Many individuals and companies have assisted Kyk-Over-Al since the magazine was relaunched 10 years ago in December 1984. Indeed without such help Kyk could not possibly have continued. In Guyana or the West Indies - perhaps, indeed, anywhere - a literary magazine can by no means survive through sales alone so we are dependent on sponsorship provided by people and companies with the imagination to see that a magazine like Kyk is worth keeping going for the sake of the contribution it makes to cultural and intellectual life in the country. In the case of this Special Anniversary issue, we owe a particular and very great debt of gratitude to five organisations which have greatly assisted us in the publication. We hope that it will be reward enough for them to know that their support has enabled an important part of our cultural tradition in Guyana and the West Indies to be preserved now and, we hope, well into the future. We extend our sincere thanks to the following:

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The Editor would welcome the submission of poems, short stories, articles and reviews to consider for publication. Publication, of course, cannot be guaranteed and because of expenses it will not be possible to return manuscripts.

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The four pen and ink Rain Forest drawings featured in this special edition of Kyk are reproduced from a series of cards printed with permission from the artist, Martin Jordan, by Red Thread Press in support of a turtle conservation project in North West, Guyana. The 'Pine Cards' awareness initiative was the inspiration of Trevor Sharples and Julia Liebeschuetz two VSOs who worked in Guyana in 1993.
Editorial Comment

Kyk-Over-Al's 50th Birthday

We hope this special double issue of *Kyk-Over-Al*, which commemorates the 50th anniversary of the magazine's first appearance in December, 1945, will speak eloquently for itself. It is a normal, though more ample than usual, issue of the magazine with a section recalling the first issue of *Kyk* and including a number of special contributions for the occasion.

All of us involved in bringing out this issue are grateful to those who have provided encouragement and made contributions. For our part we simply feel a sense of satisfaction that fifty years after the event we are able to celebrate *Kyk*'s birth with another issue of a magazine which is undeniably an important part of the literary and cultural history and heritage of Guyana and the wider West Indies. It must be our endeavour and the endeavour of those who come after us that this small miracle of continuity is maintained.

*AJS: A Tribute by Ian McDonald*

In large part we look upon this special issue as a tribute to the memory of AJS, father of *Kyk* and editor of that first, seminal sequence of 28 issues which he produced between 1945 and 61.

The life A.J Seymour lived you would not have thought that he would have had the time, the nervous energy, the mental inclination, or the emotional space to fashion anything more than the gleaming vestige of a poetic career. Yet he has been prolific in his output of poems and he will surely be considered — when cultural historians stand back far enough in time — an important West Indian poet both in terms of what he achieved intrinsically and in terms of his seminal influence on the region's poetry in the
period of transition from colonial status to independent stature. His life was so full of other things that the urge to write poetry must have been extraordinarily powerful to enable him to achieve so much in this one demanding endeavour out of so many others.

It is not just that AJS had any number of irons in the cultural fire. Those alone would have taken up a few worthwhile life-times for most men. Perhaps even more remarkable to observe, and wonder how he found the time and energy to write his poems, is that he was a conscientious, full-time civil servant dutifully pursuing an arduous career and also a devoted husband and father and God-fearing man whose life very much revolved around family, friends, and Church. There never seems to have been a question of wanting to break the bonds of convention, kick over the traces, overturn all, escape to the South Seas, in order to write his poems. Poetry had to take its place among other activities in a hard-working administrative career and within an ordered and self-consuming family circle. AJS seems to have accepted this as a controlling fact of life, a "given", a way of looking at things that was not to be, and was not, questioned. His many volumes of autobiography — “Growing Up in Guyana”, “Pilgrim Memories”, “Family Impromptu”, “30 Years a Civil Servant”, “The Years in Puerto Rico and Mackenzie” — indicate this clearly enough. His life in poetry — and poetry's deep significance for him — is certainly vividly portrayed. At the age of 22 he writes his first poem and:

...suddenly the discovery of this gift acted as a focusing of the latent energies of my life, both at that time and later on in life. I had discovered the central citadel of my inner life and was to link that gift to the unrolling of revelation in religion, especially in the phrase 'the image of the likeness of God'.

But poetry does not by any means dominate — nor even take
pride of place — in the story of his life as AJS tells it. If anything, family and religion play much the most important part in his life. At any rate there was never any doubt in his mind that first and foremost he must apply himself to earning a living so that he could marry and raise a family and provide worthily for them. There is perhaps a faint note of regret when he relates at one point how the writing of poetry retreated into the background of his life from 1945 for some 25 years:

From 1936 to around 1944 I had been conscious of a continuous flow of poetry from my pen and I had published by 1945 Verse, More Poems, Over Guiana, Clouds, and Sun’s in My Blood...But these three jobs—Government broadcasting, editing Kyk-Over-Al and being the executive officer of a cultural union — absorbed those emotional tensions that had previously expressed themselves in my poetry, and so the main tide of my creativity was diverted. It was not until 1970 with the great change in my duties and with the evolution of my country that I recovered my personal voice in poetry and my second creative phase emerged.

Regret, perhaps, but regret voiced with no doubt at all that what he was doing with his life was both inevitable and right. His Muse, though strong and insisting to be heard, never threatened to be so fierce and jealous as to divert him from that conscientiously chosen path in life.

What he was doing with his life, apart from working assiduously at his Government job and helping raise a large family was of vital importance to the cultural development of Guyana and, indeed, the Caribbean region. He was turning himself into a one man cultural task force.

It has to be remembered — especially by those who think of him first as a poet — that AJS made an incalculable impact on life and letters in Guyana simply by his active presence and
leading role in the country’s cultural and educational life. Month by month, through his editing of Kyk-Over-Al, his dedicated work in broadcasting, his secretaryship of the Union of Cultural Clubs (until it broke up in the early 1950s), his indefatigable writing of essays and articles in local magazines and newspaper, his enthusiastic encouragement of young writers and production of their publications, his devotion to the vital importance of literature in the life of an emerging nation which he communicated to all around him and the society at large, his explanation of the West Indian dimension to our cultural life — through this multitudinous attention to intellectual and cultural awareness among all sections of the community, he dramatically advanced the cause of Guyanese and West Indian literature in a particularly formative stage in its history. In the book produced in honour of his 70th birthday, I wrote about his contribution in the following terms:

*His life at one very important level is a record of 50 years of dedicated work in literature. He began in an era when everything was still to be done. Indeed, it may be that pioneers have to attempt too much. When young Seymour in the early 1930s seriously began to think what contribution he might make to life and letters in his home land, consider how much needed to be done, how many moulds required breaking, how many initiatives needed to be taken. The Empire had not yet begun to fade. The status of his country was colonial, the mentality dependent, the heritage imperial, the culture derivative. Think of the varied challenges that must have faced a young man’s sense and sensibility in those times. It must have almost seemed too much. There were poems to write whose themes were Guyanese and Caribbean not metropolitan and whose imagery was tropical and experienced, not temperate and second-hand. There was a whole new world of deeply felt historical experience to*
open up. There was new thinking to be done in half a dozen fields. Critical work had to be informed by different themes and original perspectives. So many fresh starts had to be made. A whole new context had to be prepared for the coming generations. The work that is done at the beginning of anything, like the foundations of a great building sunk beneath the earth, is least seen but is the most important part. Seymour as designer and architect of post-colonial structures of thought and art and writing in Guyana and the Caribbean is still to be fully assessed and properly acclaimed.

And in Kyk-Over-Al, # 39, in a tribute to mark his 75th birthday, I tried to give some idea of the scope of work he accomplished:

...his overall contribution to the cultural tradition of Guyana and the Caribbean is truly astonishing. I do not think the younger writers and academics grasp it fully. The AJS bibliography compiled by the National Library in 1974 was already 100 pages long and since then must have doubled in length. This amazing man's work contains poems, historical publications, reviews, broadcasts, essays, addresses, entries in anthologies, forewords, lectures, talks, pamphlets, memoirs, sermons, eulogies, magazine work, and books in such profusion that one would be excused for thinking this was the record of a school, not one man alone.

"So much to do, so little time to spare" — though when it came to spreading the word about literature he always made the time. Yet for me AJS is preeminently AJS the poet. I have a great regret that more of his life was not devoted to poetry, devoted to perfecting the craft and art poetry, devoted to expanding the frontiers of poetry in the West Indies when he was in the full
vigour of his most creative years. God knows that in his poetry he achieved great things. But I simply have the feeling that he had the capacity, the genius in him, to create and sustain more complex, more challenging, more innovative, more deeply searching and questioning poetry than he ever did succeed in writing. He never quite had the time left over in a very full and satisfying life to explore the outer limits or the innermost reaches of language as he himself, I think, would have wished to do.

Nevertheless he is a West Indian poet who will always be read. The mass of poems he wrote represents a magnificent achievement. Many of the poems will be remembered as long as forever ever lasts in the West Indies. Some of the poems — *Sun is a Shapely Fire; Name Poem; For Christopher Columbus; Tomorrow Belongs to the People; Amalivaca; Legend of Kaieteur; Over Guiana; Clouds; There Runs a Dream; I Heard a Rooster Call*; to name an essential handful — have deservedly become classics and will be read in the textbooks generation after generation.

In this special issue of his brain-child, therefore, I believe AJS would have wanted us to remember him not only as inspired founder and editor of what will always in a real sense be “his” magazine, but also by the simple name of poet. And so we praise him now for all he did, for the gift of *Kyk*, and for the poetry he loved so deeply and wrote so well".
Photograph of Kykoverat, by Robin Pieters, courtesy of 'Stabroek News'.
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Photograph of Kykoverat, by Robin Pieters, courtesy of 'Stabroek News'.
Kyk at 50
Kyk at 50

AJ Seymour

The Biography of a Magazine

In 1956, in introducing The Golden Kyk, an anthology of selections from Kyk 1 to 28, AJS wrote an article which can appropriately serve as Preface to this special section honouring Kyk on the 50th anniversary of its birth. AJS called his article: “Literature in the Making — The Contribution of Kyk-Over-Al”.

The biography of a magazine includes the consideration of the part it played in the making of a national literature which is still incomplete although it has some considerable body.

First the basic narrative. Kyk started in 1945 as the organ of the British Guiana Writers Association, and gradually assumed the responsibility for printing the more important lectures and discussions of the British Guiana Union of Cultural Clubs. This was possible because the editor was also the honorary secretary of the Union of Clubs. Then the Writers Association ceased to meet, and later the Union of Cultural of Clubs fell apart, leaving the editor to pursue the development of the magazine without clients of any sort. The editor was himself at first staff member and then the head of the Government Information Services and therefore committed to providing facts and information to all. He was himself a poet and looking back, it appears that without his being very conscious of it, he was seeking to make a distinction in his poetry of a public voice and a private voice. So here is the editor as a primary resource.

A word now about the function of a Little Review or literary magazine since this type of magazine has a history of its own. The little review is important in the world of literature and
particularly in the English language as a contemporary record of trends in new writing, that would otherwise receive little attention. In the 1945 *Little Review Anthology*, the English poet Denys Val Barker points out that over the past two centuries in England, there is a long story of writers, later to become famous, making their first appearance in print among small and unknown magazines. The little review is valuable and important since it can print new forms of writing which are too revolutionary for the popular press to notice except in a glancing fashion. For example, the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce had to come out in the little reviews before conditions for book publications could be created. A little review is also produced by a writer who finds that he has something to say of an unorthodox, controversial or visionary nature. D.H. Lawrence published his own magazine *Signature* in this way.

In the regional sense, the *Little Review* is important, to express a growing nationalism. Hugh MacDiarmid, one of Scotland’s leading national poets, unpopular with other editors because of his strong nationalistic and socialistic approach, found it necessary to bring out his own magazine *Voice of Scotland* and we have magazines with the names of *Wales and Welsh Review* to cater for regional ambitions.

During the 1939/45 war, we also had Little Reviews devoted to the literature of countries overrun by enemy forces — Free France, Belgian Message, Czech Review, Greek Hellas and so on.

There is also a special type of review which developed — the book anthology or book magazine. These looked like magazines but were books. Men and Women in the British Military Services brought out anthologies — *Bulge Blast, Khaki and Blue*, and *Air Force Poetry*. The same was true of short stories, published in little review collections.

Looking back after many years, the editor was only vaguely conscious of some of these events, in England, a far away centre of Empire. The editor was only vaguely conscious also of many of the social forces operating in Guyana in the 1940’s although
looking back, it is evident what has taken place.

In the first place, national health had become much better; it was in 1946, at the end of the war, that Dr. Giglioli and D.D.T. had come together to brake the scourge of malaria, and people no longer had to suffer from crippling fevers. There was new American money coming into the country from the construction of the Air Base at Atkinson and at the Naval Base at Makouria. People were eating more meat so the diet had improved. Harold Stannard had come to Guyana and encouraged intellectual curiosity and had put creative intelligences in touch with one another in the Caribbean region especially with Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica. The Union of Culture Clubs that he had encouraged was focusing attention on the development of the arts and discussions of cultural values in a planned deliberate and sustained fashion. This meant a gathering of interest and support that unified the native elite in the country, and a possible leadership in the country was coming into existence to discuss the intellectual material written by their peers. By chance there were at least three poets important by national standards who had begun to write in Guyana and to maintain a fellowship of poetic and critical imagination in the 1940's.

At the end of the war, there were suddenly available good inexpensive paperback books in the Penguin Series, making a revolution at that time in reading in England and America. So the community was open to influences from abroad in a liberal way. Linkages with groups in the West Indies began to appear with the little review *Focus* in Jamaica edited by Edna Manley, with *Bim* in Barbados edited by Frank Collymore and Therold Barnes.

There were also deeper social forces at work, now that one can look back and analyse. In the small community of like minded people, a strong contact was being forged between the magazine and the society, and a shape, a character of being Guyanese was being given to the society. The free play of mind upon ideas helped a blossoming of what we call literature, and the
description of areas of cultural values and an inventory of the
collection of the arts helped the focusing of common concern and
openness to ideas. The symposia (many of them came later
rather than earlier in the biography of the magazine) encouraged
progressive thinking, even though contributors held diverse views
in social and religious matters. But the very clash was important.

In the creation of literary and intellectual leadership, there
was an unconscious groping towards a position in which the
community wanted to maintain the tradition mediated from
England to the British West Indies by our colonial past and to see
how it could be married to all the cultural elements in the
community that were quickening to birth. We did not have a
name for it then, but it was what is called the process of cultural
pluralism and national unity.

What was this tradition that was inherited? It was part of the
European heritage leading back to the Greeks, the Romans and
the Hebrews, and came as part of our educational patrimony. With
the English language came standards in literature and criticism.
We had laid great store by this legacy and consciousness, and
we wanted it included in the new Guyana to be born, since we
would continue to use the English language. The question in our
minds perhaps unasked, was how we could take this old colonial
world and remake it into our nation. We were conscious also that
many of our members had religions and therefore cultural values
based upon their links with India and others on links with Africa.

