses the term “female scholars” while discussing Black women scholars at Howard University.² These are but some meager limitations in a text that is otherwise groundbreaking on many levels. This book would be well utilized in courses on the history of New Jersey, African American history, and Black women’s history.

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² Hodges, *The Marion Thompson Wright Reader*, 3; 34.