



Canute Frankson, a Jamaican-born mechanic, left his home in Detroit to join the fight against fascism in Spain in April of 1937. Several months after arriving, he wrote a powerful letter to a “dear friend” back home, one in which he tries to explain and justify his decision to go fight in Spain in a “war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery.”

Here is that letter...

Albacete, Spain
July 6, 1937

My Dear Friend:

I’m sure that by this time you are still waiting for a detailed explanation of what has this international struggle to do with my being here. Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult and abuse upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro, who have fought through these years for the rights of my people am here in Spain today.

Because we are no longer an isolated minority group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant, because, my dear, we have joined with, and become an active part of, a great progressive force, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilization from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here, we’ll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world, from the vicious prosecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler’s Fascist heels.

All we have to do is to think of the lynching of our people. We can but look back at the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes, stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies, ears, fingers, toes, have been cut for souvenirs — living bodies into which red-hot pokers have been thrust. All because of a hate created in the minds of men and women by their masters who keep us all under their heels while they such our blood, while they live in their bed of ease by exploiting us.

But these people who howl like hungry wolves for our blood, must we hate them? Must we keep the flame which these mastered kindled constantly fed? Are these men and women responsible for the programs of their masters, and the conditions which force them to such degraded depths? I think not. They are tools in the hands of unscrupulous masters. These same people are as hungry as we are. They live in dives and wear rags the same as we do. They too are robbed by the masters, and their faces kept down in the filth of a decayed system. They are our fellowmen. Soon and very soon they and we will understand. Soon many Angelo Herndons¹ will rise from among them, and from among us, and will lead us both against those who live by the stench of our bunt flesh. We will crush them. We will build us a new society—a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I’m here in Spain.

On the battlefields of Spain we fight for the preservation of democracy. Here, we’re laying the foundation for world peace, and for the liberation of my people, and of the human race. Here, where we’re engaged in one of the most bitter struggles of human history, there is no color line, no discrimination, no race hatred. There’s only one hate, and that is the hate for fascism. We know who are enemies are. The Spanish people are very sympathetic towards us. They are lovely people. I’ll tell you about them later.

→

¹ Angelo Herndon was an African American communist convicted for violating Georgia’s criminal insurrection law after he helped organize an interracial hunger march in Atlanta in 1932. In 1937 the United States Supreme Court found Georgia’s insurrection law to be unconstitutional. His brother, Milton Herndon, was a killed in action in Spain on October 13, 1937.

[...]

I promised not to preach, but by all indications this seems more like a sermon than a letter to an old friend. But how can I help it, being face to face with such trying circumstances? I'm quite conscious of the clumsiness of my effort to write you an intimate letter, but your knowledge of my earnestness and sincerity, with your intelligence and patience will enable you to understand and be tolerant. Later, after I've overcome this strain, I'm sure I'll be able to write more intimately. The consciousness of my responsibility for my actions has kept me under terrific strain. Because I think it has caused you a lot of unpleasantness.

Don't think for one moment that the strain of this terrible war or the many miles between us has changed my feelings towards you. Our friendship has meant a great deal to me, and still means much to me. I appreciate it because it has always been a friendship of devoted mutual interest. And I'll do whatever is within my power to maintain it.

No one knows the time he'll die, even under the most favorable conditions. So I, a soldier in active service, must know far less about how far or how close is death. But as long as I hold out I'll keep you in touch with events. Sometimes when I go to the front the shells drop pretty close. Then I think it is only a matter of minutes. After I return here to the base I seem to see life from a new angle. Somehow it seems to be more beautiful. I'd think of you, home and all my friends, then get to working more feverishly than ever. Each of us must give all we have if this Fascist beast is to be destroyed.

After this is over I hope to share my happiness with you. It will be a happiness which could not have been achieved in any other way than having served in a cause so worthy. I hope that the apparent wrong which I committed may be compensated for by the service I'm giving here for the cause of democracy. I hope that you're well, and that you will, or have, forgiven me. My sincere desire is that you are happy, and when this is over that we meet again. But if a Fascist bullet stops me don't worry about it. If I am conscious before I die I don't think I'll be afraid. Of one thing I'm certain: I'll be satisfied that I've done my part.

So long. Until some future date. One never knows when there'll be time to write. There's so much to do, and so little time in which to do it. Love.

Salud, Canute

Canute Frankson was born in the Parish of St. Catherine, Old Harbor, Jamaica on April 13, 1890. In 1917, together with his wife, Rachel, he emigrated to Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, where Frankson worked as a machinist. Frankson eventually settled in Detroit, where he worked in the auto industry. Frankson joined the Communist Party in 1934. He sailed for Europe aboard the *Queen Mary* on April 21, 1937. In Spain, skilled machinists were scarce and Frankson with his proven ability was rapidly promoted. He was appointed Head Mechanic at the International Garage in Albacete. Fellow International Garage veteran, Marion Noble, noted that Frankson's fluency in Spanish was a great asset and that many hours of his free time were spent teaching engine repair classes to young Spaniards. Frankson returned to the United States aboard the *President Harding* on September 24, 1938. Frankson was killed in an auto accident in either 1939 or 1940.