We ask the question, what is there in our past as Guyanese to
which we could give common pride? what were the things that
united us rather than the things that divided us? We wanted to
move away from this old world to make a new world. The old
world was still alive and the new world was not yet born.

We were not without some roots. There were the Dutch
historical past, the mythologically valuable Amerindian present,
and in some vague way all of us felt that we could somehow
claim those roots and bring them into literary and cultural
production. Vaguely too, we felt that linkage with the West Indies
and others there thinking like ourselves would help to make this new world be realised.

Remember that the editor is speaking from a web of reflection and memory that looks backwards to see the roads travelled by thinking and articulate people in Guyana over the pass 40 years. We did not know it then, but we were placing an intellectual and cultural apex on the traditional colonial pyramid. There was no university, but the University College of the West Indies, especially through its Extra Mural Department, was beginning to make its influence felt in Guyana. It was the inner necessity and urge to freedom that we were paying attention to. So we focussed on the human condition in Guyana, the here and now of our world.

The value of a magazine like Kyk lies not in its age, but its purpose. The responsibility and duty of a third world magazine is to name the here and now, to summon up the values of the past that are embedded in the soil and its history, and to point to the future from today’s discernible trends. One aspect of the urge to freedom is the ability to choose from among several possibilities. An editor can request the prose writings to put in his pages and they will be the fruit of the conscious mind, but we must remember that the poetry he prints is the expression of what is secret and internal, since the age is about to make its statements and announce its values through the poets.

Early in its pages in 1945 and 1948, Kyk declared its aims — “an instrument to help forge a Guyanese people, make them conscious of their intellectual and spiritual possibilities — build some achievement of common pride in the literary world — make an act of possession of our enviroment ... We so desperately want to be rooted in the European soil, that is the Caribbean has isolated us to the impact of a dying civilization so that we can pass on some flaming torch higher up the line.”

L.E Braithwaite reviewing Kyk in 1966 against these aims felt that the magazine had not been radical or revolutionary enough, that there had not been disagreement with the editor’s concept and point of view. He notes the magazine moves from a
purely Guyanese to a West Indian position with the setting up of the University College of the West Indies, and became aware towards the end, of the importance of African Culture in the region. He saw as valuable the translated poems of French West Indian and African poets and the special issues on West Indian Literature, Pen Portraits of important West Indians, anthologies of Guyanese and West Indian poetry, the Cities of the Caribbean, Guyanese Christmas, the Theatre in British Guiana and the Artist Society. He felt that the poetry of the main Guyanese poets and the introduction of a radical and critical element were valuable.

I wish to add certain personal points of view. There were many problems facing the Editor of *Kykoveral*. Appointed by his peers in the Writer’s Association to take charge of the magazine, he had to conduct the business of the publication in accordance with the agreed aims and with his own standards of excellence developing these as he went along, following his vision of the future in the formulation of his plans for successive issues, weighing the ability and the willingness of his possible contributors, expressing the spirit of the contents in his leading articles, gauging the relationship between the periodical and his developing audiences at home and abroad, moving out from a limited Guyanese writing core to the wider regional contribution and discussion of ideas by fellow writers of quality in the West Indies, making possible the circulation of these ideas while they were still fresh, articulating always as best he could the spirit of the times in thought and sensibility, and with growing support and confidence playing a creative part in the literary, intellectual and cultural growth of the country and the region.

As this development of editorial philosophy took place other problems arose. As noted already, the British Guiana Writers’ Association ceased to exist; then the British Guiana Union of Cultural Clubs ceased to meet. As I became the editor of a magazine without bases, my own responsibilities as a Senior Civil Servant deepened, various difficulties arose in securing
advertisements, the climate of opinion among the ablest minds in the country changed imperceptibly from tolerance to internal divisions and to commitments and pre-possessions on the political scene, in the region the Federation of the West Indies began to falter and fail in its stride. Horizons everywhere began to narrow and there was a gradual closing of mental frontiers to the circulation and influence of those ideas of breath and richness of which I had been a champion. I feel sure that there always exists a regional fraternity of men of letters within the Caribbean — indeed I was to experience contact with that fraternity during my years with the Caribbean Organisation and to sample this curiosity and openness of mind to new ideas without hostility — but with the beginning of the 1960’s it was clear that national loyalties and differences of political philosophy were affecting the existence of periodicals such as Kykoveral.

There is a special relationship between a magazine and an editor. In Australia, for example, the critic H. M. Green, pointed out that over the period 1099-1950 in three instances, The Bookfellow edited by Stephens, The Lone Hand by Archibald and the little review The Triad dealing with literary, artistic and musical matters which migrated from New Zealand to Australia, these magazines were kept alive only by the vision and perserverance of the editors. This would be true also of Kyk. Contributors had to be coaxed, cajoled, and reminded in many instances, and they still did not produce the promised contribution, in which case the editor has to decide whether or not he will write the piece himself so that the magazine will come out as planned. The relationship eventually can become that of an anxious mother and a child.

So in 1962 when the editor moved from Guyana to Puerto Rico as a political casualty, the magazine went to sleep. Since 1945 there has been a great change in the climate of literary opinion and in Guyana and the West Indies talents that had been active in the 1940’s had moved into politics. There was that disillusionment also in the wake of the breakup of the West
Indian Federation.

Who had been the main readers and supporters of Kyk in its 17 years of existence? Writers themselves, the middle class, middle-brow people in the city like clergymen, teachers, doctors, musicians, lawyers, merchants and clerks. The contributors had been involved in a numbers of symposia on themes like the spirit of man, the responsibility of the artist to the community, remembrance of Christmas from the viewpoints of living in London, New York, Jamaica; the arts in Guyana, children and their values, is there a West Indian way of life, greatness and bitterness, standards of criticism and several on reading meaning into a poem. These brought readers into involvement and made them into contributors.

There was a strong section on book reviews. Books that could make any contribution to the Guyanese way of life were made the subject of reviews and there was a wide net of persons who responded with a personal reaction to the books which found a place in the magazine.

Some years ago, a German Literature student prepared an index to Kykoveral over the period 1945-1961 under eight sections — Fiction, Drama, Poetry, articles on literature and language, articles on history and culture, Miscellaneous articles, Symposia Colloquia, and editorial notes. It was published in the magazine World Literature Written in English, Nov. 1977. The Editor went through the pages, 40 in all and realised that this was the distillation of several years of creative life. The 16 pages of the names of poets and poems, epitomised his relationships with many men and women, some of whom he had never seen.

For example, it was a letter from Miriam Koshland in California that brought translations of the poetry of Senghor, Cesaire, Lero and Rabearivelo. Meeting Philip Sherlock, Clare McFarlane and his sons in Jamaica brought an input of Jamaican poets. The St. Vincent star soloists, Kean, Campbell and Williams, Telemaque of Trinidad, E. M. Roach from Tobago, Derek Walcott from St Lucia, Frank Collymore and H. A. Vaughn
and later Eddie Brathwaite from Barbados, all had sent poems to Kyk, but always Wilson Harris and Martin Carter could be relied upon to send in poems to be printed.

As I look at the Index, I realised that Kykoveral is a prism of silver crystal which had attracted and held glowing images and ideas from more than 150 contributors over 17 years and mingled them into a jewel of memory of indescribable richness, now flashing in radiant light and now colours of heaving and seething blue and green and yellow for the delight and development of thousands of its readers. It’s lovely to know that this jewel was once in my hand.
ELMA SEYMOUR

Message

*Kyk-Over-Al* has seen 50 years! We rejoice and give thanks to the Editors who have sustained its growth over the years and so I offer my congratulations to the present Editor, Mr Ian McDonald, for carrying on the work left by the former Editor, A.J. Seymour for him to do.

I am pleased and happy that Ian has been able to take up and carry on from where AJS left off. When I look back I remember in one of the *Kyk*s, AJS writing, as it were, a last injunction: "to Ian as my son, I leave this in your hands to carry on for future generations." I am happy to record that you have carried out the instructions of producing the magazine regularly and faithfully.

I like to remember Ian as saying he came upon a copy of *Kyk* when was in the 6th Form of Queens Royal College in Trinidad and enjoyed reading what was there. Also I remember a tribute from Anne Walmsley while teaching in Jamaica which brought her to Guyana to meet AJS.

It was not easy producing this magazine but it was meeting the literary needs and urges of those who were trying to write something for publication. It gave them all great joy to see their work appear.

There were problems connected with the publication such as collecting the copy for printing of the advertising material and afterwards collecting the cash for advertisements. Some agents offered to collect for the editor but went off with what was collected, used it to their own purpose; that was distressing. So I decided to offer my services to collect for one issue as the Printers were getting worried about payment for the printing and AJS was worried and ashamed.

Mr. Oscar Wight, Managing Director of Argosy tried to help AJS out of the difficulties with the collecting agents knowing that AJS was a poor civil servant with a large family and he could not
always put his hands in his pocket to pay for the printing on his
own.

But whenever the magazine was published those who
contributed came around with smiles on their faces to collect their
copies and were grateful they had something published. This
brought much joy and satisfaction to the contributors but there
was anxiety on the part of the printers. However, Mr. Oscar
Wight was very kind and wiped off some of the debt for the
printing that was owed to the Argosy Company.

Congratulations and thanks for carrying on with *Kyk-Over-Al*
until this day. Many persons are grateful to have a copy to read. It
is a little magazine that has kept going for 50 years.

Here is a short poem AJS wrote a year before he died. I have
always kept it and enter it here now.

For Kyk

Here in my hands I hold
this happy jewel
these glowing dreams I forged
in a hard school.

Visions and memories
their blessings radiate
And many a blessing more
On new eyes wait.

My life's blood, others too
this jewel holds
transformed and caught in words
Glinting with gold
And when with dust my eyes
Finally close
Still with our happiness
this jewel glows.
For KJK

Here in my hands I hold
this happy jewel
these glowing dreams (forged
in a hard school).
Visions & memories
their blessings radiate
And many a blessing more
on men’s eyes real.

My life’s blood, others too
this jewel holds
transformed & caught in words
Glistening with gold
And when written, my eyes
Finally close.
From

Kyk-Over-Al

#1
Already there is the tang of Christmas in the air, and from the Watch Tower we send happy Christmas greetings to every reader of Kykoveral. It is the first Nativity season we spend free from hostilities, though not from the shadow of them, and most people hope for a long era of peace to repair the ravages of war.

Intellectual life in Europe and elsewhere is coming out of its enforced hibernation. The winter solstice is past, and thought begins its inevitable swing back to catch the sun. In the West Indies there are signs that social and economic conditions will slowly but surely improve, and the colonial peoples are being taken more into partnership in the government of their own countries.

Cultural life too, is quickening in many ways, but one needs a canalising of energies or, if you like, nuclei here and there that will give direction and permanence to the quickening activities. Surely the B.G Union of Cultural Clubs is one of those rallying points, and so also is a periodical of the kind we hope this will be.

What are our aims? Kykoveral we hope will be an instrument to help forge a Guianese people, and to make them conscious of their intellectual and spiritual possibilities. There’s so much we can do as a people if we can get together more, and with this magazine as an outlet, the united cultural organizations can certainly build, we believe, some achievement of common pride in the literary world, without detracting in the least from their group aims or autonomy.

Now, why change the name from “Greetings from Guiana” to “Kykoveral”? The answer can be, why not? Associations make a powerful cementing force, and although ruined, Kykoveral still
stands to remind us of our Amerindian and Dutch heritage. If we are going to grow, and to grow as people, we’ve got to have roots and Kykoveral is one of them. The old fort there is in ruins, but, as Harold Stannard says in his article, the creative spirit of man is indomitable, and cultures burgeon again amid their own ruins. As a title for a periodical Kykoveral calls for quick and wide vigilance and the expression of an alert people. The cover design — we think it an attractive one, was kindly done for us by Cecil E. Barker.

A word, now, about the contributors. The most distinguished of course is Harold Stannard, who made such a profound impression on the people of British Guiana two years ago. We don’t have to introduce Alan W. Steward or Oscar Wight or H. R. Harewood or N. E. Cameron. Every one knows these public men.

Readers of Guianese periodicals will also know already J. A. V. Bourne, Duncan Boyce, Vere T. Daly, Celeste Dolphin, Wilson Harris, Terence C. Holder, J. E. Humphrey and Jas. W. Smith. They are known to editors of longer standing than this one, and if we are not mistaken the other contributors also have appeared in print.

The issues of Kykoveral will depend largely upon public response. We may promise half yearly publication, with the hope readers will ask that the periodical appears quarterly. But Rome was not built in a day and we would wish steady growth in quality and response.
VERE T. DALY

The Story of Kykoveral

Kykoveral today is our oldest historical relic, and it should be visited by all who have pride of country in their hearts. Its name was doubtless an inspiration, for it “Looked” or “Kyked-Over-Al” the waters of the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni. Provided we have a sufficient leaven humility in our hearts, we would do ourselves no harm to take as our watch-word “Kyk-over-al!”

It has now been established beyond reasonable doubt that Kykoveral was founded in 1616. The trustworthiness of Major John Scott, on whose authority this statement was first made, was once contemptuously denied: but Dr. George Edmundson, in a series of learned articles —published in the English Historical Review, has shown, by comparison with Dutch and Spanish contemporary records, that Scott is entirely to be trusted.

By close examination and careful deduction Dr. Edmundson has reconstructed for us the story of the founding of Kykoveral.

Early in the seventeenth century there was at the Spanish settlement of San Thomé on the Orinoco, a Dutchman by the name of Adrian Groenewegen. He was the Spanish factor at San Thomé, but when a change of policy had come about in the little settlement Groenewegen quit the Spanish service and went back to his old masters in Holland.

He was at once engaged by Peter Courteen and Jan de Moor and put in charge of an expedition to Essequibo, where on his arrival with a mixed force of Englishmen and Zeelanders in two ships and a galiot, he built a fort and established a settlement on the island of Kykoveral at the water-meet of the Essequibo, Mazaruni, and Cuyuni rivers.

Until Dr. Edmundson took up the cudgel in defence of Scott (who was a notorious swindler in his private life) every bit of the above was discredited. But the acceptance of Scott’s story has now shown how false are earlier accounts which tell of the
Founding of Kykoveral between 1581 and 1598 and the finding of an old fort of alleged Portuguese construction.

In 1621 the Dutch West India Company was formed. Its main aim being the capture of Brazil, which belonged to the Portuguese, its first notable act was to send an expedition of twenty-six ships to raid San Salvador. It is probable that official attention was not paid to Essequebo before 1623, when the Zeeland Chamber began to show special interest in the post. Jacob Canyn, a ship’s captain, was the Company’s first agent. He contracted to serve for three years, but in 1626 we find him asking to be released. It is to Jan Van der Goes must go the honour of being the leader of the first official occupation of Essequebo.

