"if we must die"


22. Melvin B. Tolson, “Claude McKay’s Art,” Poetry 83, no. 5 (February 1954): 287; Mckay’s comments on “If We Must Die,” Anthology of Negro Poetry, Folkway Records Album No. FL 9791. The often-repeated story of Churchill reading the poem has two main versions. The first suggests that, as Arna Bontemps writes, Churchill “quoted it [“If We Must Die”] as the conclusion to his address before the joint houses Congress prior to the entrance of the United States into World War II.” This story is told in Arna Bontemps, ed., introduction to American Negro Poetry (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), xvi; and Tyrone Tillery, Claude McKay: A Black Poet’s Struggle for Identity (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 35. Churchill’s December 26, 1941, speech, though, makes no such mention of McKay’s poem. The second and more common version is harder either to verify or to disprove. It suggests that Churchill read the poem sometime during World War II at the House of Commons. A specific date is never mentioned. This version is especially popular with black poets. See Tolson (supra, this note); Gwendolyn Brooks, letter to the editor, Time 98, no. 16 (October 18, 1971): 6; Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton, eds., The Vintage Book of African American Poetry (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 99; and Robert Hayden, ed., Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967). 45. Wayne Cooper claims Churchill never read the poem to the House of Commons; David Perkins writes that the poem may have “stirred the Edwardian heart of Winston Churchill, who is said to have read it in the House of Commons”; and Jean Wagner writes “it seems true” “but we have no confirmation of this.” See Wayne F. Cooper, review of Claude McKay:
NOTES TO PAGES 12-19