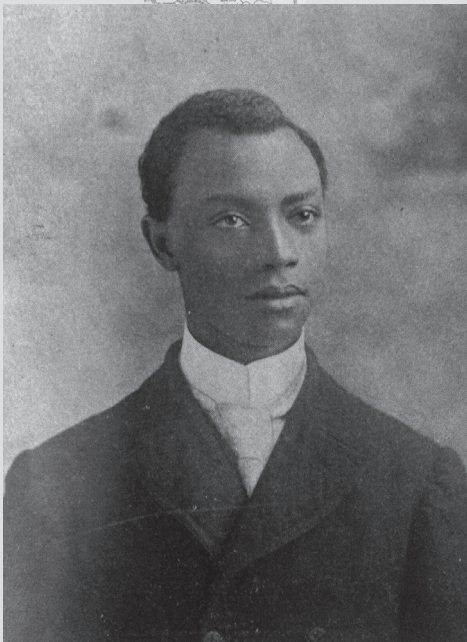


Accolades to Black Military Heroism and Fantasies of Empire in James E. McGirt's Writings

by John Gruesser



PHOTOGRAPH FROM JAMES EPHRAIM MCGIRT, *AVENGING THE MAINE, A DRUNKEN A. B., AND OTHER POEMS* (RALEIGH: EDWARDS & BROUGHTON, 1899)

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ABOVE TOP James Ephraim McGirt, circa 1900

ABOVE BOTTOM An advertisement that ran in *The Colored American* in Oct. and Nov. 1902

A pioneering African American author and editor in the first decade of the twentieth century, James E. McGirt wrote verse about the Spanish-Cuban-American War and fiction about the Philippine-American War. Some of the poems celebrate American victories over Spain and others emphasize Afro-Cuban and US black military heroism. McGirt's short story "In Love as in War" places the mythic figure of the fearless black sergeant, who appeared in Civil War testimonials as well as press coverage of the Cuban campaign, in the Philippines.¹ There he participates in the US takeover of the archipelago and successfully competes against a white American officer for the hand of a native princess. In contrast to many of his African American peers, McGirt offers unqualified support for US overseas expansion in these literary texts, raising no questions about the methods used to subjugate Filipinos, and drawing little or no attention to the discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and violence faced by African Americans at home and abroad during an era in which Jim Crow practices reached their peak.

Poet, short story writer, playwright, editor, publisher, public speaker, and businessman James Ephraim McGirt was born in Robeson County, North Carolina, in 1874. He attended a private school in Lumberton, and when his parents, the former slaves Madison and Ellen Townsend McGirt, moved the family to Greensboro, he went to the public schools in that city. In 1892, he enrolled in Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he studied English literature, Greek, and Latin. He graduated from this co-educational, historically black Methodist institution in 1895. McGirt, who began writing poetry at an early age, taught school for a year and then turned to more physically demanding work. In the Preface to his first book of poetry, *Avenging the Maine, A Drunken A. B., and Other Poems*, published by the Raleigh firm Edwards and Broughton in 1899, McGirt states that it was written "under very unfavorable circumstances," composed not during his "leisure time" but rather during his "sacrificed time, time when the body was almost exhausted from manual labor."² An expanded second edition of this volume appeared in 1900 and a third in 1901. George F. Lasher, a Philadelphia publisher, brought out a second collection of McGirt's poems, *Some Simple Songs and a Few*

¹ James E. McGirt, "In Love as in War," in *The Triumphs of Ephraim* (Philadelphia: McGirt, 1907); quotations from this story will be cited parenthetically.

² James Ephraim McGirt, *Avenging the Maine, A Drunken A. B., and Other Poems*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1900) 3-4; subsequently cited parenthetically from this edition.