In 1895 the question as to the respective boundaries of the Republic of Venezuela and the Crown Colony of British Guiana caused a world-wide stir; but war between the United States of America (acting for and on behalf of the Republic of Venezuela) and Great Britain was averted when an arbitration treaty was signed between the British Ambassador and Senhor Andrade at Washington on February 2, 1897. Working on both sides were some of the ablest professors in the world, and one of the difficulties they had to face was to decide which of the two accounts of the founding of Kykoveral was to be accepted — Scott’s, or that which could be gleaned from the minutes of the West India Company. In the American case, Scott’s account was treated with contempt: and in the decision handed down by the tribunal which met in Paris, it is clear that Scott was discredited.

The apparently irreconcilable difficulty was this: If Groenewegen in 1616 had established a settlement, why was it necessary for the West India Company to establish another sometime between 1623 and 1626? What had happened to Groenewegen’s settlement? Had it failed?

By close analysis of the documents which have come down to us, Dr. Edmundson has shown that the official occupation of Kykoveral did not disturb the settlement under Groenewegen. Undoubtedly the old settlers must have viewed the new ones with
suspicion, and vice versa; but on the whole the fortunes of the Company’s trading post hardly affected the Courteen’s colony.

How reasonable this conclusion is may easily be seen when one begins to read of attempts made by the West India Company to suppress the activities of a body of private traders. We find in 1634, for example, Abraham van Pere, and the Zeeland Chamber instructing their deputies, who were being sent to a meeting of the *Nineteen, “to request, and even insist, that no colonists or other persons shall be at liberty to navigate to the Wild Coast (Guiana) except this Chamber and Confrater van Pere alone”; And this request having failed we find the Zeeland Chamber the next year passing a resolution to the effect that “the trade to the wild coast shall be done by the company alone and by no private individuals.”

In 1635 the Company’s settlement was in such a bad way that the Zeeland Chamber’s Committee of Commerce and Finance sat to decide whether or not it was profitable to keep it. At that time there were in the Company’s employment not more than thirty men, whose main business was that of exchanging the articles of European make for anatto dye, which was then in great demand in Europe for use in the manufacture of cheese and other products.

Presumably, the report of the Chamber’s Committee was favourable, for the official occupation of Essequebo continued. The discovery that sugar-cane was growing in the colony may have been responsible for this decision, for it is about this time (1637) that we find the first mention of sugar in the minutes of the Zeeland Chamber.

But if official Essequebo was in a precarious condition, the same cannot be said of the settlement under Groenewegen. In 1624 it was visited by one Jesse de Forest and in 1627 by Captain Plowell, the discoverer of Barbados. Plowell’s visit was for the ostensible purpose of obtaining seeds and roots for planting in Barbados, but his real motive was to reinforce the colony. “There I lefte eight men.” he writes, “and lefte a Cargezon of trade for that place.”
In 1637, when the Zeeland Chamber had just decided not to abandon its past, Groenewegen was leading an expedition against San Thomé — a state of affairs which shows that the Courteen’s settlement was in a stronger position than the Company’s.

It is certain that the first fort on Kykoveral by Groenewegen was not of stone, for in 1627, and again in 1631, van der Goes was promised a fort of brick. Failure to fulfil this and other promises caused van der Goes to return home with the whole lot of his colonists in 1632. He was, however, re-engaged, and by 1634 he was back at Kykoveral with two assistants. Significantly, in 1639, he was addressed for the first time as “Commandeur,” and one may reasonably presume that this title was given him because of the fact that there were now soldiers under him. A further conclusion that can be drawn is that the promised fort had been completed, and that the soldiers were housed there. It was, as van Berkel described it thirty-one years later, “of quadrangular shape, having below the magazine, and above three apartments in which soldiers are housed, a room for the Commandant and one for the Secretary, which at the same time serves to store the cargoes.

Meanwhile, the rivalry between the Company and the Courteens for the mastery of Kykoveral was gradually coming to an end. By 1645 the position was so much easier that Groenewegen was made Governor by the West India Company; nevertheless, the Zeeland Chamber suggested to the Company, that in applying for a renewal of its charter it should stipulate that no private individuals be allowed to trade to Essequibo. This, however, was the last protest, for in 1650 Groenewegen was not only Governor, but was also Commandeur of the troops. The two colonies finally fused in 1664, for in that year Jan de Moor died and Groenewegen definitely became a Company’s servant.

Groenewegen died at his post in 1664. He was, as Scott says, “the first man that took a firm footing in Guiana by the good liking of the natives...” As an associate of Captain Plowell he was responsible for giving substantial assistance to Barbados. A story goes that when it became known in Essequibo that the Indians...
whom he had sent with Plowell to Barbados were enslaved, he was hard put to show that he was not party to such a diabolical scheme.

He solved the situation by marrying an Indian woman by whom he had a son, Amos Groenewegen, who was later post-holder in Demerara (circa 1680-1700).

The year after Groenewegen's death Kykoveral saw its first serious action. Commercial rivalry had brought the English and the Dutch into conflict, and in 1665 Major John Scott was sent by Lord Willoughby, then Governor of Barbados, to raid Dutch settlements in Guiana. After devastating Pomeroon, Scott proceeded up the Essequibo and captured Kykoveral, leaving there twenty-eight men under Captain Keene before returning to Barbados to boast of his conquest.

Scott mentions in his report that he was able to secure for his troops 73,788 lbs. of sugar, and this throws some light on the activities of the settlement. That the Indian trade in anatto was still the chief occupation of the settlers there can be no doubt: but Prince Sugar was already threatening to usurp the throne of King Anatto.

The British occupation, however, was not destined to be long. The first difficulty of the troops was with the Indians, who refused to give them supplies; then the French, who were the allies of the Dutch, came and bombarded the fort; finally, a force under Bergenaar, the Commandeur of Berbice, travelling overland by a path that is probably now part of the Rupununi Cattle Trail, and down the Essequibo, reached Kykoveral and recaptured it. Meanwhile, the States of Zeeland, hearing of the fate of their beloved Essequibo, had sent Admiral Crynsen to the rescue. Crynsen arrived after Bergenaar had effected its recapture; but he took the colony over in the name of the States of Zeeland and instituted one Baerland, Commandeur.

The Peace of Breda, signed in 1667, brought hostilities to a close. Pomeroon was now completely deserted, but Kykoveral was recovering gradually from Scott's blow.

There was now some difficulty in finding an owner for the
From Kyk # 1

colony, but after long and tedious negotiation the Zeeland Chamber of the West India Company took it over once again. Hendrick Rol was made Commander; and though a third Anglo-Dutch War was fought in the meantime, Kykoveral was not molested.

But this was not for long. Louis XIV’s ambitions soon precipitated Europe into more wars, and during the War of the Spanish Succession Kykoveral was attacked (1708). To the lasting shame of Commandeur van der Heyden Resen, it must be written that instead of sallying forth to meet the enemy he ignominiously shut himself up with his troops in the Fort. Some resistance was given at Plantation Vryheid (Bartica) by the owner and his slaves: but after two had been killed and a few injured the defenders dispersed.

Captain Ferry, the leader of the French expedition, took his departure on the receipt of a ransom of 50,000 guilders, paid in slaves, meat, provisions, and pieces of eight. But Essequibo’s cup of bitterness was not completely full. Two more French privateers sailed up the river the next year (1709) and completed the work of destruction. They plundered and burnt to their heart’s content, took two hogshead of sugar that were being prepared for export, and left on their departure but two sugar mills standing.

These two raids on Kykoveral soon woke up the planters to the alarming fact that the Fort could defend neither the colony nor the plantations. A fort, more strongly fortified, and more strategically placed, was needed, especially now that the fertile alluvial coastlands were attracting the planters lower and lower down the river. Flag Island (now Fort Island) was decided upon as the best site for the new Fort, which was so advanced by 1739 that the seat of government was transferred there.

In 1744 Fort Zeelandia (as the new fort on Flag Island was called) was completed. Kykoveral thereafter was neglected, even though it was Gravesande’s intention to have it reconditioned that very year. In 1748 it was proposed to raze it, and in 1750 it was reported abandoned. In 1755, however, it was again fortified,
because of an expected Spanish invasion: but after the scare had passed it was allowed to fall into a state of dilapidation again.

Kykoveral today is our oldest historical relic, and it should be visited by all who have pride of their country in their hearts. Its name was doubtless an inspiration for it “Looked” or “Kyked-over-al” the waters of the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni. Provided we have a sufficient leaven of humility in our hearts, we would do ourselves no harm to take as our watch-word — “Kyk-over-al!”
Note on Vere. T. Daly's "The Story of Kyk-Over-Al"

While Kyk-Over-Al clearly represents the first permanent Dutch Settlement in this country, the precise date of its foundation remains as much a mystery as ever. It is fashionable now to follow the Edmundson theory and accept 1616 as constituting the year of Essequibo establishment. Vere T. Daly certainly did so, being possibly the first popularizer of Edmundson's work locally. For all Daly's conviction, however, it cannot be proven beyond all reasonable doubt that Edmundson is right. His account is essentially a hypothesis — albeit a plausible one. It reconciles evidence which is otherwise irreconcilable, namely the account given by Major John Scott on the one hand, with the admittedly defective official records on the other.

As Daly himself points out, the problem lies in the fact that the earliest extant official documents relating to Essequibo indicate that the colony was owned by the Dutch West India Company, and that it probably had its origins around 1623. The Company was formed in 1621, which makes Scott's date for Essequibo's foundation — 1616 — highly problematical. Scott, who as Daly rightly says, was something of a scoundrel, obtained his information from two Essequibo traders whom he had captured.

Edmundson's neat hypothesis states that the colonial entrepreneur, Jan de Moor, first had a trading post in Essequibo in 1616, and that around 1623, the West India Company established itself there. For many years, he says, the two operations co-existed, until Jan de Moor died, when they were merged under the governorship of de Moor's representative, Groenewegel*. Edmundson considered that the West India Company, normally so punctilious about enforcing its monopoly, tolerated de Moor because he himself was a member of the Zeeland Chamber, or branch, of that Company.

Edmundson has chosen to ignore two pieces of evidence
deriving from the Spanish records. These indicate, firstly, that in 1616 there were about a dozen Spaniards living in Essequibo growing cassava, and that secondly, the Spaniards believed that William Usselincx, and not Jan de Moor was behind the Dutch attempt around that time to settle at various points along the Guiana coast. It is possible that the Spanish authorities were wrong in their assumption about Usselincx, and the presence of a few Spaniards somewhere in Essequibo in 1616 does not invalidate the thesis, but the problem is that Edmundson never attempted to confront the Spanish data. As things currently stand, the evidence is insufficient either to prove or disprove Edmundson’s admittedly seductive theory.

As in the case of the date of the Essequibo’s establishment, no one can be certain about precisely when the brick fort, whose archway alone now survives, was built, except to say it was probably before 1670. In 1691 it was recorded as housing 43 Europeans, 54 Amerindian slaves, 165 Black slaves and 14 Coloureds — possibly free men. As Daly rightly indicates, for many years Kyk-Over-Al was both the seat of the government as well as the military headquarters. What he does not say, however, is that it was evacuated in stages. The Governor and administration moved out first, taking themselves to the mainland at Cartabo. Here a house was built called, appropriately enough, the “Huis Nabij” or “House Nearby”. This was in 1718, and the seat of government remained here for more than twenty years, until it and the military garrison from Kyk-Over-Al moved downriver to Fort Island.

* Vere T. Daly uses the spelling ‘Groenewegen’, which is the Edmundson version of the spelling. ‘Groenewegel’ is the more correct version.
A.J. SEYMOUR

The Earth is a Woman

The earth is a woman with patient hair
And she watches a window pane
Where a tower of cloud creeps slowly past
And other clouds come again.

When night comes in, she counts the stars
On the dark gown that woman wears.
She sits with her quiet hands folded there
And she watches the patient years.
N. E. CAMERON

Drama in British Guiana

An observer who has done a fair amount of travelling in South America recently remarked at a meeting of one of our cultural clubs that he thought that the extent of dramatic activity was greater in this Colony than in any other which he had visited. It is quite true that locally there has been an outburst of such activity within recent times.

Let us take the year 1944 for instance: in January we had *Princess Ju-Ju* staged by the Bedford Boys and Girls’ Club: in March *Ecce Homo*, a religious play was staged at Buxton: in April *Adoniya* (Wife of Moses), written by the author of this article was staged at Queen’s College; in May *Savitri* was presented by the B. G. Dramatic Society in the Assembly Rooms; in July *Pageant of Church History* was presented in St. George’s School Hall; in August a sketch was presented on the occasion of the opening of the C. Y. O. and at the Annual Convention of the B. G. Union of Cultural Clubs two sketches were presented by the Georgetown Dramatic Club and the B. H. S. Old Girls’ Guild; in October the Georgetown Dramatic Club presented Bernard Shaw’s *Androcles and the Lion* in the Assembly Rooms, and in November, Queen’s College presented as its centenary play Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and in the same month Esme Cendrecourt presented her own play *Unmasked* in the Assembly Rooms, this being, I think, the last play staged in the Assembly Rooms before it was destroyed by the fire in February, 1945.

While there is undoubtedly a considerable amount of activity in this field locally, I personally am not in a position to say how this compares with similar efforts in the West Indies. I know, however, that Dramatics in the West Indies will be an interesting study for I have heard of playwrights in Jamaica and Trinidad and a writer of children’s operettas in Surinam.
Anthony Froude in his *The English in the West Indies* published in 1887, remarked that on the occasion of a visit paid to Tobago by the Governor of that time, a party of villagers sprang a pleasant surprise on him when they presented before him the *Merchant of Venice*. That was nearly 60 years ago.

For a long time in this Colony there have been dramatic clubs and groups presenting plays. I came across, in the *Royal Gazette* of December 31, 1863, mention of “an edifice containing all the appointments necessary to effective presentation of optical and dramatic entertainment.”

The writer of the article in question referred to the fact that the building no longer existed and that since then there had been no local theatre similarly equipped. I do not know whether the reference was to the Athenaeum which was founded in 1851, but the Athenaeum Club and the Philharmonic Society were among our famous cultural institutions of the past. Clubs there have been galore, e.g., the Georgetown Dramatic Club and Demerara Dramatic Club. These two contemporary clubs presented plays on two or three occasions yearly and on some evenings they presented as many as three one-act plays. Other clubs were the Lyceum, the Three Arts, Jerusalem. At present the principal dramatic clubs are the B.G. Dramatic Society, which caters only for Indian members, the Georgetown Dramatic, open to all, while there are several clubs which include drama as a part of their cultural activity.

