

McGirt, James Ephraim ^[1]

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by William L. Andrews, 1991

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James E. McGirt. 1901. Image from *Avenging the Main, A Drunken A.B., and Other Poems*.

^[2]James Ephraim McGirt, Black poet, editor, and publisher, was born in Robeson County ^[3] near the town of Lumberton. The son of Madison and Ellen Townsend McGirt, he grew up on the family farm and was sent to a private school near Lumberton. Later the family lived on a farm near Rowland before finally moving to Greensboro ^[4]. There James attended public school, worked at odd jobs, and began to write verse. In 1892 he enrolled in Bennett College ^[5], a Methodist-affiliated institution then just outside Greensboro. What he did immediately afterwards is not known, but in the preface to his first book, *Avenging the Maine, a Drunken A.B., and Other Poems* (1899), he blamed exhausting manual labor and a lack of leisure time for the slimness of the volume and the feebleness of the verse. Whatever his employment, it did not prevent him from revising and enlarging the first edition of this work in 1900, as well as issuing in the next year a new collection of poems entitled *Some Simple Songs and a Few More Ambitious Attempts*

The publication in 1901 of a third revised and enlarged edition of *Avenging the Maine* ^[2] by a Philadelphia printer rather than the Raleigh firm that had prepared the first two editions indicates the direction in which McGirt's ambitions would take him in 1903. After briefly residing in Hampton, Va., he established himself in Philadelphia where, in September 1903, he issued the first number of *McGirt's Magazine* ^[6], an illustrated monthly dealing with the activities of Black Americans in art, literature, science, and general affairs. Although his duties as editor and publisher of the magazine consumed most of his time and all of his savings, McGirt continued to write music and poetry while living in Philadelphia. *For Your Sweet Sake: Poems* ^[7] (1906), his third book of verse, testified to his abiding wish to win recognition for himself as a poet. In 1907 he published his last book, a volume of short stories entitled *The Triumph of Ephraim* ^[8].

In 1909 *McGirt's Magazine*, reflecting its declining sales, changed from a monthly to a quarterly. A year later it ceased publication, as McGirt decided to return to Greensboro to join his sister in managing the Star Hair Grower Manufacturing Company. After accumulating a considerable amount of property in and around Greensboro, he became a realtor. At his death he was remembered as "one of the best-known Negro citizens of Greensboro." He was buried in Maple Cemetery.

McGirt's contribution to literature was small. His first book of verse is, as he recognized, amateurish and undistinguished. His technical skill increased with each volume that he published, but he was never a sure metrist or a skilled rhymist. McGirt's understanding of the art of the short story was equally uncertain. The stories in *The Triumph of Ephraim* usually deal with problems or romantic love encountered by youthful and largely unindividualized Black heroes and heroines. A few of his stories are set in North Carolina, but little particularity is given to these settings in McGirt's fiction. Unlike his poems, which, despite their lack of polish, often give evidence of deep personal feelings, McGirt's short stories reveal both the lack of experience and the uncertainty of purpose that together account for the author's brief and unsuccessful literary career.

Neither McGirt nor any of his three siblings ever married.

References:

James W. Parker, "James Ephraim McGirt: Poet of Hope Deferred," *North Carolina Historical Review* 31 (July 1954).

Margaret F. Peterson, "Suspended Animation: Race Relations in the Literature of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, David Bryant Fulton, and James Ephraim McGirt" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1972).

Additional Resources:

McGirt, James E. 1901. *Avenging the Maine, a drunken A.B., and other poems*. Philadelphia: G. F. Lasher.
<https://archive.org/details/avengingmaine00mcgirich> [2].

McGirt, James E. 1906. *For your sweet sake: poems*. <https://archive.org/details/foryoursweetsake00mcgi> [7]

McGirt, James E. 1907. *The Triumphs of Ephraim*. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035837965> [8]

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