There is no doubt that drama has a special appeal for young people as one of the means of spending their leisure. Their opportunity for self expression, practice in elocution and gesture, an increased sense of dramatic appreciation together with the team spirit formed by constant association in rehearsals strike the youths as making play-acting well worth their while. It must be remarked, however, that no special courses in acting are given apart from hints picked up while at school or from reading articles and magazines or books bearing on drama. Here, of course, much more can be done and indeed much is expected to be done,
especially along the lines of elocution.

Then again the drama provides opportunity for a very great variety of talent, for apart from the actors there are the questions of scenery, costumes, make-up, music and dances, lighting effects, and the business end like advertising, etc. There are some notable scenists among us. Special mention may be made of Mr. R. G. Sharples, President of the Guianese Art Group, who painted an outdoor and indoor set for Queen’s College and an outdoor set for the Ursuline Convent. Some of our make-up artists have succeeded in creating very good results and recently the lion in the Georgetown Dramatic Club’s presentation *Androcles and the Lion* was declared by many to be a work of art.

**Local Dramatists:**

I think the first person to write a play in British Guiana was the late Father C. W. Barraud, S. J., Principal of St Stanislaus College. In 1872 he wrote *St. Thomas of Canterbury* and *St. Elizabeth of Hungary*, both 5-act plays in the Shakespearean manner. These were, however, not published until 1892 and were reviewed locally in the following year. In 1893 a master of Queen’s College, J. Veecock, Secretary and Stage Manager of the then Demerara Dramatic club, presented *Falstaff* which was a collection, with modifications, of those scenes in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV. Parts I and II*, in which the character Falstaff appeared. Then followed short sketches, usually humorous, dealing with various phases of local life. It is unfortunate that there appears to be no copy extant of *Quid Rides* (Why do you laugh?), a collection of about 10 sketches by Rev. P. Giddings, all the more as the sketches were supposed to characterise various foibles of the people, especially a tendency to use words of learned length and thundering sound.

About 1916, Sidney Martins, a Portuguese comedian published a collection of his witticisms and sketches. One of these *Mrs. Farrington’s Third Husband* might well bear representation especially if re-written to suit modern taste.

Since that time there have been several writers of comic
sketches, the most brilliant being G. Ingham Goring, whose comic songs are still remembered by many. Three of his sketches are *Perseus Drops a Brick*, a sketch based on the story of Andromeda in 5,000 words: *Robin Hood and the King’s Deer* and the *Mortgage on the Old Guiana Home*.

In May, 1931, came a revival of the full length play when there appeared the author’s *Balthazar*, a play based on Anatole France’s version of the story of the *Three Wise Men*. The late Walter Mac A. Lawrence reviewing this play in the *New Daily Chronicle* hailed it as the beginning of a new phase in local drama. Encouraged by this publication, Esme Cendrecourt, the most prolific of our playwrights, staged *Romance of Kaieteur* in the Assembly Rooms in September, 1931. Miss Cendrecourt’s succeeding plays were all propaganda plays, illustrating some phase of health work or social welfare work. In December, 1943, the author presented *Adoniya* at Queen’s College for the first time.

The most recent to enter the field of Guianese dramatists is Mr. Basil Balgobin, who presented in May of this year *Asra*, a political play on India.

There is a growing demand for a new Guianese drama with full length plays written on a dignified plane dealing with various aspects of local life, and indeed voicing the sentiments and aspirations of the people. While this is very praiseworthy and indeed may be the next phase of our efforts at dramatic publications, it is rather curious that the advocates of this idea do not stress at the same time that all the other forms of local art and literature, for example the short story, music, painting, poetry, should strive similarly to represent to the world the thoughts and aspirations of British Guiana. This is undoubtedly one of the highest aims of art and literature.

I mentioned previously that it was possible that in the very near future systematic courses of study might be given to our actors. Similarly, there should be courses of study in play writing for the would-be playwright. I notice that lessons on play writing and competitions for the best original plays are being given to the
B. H. S. dramatic group and one can only hope that similar courses will be given in our dramatic clubs.

The work which has been done up to the present has been quite good on the whole in spite of the disadvantages due to lack of special training in acting and playwriting and to the limitations of small stages and halls of faulty acoustic properties. With the advent of British Council activity among us and with the promise of a new and modern theatre we may look forward to a considerable advance of local dramatic achievement.
Special Contributions

EDWARD BAUGH

Frank Collymore and A J Seymour:
A Literary Friendship

This is a small but special chapter in West Indian literary history. It is well known that Frank Collymore and A.J. Seymour played important and similar roles in the development of West Indian literature, chiefly by their editing of the little magazines Bim and Kyk-Over-Al, but also their own poetry. What is not so well known is that in these roles they were mutually supportive, encouraging each other, collaborating, and forming and sustaining a friendship almost entirely by correspondence.

Some of this correspondence survives. In the Collymore collection in the Barbados National Archives, there are two letters from Seymour to Collymore, written in the 1940s. In the Seymour collection in the University of Guyana Library, there are six letters from Collymore to Seymour, spanning the period 1952 to 1975, as well as one from Seymour to Collymore, written in 1958.

The first of these letters, from Seymour to Collymore, is dated 16 February 1946. It was obviously written in the early stages of contact between the two men. It is not clear who initiated the correspondence. It may have been prompted by the first appearance of Kyk, in 1945, Bim having first appeared in 1942. In this letter, Seymour, addressing his correspondent as “Dear Collymore,” thanks him for “the flattering notice in the December Forum,” and for the copy of Collymore’s Beneath the Casuarinas (1945), a collection of poems, which Collymore had sent him. The Forum was another Barbadian little magazine which was also making a contribution at that time to the development of West Indian literature, and the flattering notice may have been of Kyk. Seymour expresses his delight in
Casuarinas, and singles out for praise “Newsreel from Buchenwald,” which he describes as “horribly powerful,” and “This Land.” With reference to the latter, he says, “We’ve got to do a lot of that in the West Indies — drive home our roots if we want to grow as a people.”

Seymour also mentions his first “glimpse” of Collymore, from a photograph in the Barbados Annual Review, a Christmas publication of the Barbados Advocate newspaper. This glimpse of Collymore prompts Seymour to ask about Collymore’s age, and whether he is married and has children. Then he gives some information about himself: his age—32 (“I feel 52”) — that he is married and has five children, and that he is Assistant Publicity Officer of the Bureau of Publicity and Information.

The second letter is dated 14 May 1949, but it is clear that the correspondence and friendship had developed between 1946 and now. Seymour tells Collymore about books which he has been reading, and makes special mention of E.M.W. Tillyard’s Poetry Direct and Oblique, which he finds to be “very good as a line on trends in the colonies.” He adds, “... as soon as I’d finished the book, I took me my pen & said so to the master of Jesus College, Cambridge. Being a nice man, Dr. Tillyard replied with corroboration.” The style (“I took me my pen,” “replied with corroboration”), and the relish in the ceremonial designation (“The master of Jesus College, Cambridge”) are typical of Seymour. Collymore was not likely to have written to Tillyard in a similar situation.

Of the two, Seymour was also the one more given to plans and projects in the editing of his magazine. He now proposes to Collymore that they “engage, professionally, in correspondence on the literary & cultural prospects of the WI & our colonies in particular, so that we both publish the exchange of letters at the same time.” Collymore being a man most reluctant to “sound off” about anything, it is not surprising that this particular project of Seymour’s did not materialise.

Then Seymour shares information about promising literary
development in Trinidad: “Lamming & Co have begun to think of a magazine for Trinidad. I suppose he’s written you also, & [Andrew] Pearse, the Resident Tutor there [ for the Extra- Mural Department of the University College of the West Indies ], tells of a Reader and Writers Guild.” Lamming, then just twenty one years old, Collymore’s protegée and friend, was teaching in Trinidad, and had indeed been keeping his mentor informed of literary activity there. Lamming had become vigorously involved with a small group of Trinidadian writers, including Cecil Herbert, Ernest Carr and Harold Telemaque, who were the hub of literary activity on the island. In an undated letter to Collymore (Collymore Collection, Barbados Archives), quite likely also written in May 1949, Lamming tells his mentor about plans for the magazine. He says that Seymour has promised a contribution. He tells Collymore about Seymour’s having written to Tillyard, a development which he finds “so encouraging.” It is a fair guess that it was through Collymore that Lamming had come to correspond with Seymour.

In his next letter to Collymore, also undated, Lamming gives Collymore an account of a talk on “West Indian Writing Today” which he had delivered the previous evening. Reflecting on the art of public speaking, he considered the talk a failure. For one thing, he realised afterwards that he had not said some of the things he had wanted to say. In particular, he had not said enough about West Indian poetry, and had not done justice to either Collymore or Seymour.

The main topics of Collymore’s extant letters to Seymour are: news about forthcoming contents of *Bim* and about the difficulties of keeping the magazine going; news about other West Indian writers; comments on, and transactions for distributing Seymour’s publications; the possibility of their jointly editing an anthology of West Indian poetry.

By the time of the first letter, 7 September 1952, Seymour had begun to publish his *Miniature Poets* series of chapbooks by West Indian poets, and Collymore thanks him for the one by the
Trinidadian Cecil Herbert, which had recently arrived. He tells Seymour that he had recently met E. McG. Keane and Daniel Williams, who had passed through Barbados on their way to the UK and the USA respectively. These two, along with Owen Campbell, formed a trio of promising Vincentian poets whose work has been appearing in Bim. One of them, Keane, went on to make something of a name for himself as a poet. Mention of Keane and Williams causes Collymore to reflect ruefully on the exodus of West Indian writers from the region: "It seems a pity that all the young men who have something to say should have to go else-where to say it, but... they both told me they simply could not remain in St Vincent... it was too soul-stifling."

In his letter of 22 October, Collymore thanks Seymour for his "very meaty" letter of the 12th, and for the Keane chapbook and Kyk No.15. He congratulates Seymour on the Kyk, which he considers the best number produced so far, and says that he must make a special effort "to tackle Wilson Harris," whose work does not appeal to him so directly as does that of Martin Carter. He places orders for chapbooks in the Miniature Poets series, and tells of progress with the production of Bim No.17. This number will include a foreword aimed at reassuring Bim's indispensable advertisers, especially in the face of the adverse local reviews which the last three numbers have received: "... I do wish advertisers to know that writers in Bim are being accepted as 'world writers' and not merely as 'Caribbean curiosities' -"

With regard to a new Kyk project—a symposium on The West Indies Today," Collymore suggests that Seymour might ask the Barbadian poet and historian H.A. Vaughan, and the Professor of English at the UCWI for contributions. The Professor, A.K. Croston, an Englishman, had recently given a lecture in Barbados, and Collymore thinks that "he may be able to work the matter into a critical assessment of the W.I. Novel."

Collymore's pleasure at the metropolitan success of Bim writers features in his letter of 26 November. He mentions Mittelholzer, Selvon, and Lamming, whose first novel, In the
Castle of My Skin, was soon to be published (1953). He also mentions the non-West Indians Bruce Hamilton and Hugh Popham, and adds that Geoffrey Drayton has completed “two [books] which have not yet been placed.” No doubt one of these was Drayton’s only published novel, Christopher (1959). Collymore also gives news of Mittelholzer, his friend and faithful correspondent, who had written to him from New York. He tells Seymour about Gloria Escoffery, the young Jamaican painter and poet, who was then teaching art at Combermere School, where Collymore had by then been teaching for over forty years. Escoffery was acting for the sculptor and painter Karl Broodhagen, who had gone to the UK on a British Council scholarship. “She is very keen,” says Collymore, “& would, I am sure, write you an article for Kyk.” She may not have written an article, but she did have poems published in Kyk.

Seymour had just published a Collymore chapbook in the Miniature Poets series, and Collymore thanks him for the “extra prompt delivery” of the forty copies which he had ordered in his previous letter. He congratulates Seymour on the physical appearance of the book, and on the standard of proof-reading. As he had done in the previous letter, he complains about the poor proof-reading which he has had to suffer at the hands of the Advocate Press.

Seymour had been keeping abreast of Collymore’s work in the theatre, with the Bridgetown Players, and Collymore now tells of his guarded hopes that the group will be able to have a theatre building of their own. He sounds a note which anticipates by twenty years the kind of complaint which Walcott was to make about the public and state support for theatre and the arts in Trinidad: “People in Barbados are not public spirited. With all this talk of culture, no progress can be made until due homage is paid to the arts, and a theatre is a necessity. Govt. are apathetic.”

We are next able to pick up the story of the correspondence in mid-1958. The two men are excitedly exchanging ideas for jointly editing an anthology of West Indian poetry for the British
publishers McGibbon and Kee. Apparently Selvon had contacted Collymore from London, to inform him of the publishers’ interest in such an anthology, and to interest him in editing it. Collymore in turn enlisted Seymour’s support. Seymour replies in enthusiastic affirmative on 16 May. They begin to discuss the contents of the anthology, in what order the poems should be presented, what the introduction might contain, whether or not there should be an index of first lines (Collymore is not much for it), and so on. On 14 June, Collymore says that he has written to Selvon for further information, such as the size of the book and whether contributors will be paid: “not that I expect or want to make anything out of it, but I wonder whether contributors may not expect some sort of royalty.” For whatever reason, nothing came of this venture. If the anthology had been published, it would have been a landmark.

The next letter, from Collymore, is dated 22 March 1959 and is devoted to two topics: “Bim’s decease” and resurrection, and Seymour’s request that Collymore write an article for Kyk on the theatre in Barbados. In No. 27 (Dec. 1958), Bim had announced, regretfully, that, because of financial difficulties it would not be reappearing. There was an outcry of disbelief from the circle of readers and writers who had come to set such great store by the magazine. Collymore tells Seymour about the “many condolences and suggestions,” including Seymour’s, that he had received. But, he says, “frankly I was skeptical. And, for another thing I was tired.” Then he tells the story of how it came about that Oliver Jackman managed to raise the famous Fifty Pounds which saved Bim.

As for the requested article on Barbadian theatre, it is not surprising to find Collymore regretfully declining, because he would not have the time to do the research he considered necessary. Of course, even in the process of declining, his own active involvement in the theatre apart, he was indeed the ideal person for the job.

The last extant letter is written by Collymore nearly sixteen
years later, on the 6th January 1975, the day before his eighty-second birthday. The letter is a brief, almost illegible scrawl. By now his health and eyesight are failing. He apologises for not having earlier acknowledged receipt of a *Dictionary of Guyanese Folklore* which Seymour had sent him—"but this attack of cystitis has laid me low and I'm having more trouble with my eyes. So please excuse brevity." He wishes AJ and his family "all the very best... for 75.” The rest, as they say, is silence.

This little story may seem to be largely one of ideas and plans unrealised; but it also provides valuable evidence of that networking to use a word which would no doubt have scandalised both men — which was so crucial to the making of West Indian literature. It is a story warm with a sense of shared purpose, and with the elation of a bright new beginning.
On the 50th Anniversary of Kyk-Over-Al

Fifty years in the life of a small magazine, is without exaggeration, an age and survival, a miracle worth recording. Take, for instance, a man’s life. After Mewling and Puking through his infant, inarticulate years, he arrives at the point, say in his teens, when he is moved to think that although he may not be able to shape the world to his own desire or design, there is enough around and about him that simply, because it is newly seen, compels him to record his presence, to say, without apology or bombast, that he was here, and so he sets about gathering his wits and his words which are really, in addition to a mysterious energy, his only tools.

Since the end of 1992, the 50th Anniversary issue of Bim Magazine with which Kyk-Over-Al published a joint issue, Bim has been silent. The problem is financial: printing costs have proved prohibitive. But there is also the question of the difficulty of finding enough free hands and time to carry out the various tasks of editorship, as well as the increased correspondence which has been the result of the magazine’s long life and widening readership.

May I share with you a disjointed extract from an introduction to Clockwatch Review by James Plath, the editor.

More than a few literary magazines begin with introductory letters or essays from the editor. Although I have always shied away from such things, this issue seemed to cry out for some sort of editorial comment — or at least an explanation, since the 10th anniversary issue of Clockwatch, labelled “Volume 9 Numbers 1-2.” is published at the end of our 11th year. Obviously, though the first issue of this semi-annual debuted the summer of 1983, we dropped a stitch or two along the way. Sometimes an issue was delayed or we published only one per year because of financial problems, while other times we weren’t getting enough quality work to fill an issue. Such is life in the small press world. But explanations aside, it struck me that a 10th anniversary issue
without some sort of informal history would be like having a birthday cake with no candles. As always, we hope that you will find surprises inside our latest issue. But the real surprise is that Clockwatch is still ticking after all these years. So, here’s a behind-the-scenes look at the publication you now hold in your hands. I offer it partly as a record of one little literary magazine (for future students of this peculiar industry), but mostly for readers who might be curious about what goes on at a literary magazine...

T.S Eliot once wrote Karl Shapiro that a literary magazine should be one person, and defined the little magazine as one which had “a single editor, a small circulation, and a short lifespan, rarely exceeding the life of the founding editorship.” Clockwatch is typical, I think, of the thousands of little literary magazines that operate as single proprietorships, with the average circulation being 500 (ours is now 1500) and the average lifespan just a year and a half. Most literary magazines are shoestring operations, many of them published out of home offices, and so it never ceased to amuse me how often I got mail addressed to “Circulation Manager,” “Business Manager,” “Advertising Director,” “Fiction Editor,” or “Poetry Editor,” and thought, that would be me. Or how often I got phone calls — even from a New York City publishing house or agent who should know better — from people expecting the click and clack of office noise, and hearing instead cartoons on the television and children squabbling. “Is this Clockwatch Review?” they’d ask, and one of my children would invariably stun them into silence by saying something like, “Just a minute ... I’ll get him.”
Fred D’Aguiar

Bill of Rights

Extract From a Poem Sequence

1.
From Chattanooga, from Brixton (L--, write)
From hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come,
To the Potaro, Essequibo, Demerara,

The near one thousand came and stayed.
I am your saviour. Follow me. And we did.
And planted, did we plant, on a hill;

And the rains came and washed the crops away.
And we planted them again, and they were
Washed away, again; and starved, we starved,

Until the locals took pity on us.
There were, after all, pregnant women.
Children and the very old, in our midst.

2.
‘Occupancy limited to 118 persons.’
We sat in the aisles, plunked children
One on top of another, into laps.

Volunteered for the cargo hold
And would have remained there
As directed by Father had the pilot

Not said we’d freeze or suffocate
At 33,000 feet, or both. I am among
The agile ones, curled in the overhead
Luggage compartment.

3.
Goodbye Chattanooga. Hello Potaro.
Later, L— and Brixton. Essequibo, here we go.

Someone they call a buck light-footed
It over to me. I jumped but his open palms,

A stupid smile and his near-naked frame
Put me at ease. He gave me corn

I bolted down. His head shake, finger wag
And suppressed chuckle told me I’d done wrong.

4.
Dip the tip of an arrow in this plant sap,
Let it dry, untouched, in the sun,
Let it fly into that wild boar.

Roast the boar but offer some to the sun,
Carve buttons from the bone,
Dry the skin, tell the boar you are sorry

But you have a thousand mouths to feed
And it fits the bill exactamundo.

5.
Bow tie, bodacious, Father. Model divine Daddy.
Here the Trades rinse the air constantly.
Rain returns the verdant to grass, trees and paling.
'All the days of my life, ever since I been born
I never heard a man speak like this man before.'
1000 Tarzan yodels tear the night to ribbons.

6.
Holy is coconut with cream and water
Holy stinking-toe and sour-sap and eddoe
Holy this vision in Him that brought us here
Holy His name Jones and His every aspect

Holy am I for my proximity to Him
Holy this uzi blessed in service to Him
Holy every drop that rains and rusts our joints
Holy the hard wood greenheart in these huts.

7.
Autochthonous wood.
Purpleheart and greenheart
Blunted or broke electric
Saw after electric saw

In half. Wood this tough
Cannot have known much love
And must have hardened itself
Against further loss of face.

8.
In Chattanooga as in Kalamazoo
We had three square meals, inside loos
And an inside to speak of.
Here in paradise, Essequibo, Potaro,
The branch’s leak never switches off.
I have the runs and chigoe,

A fungus culture between my toes.
I patrol this new town’s perimeter
With my finger on an uzi’s trigger.

9.
Yoknapatawpha county,
This was not.

Rice for breakfast,
Rice water soup for lunch—
Yes there was time for lunch—
Rice and beans for dinner,

With the stubborn, giant anteater,
The sloth and the caiman,
Too tough by far,
Even for our meagre pots.

10.
Topsoil gone in the rain with our seedlings.
Spirit for fighting back this wilderness gone
Too; all that’s left unencumbered is my love
For Father: my nerves are a Stradivarius

In the hands of a musical pygmy.
Inside I sound like cats in an alley
Mating or squabbling over a smell of fish.
My face is as expressionless as a satellite dish.
Jacqueline de Weever

In the Beginning — Kyk

*Kyk-Over-Al* is at the beginning of my intellectual life. I had always been aware of the magazine as I was always in and out of AJ’s study, full of questions and ideas about one thing and another. So he put me to work, when I was about sixteen years old, reading proofs for the magazine. This seemed a natural development to our conversations about Wordsworth and Keats in the small garden beside the house. Obsessed with poetry as I was, proof-reading poetry written by our own poets for *Kyk* was an added excitement to my high school years. Then my mother, who lived in New York, sent me a portable typewriter, very light, easily carried around. By the time I was studying for A levels, I was resident typist for *Kyk-Over-Al*, typing poems from the handwritten missals sent in by poets from the islands and some from our own Guyanese poets.

I remember especially proof-reading a very early poem by Derek Walcott commemorating the destruction of Castries, St. Lucia — “A City’s Death by Fire.” Other poems followed, from Vaughan, Collymore, Sherlock, and others. While we worked on *Kyk*, AJ would tell me some of the stories of the tribulations the writer must encounter and assimilate. I remember especially the story of Edgar Mittelholzer’s attempts to publish his long novels. Edgar would send off his huge tomes to London, by sea mail in those days, and they would come back, it seemed, by return mail. Someone was waiting on the wharf at Plymouth specifically to send them back. Edgar would be very depressed and upset. Then, miraculously, *Morning at the Office* was accepted and published. Elation and happiness all around. So Edgar took out those same rejected tomes and, without changing a word, sent them off. Miracle of miracles, they began to appear — *Kaywana, Children of Kaywana, The Harrowing of Hubertus* and Edgar was now a published, important, author. When Mittelholzer
moved to England, he sent AJ a copy of every book he published, all inscribed.

Most intriguing of all was the process of building a poem, the many versions before the printed version. I learned about this from AJ’s Thursday group. Martin Carter and Wilson Harris joined AJ on Thursday afternoons to read poetry-in-progress to each other, as well as to discuss other poets they were reading. Because I kept quiet, they let me join their circle. I sat next to AJ in an enchantment more real and concrete than the enchantments I was dreaming up in fairy tales I began writing at that time. Particularly memorable was Wilson’s reading of Auden’s “Lullaby” and Pound’s “Night Litany.” Wilson’s reading of Pound’s “Night Litany” is so lodged in my memory that when I emerged from the train station in Venice in June, 1994, the Pound poem just invaded my being as I waited for Boat One to take me to my hotel. More indelible was Wilson’s reading of poems he was working on, then, best of all, giving me one or two to type for Kyk.

I considered Kyk my magazine since I spent so much time on it. When the proofs came, I discontinued my own routine to pay careful attention to proof-reading. One routine was to ride my bicycle up to Kitty, then walk out on the jetty, listening to the Atlantic crashing against the concrete, and the wind in the huge sea-grape tree with tentacle roots in the sand. Sometimes a Hindu group had left wedding offerings in the water, which bobbed up and down on the waves. When Kyk was due, time was precious, and my rides were fewer. I continued my work for Kyk, until I left Georgetown to attend college in New York. A part of my life was over, although I did not know it. The invaluable gift of myadolescence is the insight into a poem’s birth — “construction” is too hard a word — listening to Wilson, Martin, and AJ talk about, rethink, change, their poems as they wrote them.

Fifty years is a truly golden age for a little magazine, so essential to a country’s intellectual life. I am happy that Kyk
celebrates this anniversary, feeling blessed to have helped in its early nurturing. AJ is quite proud, now in the Great Beyond; I’m positively sure of it.
MARK MCWATT

Beloved of the Rivers:
(A Fictional Encounter in 10 Poems.)

1
You sat on a tree
that hung over the river
fishing for me.

I took the hook
and I hauled you in
to the net of my book.

Fallen into fiction
you’re now trapped with me
in this self-contradiction.

And there’s nothing I can do,
within rock and swift water,
but turn the pages of you.

2
In other places
I have been careful about intruders,
I have learnt about locks and iron bars.

Here I open a door
to admit a river, watch it spread across my floor
with palm seeds and the brittle claws
of crabs.

How often can you forgive me
for sinking your house
down to the secret bed of a river,
and for emerging from its wet dream
to embrace you with sudden spite,
like a lover?

3
I crush your fingers
like aromatic leaves
and hold them to my lips:
the fragrance of you fills me
and we dance on wet leaves
in a patch of sunlight
purer than the love you spoke to me.

And sunlight dances now
on the torn skirt of the river,
on the glistening rocks . . .
as my own love, like spilled blood,
swirls slowly to stillness
and fills the soft shallows,
the warm hollows
of the silence on the surface
of you.

4
After the body’s shrill song
comes a silent love
like the calm reaches of a river
that once crashed down stone stairs.
its head boiling with foam and passion,
and you wonder:
“Was all of that for me?”

And you look beyond love,
as a river, tasting salt
in its tidal mouth, stiffens
for the Judas-kiss of the sea;
finding no ground for hope,
you surrender silently to me
wondering, as you lose yourself in love,
"Will love still remember me?"

5
What is this love
we are always rehearsing?
Where will it take us
at the end of what day?

To whom do we offer
these arms and lips
and the hardened tips of ourselves
in mock surrender
— in rituals that sunder
stone and sky, cloud and thunder?

I try to remember
a reason for it all,
a place behind the gesture
that might still be hallowed;
but it is hard, in these times of drift,
to think fruitfully
beyond flesh and faint laughter.

Perhaps truth is no longer to be found
where we have always sought her.
We grow too old for belief.
Like the sky, we simply shrug:
the stone’s indifference to water.
6
Because rivers contain
the history of space,
I call you to come with me
into those amber shallows.

We start with creeks:
Kamuni, Wauna and Warapoka,
they become no more nor less
than your naked body.
which I enter to discover
—in that fluid mirror—
the past and the future
of my face.

Next the larger tributaries:
Potaro, Cuyuni, Barama . . .
Ah, do not be fooled
by the contiguity of surfaces:
we descend into separate depths
where each river’s cold is a different shiver,
and shattered light falls dully
among your drifting hair.
There is primordial memory there
in poured libations that are sufficient
to reach the spirit of the sea.

And Demerara, Corentyne, Waini:
I whistle for you across those estuaries,
My tears become the same salt as the sea.
crusting in the cracks beside my eyes
Here we must respond in time
to the challenge of space:
I anchor myself to your vast body
raking the flesh of a continent
on the soft, forgetful beds of rivers,
making and healing
the scars of my race.

7
There are insects that crawl
on the skin of rivers,
giving you gooseflesh;
but the long brush of a hand
doesn’t break your surface
on which I can still count the stars.

I watch the trees descending
to the sky, each with a blurr
of unkept promises. I hear you sigh
like breeze on the flesh of the river:
cold fingers of mist caress you
and my body and I await
your subtlest capitulations.

In this frenzy
of leaf-rot and sunstruck foam
I ease out of you,
lathered with your involuntary laughter,
nursing the crumpled remnant
of my story — now in danger
of abridgement in mid-stream . . .

I who must love rivers
love you too much
to succumb to your only dream.
8
Hearing the tidal beat of your wings above the river, I look upward to see the morning sky stained with your brilliant love for me.

The noontide, swollen with my foolish pride, bears me beyond the reach of your farthest tendril finger and the cloudless sky consumes me.

Evening washes me back to your warmth, across the groins of love's wide estuary; and I imagine that I have turned your tide into the living flesh of memory.

Night severs the umbilical strand of our love and I wait in the tether of your throbbing tide for the drowned touch of another dawn to release me.

9
To take you like a smooth river stone to the hollow of my neck is to dream of freedom beyond the cool skin of ecstasy, beyond fossil, beyond the finesse of rhyme and memory.

To dream of loving you and rivers has been to discover the specific thirst of earth for sky
and the cruel patina of being
painted on the gifts of time.

10
When I finally rolled away
the stone of your love
that concealed the self I sought in rivers,
I was awakened to
  sudden sorrow
by the cruel sunlight
streaming from an ordinary sky
through the startling absence
  of you.
GEORGE SIMON Talks to ANNE WALMSLEY

Looking Inland

In April 1995 recent work by three Arawak Guyanese was shown at Castellalli House — Guyana’s national gallery — in an exhibition of Contemporary Amerindian Art. George Simon, whose paintings were hung along with wood sculpture by Oswald Hussein and Lynus Clenkien, had initiated and arranged the exhibition. It demonstrated the results of Simon’s involvement with a group of artists in his home village of Pakuri — St. Cuthbert’s Mission — on the Mahaica River. It also revealed ways in which Simon’s travels and studies over the past ten years as a trainee anthropologist and archaeologist have affected his paintings.

GEORGE SIMON I had just completed my MA course in Archaeology in London and returned to Guyana. While waiting for a new posting, I thought I should become involved again with a group of artists that I’ve been working with at St. Cuthbert’s — to find, to my disappointment, that in my absence only two of them had been working at their art. I felt that it would have been a great shame that these two sculptors whom I knew to be talented and in whom I saw some sign of development were going to be left alone, and I thought, to show with them is to give them some kind of moral support and to bring them out to Georgetown. Ossie Hussein, who on two occasions has won the national prize at the annual National Visual Arts Exhibition, never had a show on his own but had a body of work with which I felt we could put an exhibition together quite quickly. Lynus Clenkien did not have many pieces, but I felt he should show his work.

ANNE WALMSLEY How long had you been working with these artists at St. Cuthbert’s?
In about 1988 I became concerned about Amerindians from my village not going very far in their education. I felt I needed to help them along, so to speak, in life. Since I was trained as an artist, I thought one thing that I could do is to encourage art and try to develop their skills in painting or sculpture. Sculpture was the best because there was wood and they were familiar with carving: making canoes and paddles and that kind of thing — making bows and arrows was a natural to us. So wood carving, wood sculpture was a natural thing for them to develop.

Am I right in saying that until you worked with them and encouraged them, no work of this sort had been done by Amerindian peoples of Guyana? That although there is a long tradition of varied and highly skilled Amerindian craft work, there is no non-functional visual practice, no 'fine arts'?

Not quite so. Stephanie Correia has done tremendous work as a fine artist, especially in ceramics, and there are other Amerindians who work privately and whose work is not yet known to the general Guyanese public. As a youngster, even at school I had a little chance while I was at St. Cuthbert’s Anglican School. We had a Friday afternoon — I think it was — session where we would actually be taught craft by the villagers: basket weaving, making miniature canoes and paddles and that kind of thing. Basically, it was craft that was made for trading or for selling purposes.

So in this recent exhibition you, the teacher, were showing alongside your students.

The most important thing was that the three of us seemed to have been working in the same vein, very secretly and very privately. I had always allowed them to develop their own ideas. I have changed my figurative work to semi-abstract, gradually getting involved in mythology and when I got back it was refreshing and very exciting to see that Ossie had all the time been concerned
with the mythology of his people. Lynus had been concerned with spirits and also working in the same vein. So it was not difficult for the three of us to come together, it was a natural thing, so to speak.

Your painting Oriyu-Shikaw: Kaieteur, Home of the River Spirit was amongst the paintings which you showed, and has been bought for the National Art Collection of Guyana. Is this a recent work?

Yes, it’s amazing how that came about. Maybe an insight into how a canvas develops for me might give you an idea of how things happen very spontaneously. After I’ve prepared a canvas, I’ll decide on a dominant colour and then throw paint haphazardly onto the canvas and imagery comes up. It’s a principle that I think da Vinci mentioned where if you were to lie very quietly on your couch and look at the ceiling, you could probably see horses and warriors and people fighting — whatever. It’s that kind of thing that happens to me, and I have great faith in the subconscious. So I would let the paint remain on the canvas and look at it and gradually images come out and I would develop those images. And lo and behold a picture of the Kaieteur emerged on this occasion, and I developed the idea. The first time I had experienced the Kaieteur, it was such a powerful place to be at, that I thought, surely, the first people who had discovered or seen this place would have worshipped there. So I had this in me, and I created a Kaieteur which is totally different. The Falls itself is full of petroglyphs and symbols, and then the bottom part of it where the water actually falls into the gorge is full of fossils and skeleton remains and rocks. In the distance in the landscape of denuded forest, it’s all mountains, grass mountains criss-crossed with rivers and tributaries. I’ve done a lot of work there; I’ve travelled beyond the Falls and I’ve looked at archaeological sites along the Potaro River. I have been really concerned with all the dredging and the destruction
of the river. I can imagine it happening where the Falls would dry up and what would remain are the walls of the Kaieteur and trickles of water coming over the top and human remains at the bottom. So the painting was more or less a political statement as well.

*Had an exhibition of work by Amerindian artists ever been shown in Georgetown before?*

There have been past exhibitions of craft work. In the mid 80s there were big exhibitions of work by Amerindians which would include some pottery, weaving, basketry, that sort of thing. But to have an exhibition of this kind was new.

*Where do you think such art is going to go next, and how do you want to be involved in it?*

Already it has made an impact on the Guyanese art scene because, as you would realise, most of the artists in Guyana are people who live on the coast. And now I myself live in Georgetown. But to have the boys from the interior — Amerindian boys — with a new vision, it’s going to cause some confusion, I think. And I dare say it will assist the coastlanders to look inland instead of looking towards the sea and towards the Caribbean. Now what we hope to do is to go out to the villages. Indeed, already Lynus and Ossie have gone to Annai in the north Rupununi savannah to work — together with a ceramist — among the Macusi, the indigenous people there, to show the people what they are doing and hopefully stimulate a few of them into making ceramics or sculptures. What will happen eventually in Guyana is that there will be an emergence of new sculptures and other art forms of totally different ideas, created by artists with totally different backgrounds from those that we have seen so far.
And how about your own work in painting, where do you see that going now?

I will concentrate on Amerindian mythology. I need to look inside. I trust the subconscious and I wait for that inner voice to say, ‘Change it here and do that there’, and that’s how I work. And I can only see that this is the way that I will pursue my work. My archaeology helps, and of course a lot of that comes into my work as well.

How have your studies in archaeology helped this new direction in your painting?

I have been looking at prehistoric art in South America and in Latin America generally. That has helped tremendously. It has encouraged me to look inwards and maybe to use some of the imagery that I’ve seen, or maybe to become much more confident in using my own private language and taking more notice of what my peoples have done and how they’ve been stifled and how they have not said things before, and trying to use their mythologies.

How did you think about yourself and your people before you got into archaeology?

I did not know the importance of my Amerindian past. I did not know the history of my people. The subject was not taught at school. In fact, I was forbidden at school to speak my own language and anyone found speaking Arawak in class was flogged. In general, Amerindian culture was discouraged and we were made to feel inferior. An anthropologist said to me recently that he knew more about the Amerindians than they know about themselves. How sadly true! I was trained in Europe and developed European ideas for my art. I did not draw from inside myself at all. I didn’t become conscious of my Amerindianness, if
I might say so, until after returning to Guyana from my years of art training in England, in 1978. I was invited by Denis Williams to join him at the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology in 1985. This opportunity allowed me to travel extensively in Guyana and to be reunited with my people. I had had an exhibition in 1982 which dissatisfied me. The paintings did not reflect my Amerindianess.

What did the work at the Museum involve?

Very shortly after I had joined him, Denis had a message of some sort to say that the Museum of Puerto Rico was interested in sending an expedition to the Wai-Wais in the Upper Essequibo River, in the Amazon forest. The expedition would make a collection of Wai-Wai artefacts, half of which would come to the Walter Roth Museum and others to the Museum of Puerto Rico. There would be an anthropologist and an archaeologist in the team and I was going to be the Walter Roth Museum representative. That was my first expedition. I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do. I felt like I was going to be looking after these American strangers in the forest.

You hadn’t been to the part of Guyana where the Wai-Wai live?

No, no, no. I knew St. Cuthbert’s and Mackenzie and that was it — though I had gone up to Great Falls, up the Demerara, in the early ‘60s. So I didn’t know anything, because I’d been partially cut off from my people and that kind of life. However, yes, I agreed to go on the expedition. So Denis gave me six books about anthropology and the Wai-Wai to read in two weeks. I became very interested in the work that we were doing when we eventually arrived at Shapariymo where the Wai-Wais lived. We spent a month with the Wai-Wais. We made recordings of their music and songs, took photographs of the Amerindian situation, went hunting with them and collected their craft work.
All the time I was observing how the archaeologist was working and how the anthropologist was working. Here at last there was something that related to me. I felt re-awakened by the experience.

Did you do any work as an artist while you were up there?

I did a lot of sketches. I was asked to do a sketch of a conical house, traditional Wai-Wai architecture. I studied the ground surface and recorded all the artefacts on the ground, the walls and the thatched roof. This study helped me to see a layout of the house — where people lived, where the people ate, where people did housework and that kind of pattern. This was my first experience of being in the Amazon and of being with indigenous peoples of the Amazonas, from whom I could draw parallels with my own early life.

And then back at the Walter Roth Museum?

Yes, I wanted to know more about my people, I wanted to know more about primitive art, primitive culture. So there was pottery to look at, more books to read, and discussions on these subjects. I started from there. I came back from that first expedition fired with interest and I thought, ah, now I can paint, I have something to paint, something to say!

What sort of painting did you then start to do?

The painting situation had become worse and one couldn’t get oil paints or linseed oil or turps to buy. Acrylic paint was relatively easy to acquire, although I couldn’t purchase a medium to go with it; it was a water-based paint, which was good. I started to use these sparingly, very carefully, in washes, and I developed from that a technique of applying paint very thinly onto the canvas — layer over layer, layer by layer — in this very watercoloury kind of effect. I developed a glazing technique and
studied colour theory.

What support material were you painting onto?

I use twill. I stretch twill and sometimes apply a very thick ground: maybe six coats of emulsion paint, very thick sometimes, and I would sand it down with sandpaper and then work from that, and very gently and very tediously try to build contrasts and colours and depth and that kind of thing by applying layers and layers of colour on top of one another. And so I built my surfaces. But then I became proficient so to speak, in this technique. I paint very quickly now in this medium and I can capture someone sitting there very quickly and get a very good result, like you would do in watercolour. But I wasn’t satisfied. I considered the composition of the picture and I introduced three-dimensional shapes and flat areas into paintings. Gradually, I became interested in the atmosphere, and in effects of the light — and in how Rembrandt and Turner achieved these. Of course in the meantime I am sent out from time to time on expeditions for the Museum.

What other expeditions deeply affected your subsequent work as a painter?

I did a lot of work in the Essequibo River and in the Potaro River, so I had to cross and travel up and down the Essequibo River a great deal. And that helped me in looking at atmosphere. So, after the Wai-Wai series, I did about 25 paintings of the Essequibo which I called ‘Essequibo Series’, basically of the river, the landscape, the streak of land that you’d see in the Essequibo — such a vast river, this line that separates the sky from the water, this vast expanse of water. I laid great emphasis on the water.

On some of these expeditions you must have been studying the petroglyphs — the great prehistoric rock carvings. Did they
influence your own artistic work?

Not until quite recently, in the last two years or so. Denis Williams was, of course, the man who really brought these things to life. They had been looked at before, but not in the way that Denis had really studied them in the Berbice and Upper Essequibo.

And Denis introduced you to them?

From his work, from his writings, I’d seen them. But then to have seen these things on paper is not to experience them in landscape. I came across these carved marks, these petroglyphs, for the first time — I think it must have been in 91 or 92 — in the Essequibo. To see them there and in the flesh, in a river bed that had dried up, was a marvellous experience, it makes you begin to wonder. You know, you go to Kaieteur and you think — oh people must have really worshipped this Falls here, such a powerful thing! So to use the imagery of the petroglyphs was to incorporate the spirituality of the place. It moved one to look at the other side.

So you’re not simply reproducing the motifs in your paintings, you’re trying to get behind what prompted them, and to bring something similar into your work.

Absolutely. I became interested in the writing of these things. Why were they written? What were people trying to say? I tried to decode them in my own particular way, not in the archaeological sense. For instance, I did a painting which was a view from the plane going across the mouth of the Siparuni River, one of the Essequibo tributaries. We were going to do some work in that area in July or August when the water was low. And I saw this area and then did a painting of it as if it had been x-rayed, like I’d looked at it from the top and gone through the
inside. I’d gone beyond the surface and looked beyond to see the rock formation and that kind of thing. And I like to think of the petroglyphs in that sense, where you don’t just copy the surface but you look inside; you consider the place where the petroglyphs appeared — maybe a little waterfall, the trees that might be around there, the birds — you think of all these. It’s a religious centre, so to speak, it’s like a little cathedral, and I look at it in that sacred sense. So I use all these and they conjure up in me a certain kind of way to present what I have seen and experienced. It becomes a very, very private undertaking. I make these paintings and what happens on occasions on the canvas is that there are some very heavy textured surfaces and some very light areas. I now move between textured and light surfaces for contrast, like I did initially with flat and round forms. I think one needs to go beyond the expected. I’ve never understood when someone said, ‘Oh, you’ve captured the true spirit of that individual in the painting’. I always thought, what was that? I now understand what that means: it’s capturing the essence of Kaieteur if you’re going to paint the Kaieteur.

Which, it seems, you have now done marvellously in your painting Oriuyu-Shikaw, Kaieteur, Home of the River Spirit. Thank you, George Simon, and best wishes to you and the ‘boys from the interior’ in your continuing work.

(From interviews with George Simon in London in January 1994 and June 1995.)
EUSI KWAYANA

*Kyk-Over-Al at Fifty*

Only think how many human beings, the prize of creation, who were born fifty years ago did not live to see their fiftieth birthday. Perhaps one day our literary statisticians will make an intersectorial comparison between the infant mortality rate of humans and the infant mortality rate of publications.

Although, according to the latest Human Development Report of the UNDP, our infant mortality rate still stood at 48 per thousand in 1992, there is reason to believe that young people now eighteen, on the verge of childhood’s old age, or even those who are now fifteen, will be there to celebrate *Kyk-Over-Al’s* centenary.

That is an encouraging way of expressing faith in *Kyk-Over-Al* for its own sake, paying tribute to the founders and those whose love and clear-headedness has kept it going for all this half century. And with confidence claim that the rising generation will rise to the occasion — as most have always done, despite misgivings of elders — and so continue the tradition of creation and publication in this form, or in whatever form seems to them most fitting in the circumstances which will greet them on their way and which they may even now have begun to influence.

But Seymour! It is impossible to say *Kyk-Over-Al* without thinking of its most dedicated founder, and without seeing him at his desk with that supreme calm which grew as difficulties mounted; without thinking of his life long co-worker and companion, Elma, whose time and space were as communal as his, and of that long line of men and women writers whose sparks he fanned into flame.

*Kyk-Over-Al is fifty - Long live Kyk! *
MICHAEL GILKES

Swimmer

Every thing he did came easily.
Trees dropped their fruit
for him to catch,
fires lit for him
with one damp match.
Rain filled his bucket to the brim.
The yard, the circles
of cousins, neighbours, friends,
the childhood games,
the gabled house,
familiar as its housemaids' names
bouyed his young life so he could swim.

In those green Dolphin-days boyhood meandered
like a creek
finding its course,
changing its mind.
He wanted to leave the source behind, go where
the sun's glow lit the river's amber scrim
making the forest's cyclorama dim
to gold.
He longed to sing with tongues of gauldings
blown, like white confetti,
along the river's rim.
He yearned to skim that changing surface,
soft as silk,
or dimpled as a dinner-gong.
Older swimmers said 'boy, you too young.
That water deep. The currents there too strong.'

One afternoon the river called to him.
He heard its song.
Its voice was hoarse,
raucous as sin.
Its umber face reflected his
when he slipped in,
his body a bateau unzipping
the dark water's skin.

Later, half-drowned, glug-glugging on a coke,
sucking a cigarette,
he watched as his struck match ignited the dusk.
Towelled and dry,
his skin smelled of the river's musk.
The swimmer knew that smell would stay
for good, like a dark stain.
Nothing in life would come easy again.
NIGEL WESTMAAS

Personal Reflections:
Kyk-Over-Al, The Magazine

My initial encounter with *Kyk-Over-Al*, the magazine, was in the Caribbean section of the Public Free Library, as it was then called. In one sense I smelt *Kyk* before anything else. Everyone who has been in the library knows of the particular smell of the books arising from the substance used to protect them. *Kyk* appeared to have an abundance of the stuff. At the time, I was less concerned with reading than with admiring its form and seeming permanence on the shelf among other West Indian books. But its emphasis on poetry caught my mind even then. All the obscure and the great poems were included in *Kyk*. And just think! Where else could one have read short stories, poems, interviews, art criticism, and so much more, as *Kyk* provided?

To my mind *Kyk*’s very name was a choice of genius. The relevance of its name, an amazing conjunction of image and history, linked the geographical and historical significance of a Guyanese landmark and art, a marvellous leap of identification. It also performed the function of history teacher. Is it true that the remains of Kyk-Over-Al at the confluence of the Cuyuni, Mazaruni and Essequibo rivers only imbedded itself in the national consciousness largely because of this great literary magazine? On picking up an old *Kyk* one was always struck by the image of the Dutch fort on the cover. In time it fused itself in the memory.

Every magazine has its own spirit. This mirrors in some way the society that gave birth to it. *Kyk* came to symbolise more than a new element entering an emergent post-war Guyanese readership, thirsty for its own literature. Yet it was a few kindred spirits who spawned it and brought it to fruition. Martin Carter was once heard to remark that a whole village does not write a petition, someone does, and a village ratifies it. So it
was with this Guyanese icon. *Kyk-Over-Al* has been ratified several times over in its fifty years. And yet, then and now, it continues to require a tremendous persistence to be maintained. The process of making a magazine involves a great deal — conception, collection of material, editing, getting it to the printers, and then distribution. Only a great love of literature and art could have provided that engine of consistency. The two main figures associated with *Kyk’s* fifty years, AJ Seymour and Ian McDonald have had this particular quality in their respective editorships. AJ Seymour himself made a large slice of his life’s work this odyssey of perseverance and commitment.

There were breaks in its production over the years but AJ and his successors could have remarked like Goethe, “Die ich Rief, Die Geister werd’ ich nun nicht los”. Roughly translated, “The spirits that I summoned, I cannot now dismiss”. In other words had *Kyk* not existed it would have had to be invented. It had created a want.

A final reflection: Another thing I recall everytime I think of *Kyk* is the mutation of its page colour and print. The newer *Kyk*, that is, the *Kyk* of the computer age, does not have the faded “yellow” pages of its predecessors of the 1950’s and 1960’s. That colour gave the magazine an additional ‘history’. Editorial licence pushed the *Kyk* image to the top of the page in the newer issues with attractive main covers. But is newer better? Maybe in some ways. Yet somehow those old, faded copies of *Kyk* and their very readable print are superior to the modern computer-assisted appearance. In any case *Kyk* will survive and remain a permanent part of the Guyanese imagination. Hail *Kyk’s* Fiftieth Year!
Edgar Mittelholzer was the first Guyanese or West Indian novelist to live by his pen for most of his career. Even today, among West Indian writers, a similar claim may be genuinely made only for V. S. Naipaul. But Mittelholzer’s singularity goes further: he has written more novels than Naipaul, or any other West Indian for that matter; and in quicker time. From his first novel, *Corentyne Thunder*, in 1941, Mittelholzer produced twenty-five books; and if we consider that he published virtually nothing from 1942 to 1949, around the period of the Second World War, it means that in fifteen years (1950-1965) he published twenty-three novels, not to mention *With a Carib Eye* (1958) a travel book that reveals some of his most deeply felt views, and his autobiography *A Swarthy Boy* (1963). These statistics proclaim startling, not to say bewildering literary productivity, and an imagination whose fertility remains unsurpassed in the annals of West Indian literature.

Mittelholzer is also a pioneer. When he began writing, there was virtually no imaginative literature from Guyana or the West Indies. For this reason alone he should be canonized as the father of Guyanese literature. He either invented or made a critical contribution to basic genres of Guyanese and West Indian writing — the historical novel in his Kaywana trilogy; detective fiction in *My Bones and My Flute*; social realism in *A Morning at the Office*; science fiction in *A Twinkling in the Twilight*; erotica in *The Piling of Clouds*; the psychological thriller in *Sylvia*; and what he himself calls comedy-fantasy in such novels as *Shadows Move Among Them* and *The Mad MacMullochs*. Where he did not initiate these genres, his writing provided a decisive impetus that helped them to become established.

For all that, despite his professionalism, productivity, and pioneering, Mittelholzer has had a bad press. He is not accepted
as an artist of high calibre, like his contemporaries —
V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, or his fellow
Guyanese — Wilson Harris. This is astonishing because, on the
surface at least, Mittelholzer possessed qualities that would be the
envy of most great or gifted artists — fertile imagination, original
ideas, inspired initiative, technical flair, dogged determination
and superhuman energy. Yet the sad truth is that his fiction, like
the batting of his equally gifted countryman — Robert Christiani
— delivers less than it promises. Perhaps he was too spendthrift
with his rich talents, as Christiani certainly was; hence the
calamity of his fiction being disfigured by opulent self-indulgence
in novel after novel, for example, in *Eltonsbrody, Shadows Move
Among Them*, and most tragically of all, in his masterpiece — the
*Kaywana* trilogy — in which Mittelholzer cannot stop himself
from piling grotesquerie on top of eccentricity, sensation on top
of horror, mainly it seems, to shock the reader. Such powerfully
compulsive writing suggests either that Mittelholzer simply
threw caution to the winds and hugely enjoyed what he did, or that,
irresistibly, he was driven by demons that he could not control.

No wonder he destroyed himself in the end; for an
imagination that was daring enough to inspire fiction mixing
fascist or racist theories with transcendentalism, occultism,
eroticism and sadomasochism, was just as capable of devising a
method of suicide that entailed turning himself into a human
torch in England, where he had finally settled. The parallel is
inescapable with Buddhist monks whose pictures he must have
seen in English newspapers, willingly undergoing public
self-immolation. Even if it sounds preposterous, this horrifying
form of death tends to vindicate the compulsive self-indulgence
of Mittelholzer’s writing by investing it with an aura of almost
monkish devotion. For one thing, after self-immolation, it is
said that Mittelholzer’s body was found in a devotional posture.
For another, his novels contain moral or religious elements. At the
same time, improbably, many novels are riddled with
contradictory concepts of a Jekyll/Hyde variety, and situations of
manichean extremes that enjoin both lust and abstinence, evil as well as good. His novels also contain characters like Hubertus van Groenwegel (*Kaywana Stock*), an archetypal sinner/saint, capable of invoking pious incantations of abstinence and selfless dedication to God at the very moment that he cherishes thoughts of brutish lust, or actions of outlandish, carnal self-gratification. All this points to a mad logic in the manner of Mittelholzer’s death which may explain contradictory elements in his fiction, without, artistically, redeeming them.

Growing up in Guyana in the first quarter of this century, Mittelholzer enjoyed a measure of colonial social privilege. He came from a white/brown, creole, or upper middle class background; and although the literary resources available to him were slender, for example, the Bible, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Victorian penny dreadfuls and periodicals like *The Union Jack*, they were a good deal better than those available to most of his countrymen in a remote British Caribbean colony at the time. This is partly why he and other writers of a similar social background — DeLisser and Roberts of Jamaica, Frank Collymore of Barbados, and Gomes, Mendes and DeBoissiere of Trinidad are among the most important pioneers in West Indian literature. Among this group, C. L. R. James remains a lonely exception because he was black and from the lower middle class. These pioneers all display initiative, originality and versatility in their historical novels, social studies, romantic or detective fiction, and psychological thrillers; but Mittelholzer stands out because of an historical imagination more daring and dynamic than any other, both among his contemporaries, and their successors. For instance, while the harsh historical reality of DeLisser and Roberts is often relieved by blandishments of local colour and romance, Mittelholzer’s historical fiction is austerely motivated by a seemingly morbid desire to plumb the darkest depths of the master/slave relationship that is at the very foundation of Guyanese and West Indian culture.

This confers a unique accolade on the *Kaywana* trilogy; for
although the relationship between European masters and African slaves, in a plantation context, is the most historic of all West Indian subjects, it has not received the attention it deserves from West Indian novelists. It is true that Ada Quayle’s *The Mistress* vividly documents domestic plantation routine, and Orlando Patterson’s *Die the Long Day* offers generalised and rather abstract reflections on the same subjects; but neither of these novels investigates the morality of human beings owning other human beings, as Mittelholzer’s *Kaywana* novels attempt to do. The achievement of these three novels — *The Children of Kaywana, Kaywana Stock* and *Kaywana Blood* — is that in the process of examining the moral implications of slavery on Guyanese plantations, they transform themselves into sheer marvels of historical reconstruction, adaptation, and improvisation. In the sterile and forbiddingly uncreative conditions of colonial Guyana, in the first half of this century, Mittelholzer had no more than J. A. Rodway’s *A History of Guyana* as a source on which he could rely. Consequently, he fell back on his imagination which roamed at will, far and wide, vigorously and feverishly creating, inventing, fabricating and conjuring manifold scenes, events, issues and characters into a sweeping panorama of Guyanese history that spanned three and a half centuries. Ineluctably, it seems, mesmerised by the prodigious effort he devoted to this enormous project, Mittelholzer was also induced to plumb the turbulent, subconscious depths of his own mixed (European/African) ancestry. The result is an evocation of Guyanese history less distinguished by historical accuracy or documentary authenticity, than by a dazzling combination of psychological insight with ebullient, dramatic action, thrilling adventure, bizarre philosophical speculation and a vision that, ironically, would prove prophetic in the author’s homeland.

The vision that emerges from the *Kaywana* novels is one of enforced jungle justice, a severe, tough-minded, resilient creed that accepts life’s cruelties with perverse relish and participates
himself off as a true patriot in the eyes of the Guyanese people. If this is true, it is typical of the cynicism and expedience of Burnham’s regime as described by Ashton Chase in *Guyana: A Nation in Transit — Burnham’s Role*. At any rate, for Mittelholzer to have drawn his portrait of Cuffee, more than twelve years before Burnham took office, smacks of prophecy.

Yet Mittelholzer’s portrait of Cuffee/Burnham is not entirely mysterious: it is partly the logical outcome of a blind, brutal and haphazard vision of life as outlined in *With a Carib Eye*:

*I can even find it in me to sympathise with the old planters in their cynical apathy towards political questions of the day. In the final reckoning, whether they protested against some threatened measure or shrugged with indifference, the powers in Holland or England always decided the matter as the powers saw fit.*

This, too, is part of the vision in the *Kaywana* novels, with their portrait of political leadership, whether of planter or slave, as one of resigned, cynical apathy, expedience, and Machiavellian self-aggrandisement. The most original aspect of this vision is its insight that political Independence which put an end to colonial rule in Guyana in 1966, was likely at least in its initial aftermath to be followed by the same authoritarian, colonial style of government that it had supposedly overthrown. By exemplifying the truth of this vision, Burnham’s post-Independence regime vindicates the acuteness of Mittelholzer’s perceptions, and the tortured integrity of his troubled genius.

The singularity of Mittelholzer’s genius is indisputable: his originality and inventiveness are peerless; his sense of drama wrenching; his evocation of landscape brilliant; and his intellectual curiosity diverting and entertaining. To all this he brought a narrative fluency equalled by no other West Indian novelist except, possibly, John Hearne of Jamaica. His professionalism, productivity and pioneering deserve to become an integral part of Guyanese and West Indian literary history. But
his belief in jungle justice was a liability, despite the fact that it led him to predict events in post-Independence Guyana. In the end, Mittelholzer remains, potentially, the most gifted writer of Guyanese or West Indian origin. But alas, like Robert Christiani, whose dazzling feats of batsmanship survive chiefly in glorious fragments, in abbreviated Test innings, Mittelholzer’s immense literary gifts lie in a disconsolate mass of scattered fragments, strewn higgledy-piggledy over more than twenty novels. We shall never fully know what saints or demons, probably originating in his native county of Berbice, led him to squander his precious gifts so prodigally, or to create at such white heat that, metaphorically, literally, prematurely, he burnt himself out. All we can glean from his work is the dimly glowing wonder of a career promising the most brilliant productions ever to come from a Guyanese or West Indian pen, and perishing, tragically unfulfilled, in alien, autumn sunlight, in Godalming, Surrey, England.
perform, what he called “this duty of criticism”.

*There are always the newspapers to perform part of this duty of criticism, but the journalist has primarily to deal with short term material and he supplies more of fact and less of opinion. It is to the weekly and monthly and quarterly issues of critical material that we must look for more fundamental probing, there we must seek the expression of the more slowly maturing spirit of the people. In other words, publications are necessary if the leaven of community and of national unity is to work among an organised people.*

This on eve of the 1953 April elections and the beginning of a convulsive year in the colony.

And after the trauma of the invasion of October 1953 and the overthrow of our first elected government? A solemn remembrance of the honourable dead who blazed the trail of our cultural movement — the brothers Potter, Philip Pilgrim and, before them, Mac A. Lawrence, A. R. F. Webber, Egbert Martin — a praise-song of “the supremacy of the spirit over material things.” The opening line sounds the note:

*In this country we have seen brilliant lights go out in the darkness and clocks have stopped on the wall.*

In the face of rupture and defeat, the measured celebration of continuity and a defiance of negation. Speaking out of a radical conservative humanism, Seymour hit upon a vital truth of social motion, ignored by political activists at their own peril and ultimately at the peril of others: “We are pre-occupied with community values of a more political nature, and rightly so, but there must be an advance upon many fronts at the same time if we are going to develop the national spirit.” (Italics mine).

There was no lack of boldness in Seymour’s quiet defence of the freedom of the creative imagination in the heyday of *littérature engagee*, that of the highly reputable Sartre no less than that of the utterly disreputable Zdanov. In 1952, we find him writing:

*The most valuable asset of the writer is his independence. It is*
true that he is socially conditioned in the unconscious springs of his being, but no attempt should be made to make him toe a party line in literature.

In hospitable only to dogma and its suffocations, 

*Kyk-Over-Al* was from the beginning a voice for reason, moderation and an unapologetic humanism.

Born in the same year as the United Nations fifty years ago, in the aftermath of the decimation of great cities and the slaughter in the ovens, on the steppes and in the trenches, *Kyk-Over-Al* was a small part of the universal assertion of civilisation over barbarism, of humanism over inhumanity, of the garden over the ashes. And this in a British colony, far from what is called the centre.

"The writer writes as best he can" Seymour has written, "and he is grateful that he can write at all." In a salute to *Kyk-Over-Al* on its fiftieth anniversary, gratitude is a good note on which to end."
Recollections

The photograph, "The village shop," comes from *Guiana, British, Dutch, French*, a nineteenth century colonial travelogue published in 1912 by Fisher Unwin. When I first saw it I felt it evoked my father’s boyhood. It reflects the situation and society of his birth, childhood upbringing and life on a sugar plantation in rural, coastland British Guiana. Our family lived as part of a community of sugar workers in Rose Hall Plantation in Canje, on the banks of the Canje River, a tributary of the Berbice River. The photograph makes me remember that my parental, widowed grandmother raised her two sons and daughter there, in the village shop near the sugar factory. I was born and lived there until I was nine. This photograph reminds me of my father’s identity. It reminds me that the country of his birth British Guiana, its history, political and social experience at a specific time was also his history. The struggle of the Guianese sugar workers was the defining frame of his life. This photograph represents his childhood, his life, in that frame.

My father is prominent in my earliest childhood memories because he was so active in looking after me. His closest friends were the canecutters, field and factory workers at Rose Hall estate, Canje. I recollect scenes of companionship among them. They came after work to our home to rest, chat and wash away the soil and dirt of the cane fields before going home. They helped to build the large water tank in our yard. They came to draw water, boil it for drinking and to wash. Late at night, my father would sit with them in the lamplight and talk politics. They also played their banjoes, sang, and told stories. The companionship, security and warmth among them often lulled me to sleep. This is one of the most comforting memories of my childhood. It returns me to an inviolable sense of security. I dream frequently about my father and these companions. In my dreams, they emerge from my
psyche and appear with my childhood family as mythical, fantastic figures with power to traverse space and time, link me with my past, present and future, and redeem mundane experience with vision and imagination. They have this power in my imagination because I witnessed the power of theirs in the face of the harshness and cruelties of plantation life. Rare, delicious water chestnuts and exquisitely perfumed lilies grew in the deepest parts of the canefields. They made a habit of collecting and giving them as presents to women and children. I have witnessed a cane cutter covered entirely in soot from burnt cane; cutlass, saucepans and pitchfork hitched to his back, arrive at my mother’s kitchen door bearing a bunch of beautiful delicate lilies. Even as I write this, the rare scent of those lilies and the taste of those water chestnuts return to intoxicate me. Now I know that their talk of politics was not peaceful. They were often plotting tactics against the plantation managers. They talked about fighting for their rights. Their meetings seemed to mean more to my father than anything else. I never saw him so serious and passionate as when he was involved in politics. At weekends, they organised work gangs to repair and build their homes, and to maintain the dams and protect our villages from floods. I associate my early childhood with my father’s active political life.

In my teenage years, he caught polio. He lost the use of his legs. His friends would still visit and keep him informed but it fretted him to be paralysed. It pained me to see my father like this but he was brave. One friend, Mr. Moses, a furniture craftsman, made him a Berbice chair specially to aid his recovery. Mr. Moses regularly performed libations over the chair, and helped him recover the use of his legs by visiting daily and supporting him to force himself to walk for half an hour each day. Another friend, Bhajan, would massage him with coconut oil, the East Indian cure-all, and sing to him in Hindi or Bhojpuri while he lay in the chair. African, Chinese and Amerindian herbalists provided teas as well as oils and pastes for massage. Christian friends came to read the psalms and sing hymns to my father in
his Berbice chair but he refused the Anglican priest when he came to give him communion. These healing sessions and political meetings were conducted simultaneously. When he began to walk again they said it was a miracle. He was afflicted for the rest of his life by constant pain and a limp. This confined him at home and thwarted his political activism. His community-based political culture ended when young cadres invaded our village with the politics of the Cold War and to preach Soviet communism and Marxism. The political meetings in our yard ended. It was also the end of my childhood.

My father's influence led me to become involved in community-based politics in London. It taught me what politics meant to him. I think he believed in living in a colony, on a plantation, nothing else could give his life as much shape and focus, or his actions as much meaning. He distrusted liberalism, individualism, bourgeois values, Christianity, colonial education and culture for political reasons, because they were used to violate our autonomy. His politics give his life discipline, direction, value and stability in the unjust and unpredictable world of the sugar plantation. He felt helpless to see his children undergo an education he distrusted. When I returned home from school he did his best to de-educate me, to undermine what I was learning at school, and bind me to his values. It left me with a lasting ambivalence towards my education that made me interrupt and postpone it frequently, question it, shy away from an academic career, and settle down only with iconoclastic teachers. My education was always controversial, dominated by issues of power and politics because of my father. He conditioned me to question everything, to distrust ideologues, ideology, doctrine. Teachers like Samuel Archer at my primary school understood him, knew how to win his trust, and teach and inspire me to learn. I was ten when he encouraged me to write an essay on the title, "My Life". I did not know where to start. In the end, I wrote about my impressions of the forest along the Canje River. I called it "Water and Trees" (ten years later, I rewrote and published it). He read
it to the class. While he read, I was embarrassed, expecting to be the butt of jokes later in the playground. But the class took it as a chance to bring our own lives into the classroom, and acknowledge as one that the forest was a haunt of our imagination. Thirty years later, in 1987, when I heard that I received the Guyana Literary Prize for my first novel, I thought about Mr. Archer drinking mauby with my father, their gentle, courteous conversations; the essay "Water and Trees", and the faith in my work these two men gave me when I was a child. I never expected Mr. Archer knew of the prize because he was still living in Canje, now headmaster of one of the primary schools, and news takes a long time to travel from the city to the country. I thought I would go home and tell him about it afterwards. On the evening the prizes were awarded, after the ceremony, he emerged from the crowd to greet me. It was thirty years since he encouraged me to write "Water and Trees". He told me he had travelled to the city straight from teaching that afternoon and was returning early in the morning to be back in time to teach a class. I thanked him for encouraging me and for initiating me into my first experience of writing and an audience and readership.

In the Canje area where they lived all their life, my parents raised their children in a communal system, and participated in diverse rituals and rites of passage — African, East Indian, Christian, Amerindian, European. As a small child, I moved with no sense of difference between an East Indian maticore and African queh queh ceremony, the Hindu temple, the Muslim mosque, the African Association meetings, high mass at the Anglican church, and canoe trips along the Canje river to barter with Amerindian and Djuka settlers in the forest and savannahs. These are not just sentimental memories. They are my childhood reality, experiences as diverse and more natural and united than any I lived in afterwards. It was a strategy of the colonial authorities to take credit for this so there prevailed a pre-Independence idea that it was not my parent's community
smell the shaving cream, soap and shoe polish that he used, and feel the texture of his hair in my fingers when, as a child, I would cling to him to be carried or held. We rarely ate food cooked in an authentic Chinese style so his visits to the town were occasions to buy and bring home Chinese food. When I look at this photograph I can smell the dumplings, noodles, pastries and sweet plums he laid out on the table on his return from town. Often he and I would sit together and share the pleasure of eating some of the pastries — still warm in greaseproof wrapping — as soon as he arrived home. I wonder if there were times when my father thought about what it might be like to live in China. Perhaps those occasions when he bought Chinese food, it was an opportunity to indulge ourselves fleetingly and momentarily in an imaginary identification with that culture? If it was, it was not experienced in conflict with the life we lived in such a remote part of the coast.

I went to school in the same town. I know it very well. I can see my father leave the studio after having his photograph taken. He would have been hot in this suit in the heat. I can see the route he walked to Main Street where the only two Chinese restaurants were located. I can see him make the purchase then walk to the bus stop. I can take myself back to the bus and sit beside him as we journeyed home; see the village scenes pass by; feel the warm, relaxing, scented breeze through the open window; smell the scents of fruits from the baskets on the shelves overhead; and join in the conversations of the other passengers with whom he is on familiar terms because he has known them since his boyhood. I can hear my father's voice. I am alert to the many different accents and speech styles of Guyanese. These vary from one district to another. My father spoke in the accent and speech of the Canje district. His social and political values and morals were of the militant pre-nationalist, anti-colonial British Guianese sugar worker.

So this photograph has the power to bring to life my most personal memories and experience of our close relationship. My
father was kind, gentle, loving, with a personal code of ethics he practised in everyday terms with his family, friends and community equally. I used to take his qualities for granted. Now I see how much I have struggled to emulate him, and how difficult and important this has been in my life. When I failed, I could apply his ethic of compassion to my mistake and try again. He did not believe in or practise the system of reward and punishment that was typical of the colonial Caribbean version of Christian high church nationalism that was used to subjugate other religions with its message of racial superiority. Nowadays, United States culture has the colonising role in the Caribbean and U.S. Christian fundamentalism colonises Caribbean souls. My father refused Christianity, its concept of sin and utopia. For him, the cultivation of the emotions and the spiritual faculties was the highest aspiration and could be practised directly and independently by anyone in simple, everyday terms, including their social and political conscience. He disliked hatred and enmity. Failure was not punished, no one was demonised or rejected for mistakes. It was always possible to return to the path of effort. Kindness and forgiveness could always overcome misunderstanding, conflict and adversity. A simple life and selflessness gave him joy and fulfillment. My best inheritance from him is a desire for such joy and fulfillment.

If my parents were alive I would tell them that I have experienced the separations and divisions of the world that sometimes made it seem difficult, impossible, to believe in their values, especially their ethical approach to difference. I would tell them that in my childhood, living with them, I never realised that difference generated so much hatred and division. I would thank them for sheltering me from the destructiveness of experiencing too much of that too early and giving me security that has protected me when I did have to face it. I would thank them for giving me a gift I took for granted but now realise is rare — a positive experience of difference in our family and community. I would thank them for the vision and courage to place this
positive experience above the negative ones and for teaching me that the negative ones should never determine my own actions and beliefs. I would thank them most of all for showing me how to live such a life by their example, and how to try and shape myself a community of friends and colleagues who exemplify their values.

I would not describe Guyana or London as ‘pluralist’ or ‘heterogeneous’. Those concepts have been used to portray homogeneity, the nation, the state as the perfectly integrated society based on racial and cultural purity and these are artificial, nevertheless powerful constructs which people have assimilated into their perception and desires and actualised in their political and personal practice. Whether it is more fraught or easier to live with a sense of a diversity of cultures depends entirely on how you construct your own perceptions of the meaning of power, politics, authority, community, and knowledge. In London, there is a greater diversity of communities, a larger population of people mingling, and everyday involvement and contact between them. The diversity of London is increasing continually and this is reflected in young people like my own children born of the unions of late twentieth century diversity here. They have a consciousness and values that force us to transcend artificial constructions of difference, used by Europe to justify the extirpation, extermination, transportation and migration of peoples for five centuries. On the other hand, London, Britain, is capitalist and individualist like the U.S. This does discourage the integrity of communities cohering and challenging the authority of the racist nation state. It can and does make some individuals and groups closed, cling to racial and cultural exclusiveness, and use the tools of capitalism and individualism to acquire institutional, economic and political power, to mimic a capitalist lifestyle of competition for wealth and status. This was a feature of life in urban Guyana, reinforced after Independence. In Guyana and London I have seen such opportunism destroy relationships between friends, family, lovers, colleagues, and thereby destroy
the vision and potential of their legacy of diversity. In London, Guyana, and anywhere else this destructiveness and failure of vision can be resisted by having the courage to struggle to create, sustain, live and work in political, institutional and cultural settings that challenge racism and the hegemony of a racist nation state. In these settings, people are politicised through a refusal of racist constructions of difference. My father’s community was hostile to British colonial, nationalist racism. They held out against it all their lives. No matter how triumphant and superior its hold on power, how tempting the rewards it offered for compromise, they refused its terms totally. Conditions for diversity and resisting racism are favourable in London where I still live currently. I could not have found and taken to them if my life in Guyana had not prepared me to, especially the example of my father and his community. Although like my father illness has made me give up political work, his vision and his life continue to inspire me here in London as it did when I was growing up with him. Wherever I go, this inspiration will travel with me.

Footnotes

*This essay has been published elsewhere with accompanying photographs which cannot be reproduced here.

1. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, Russell Square, London reproduced a copy of this photograph from the copy of the book in their collection.

2. Guiana and British Guiana are used to refer to the pre-independence period, and Guyana to the post-independence period.
3. There are similarities between these two rituals, Maticore is a Hindu ritual. Queh queh is practised mostly in Berbice and originates in West Africa. Both are secular events of female initiation which precede religious marriage rites. They are staged at night. Older women lead them but some older men may be present. The bride-to-be is the central figure but she has to be concealed by a sheet or in a separate space during the entire ceremony. Songs with explicit sexual content are sung and sexually suggestive dances are performed. The songs also initiate the bride into an awareness of marital politics. Virtuoso skills of singing, dancing and drumming have to be displayed and the families of the prospective marriage partners must sustain the enthusiasm of participants for the duration of the event which lasts until the break of dawn.
1994 Guyana Prize

DENNIS CRAIG

Opening Remarks

Your Excellency, Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corps, Hon. Prime Minister, Hon. Minority Leader, Ministers of Government, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honour to welcome you, on behalf of the Management Committee of the Guyana Prize, to this evening’s ceremony for the 1994 Award of Prizes.

As Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana, I am by tradition the ex-officio chairman of the Management Committee, and I should like to begin my remarks by telling you who the other members of the Management Committee are. They are: Ms Lynette Dolphin, OR, CCH: Professor Joycelynne Loncke, CCH; Mr Ian McDonald (for a period of time preceding his own entry into the competition); Mrs Yvonne Lancaster, the Deputy Librarian of the University of Guyana; Ms Roslin Khan, of the Faculty of Arts, of the University of Guyana; Mr Al Creighton, also of the Faculty of Arts (Secretary of the Committee).

The Management committee is concerned only with administrative matters relating to the Prize and has nothing to do with the judging of entries. The judging of entries is done by an independent panel of judges selected for that purpose, and later in the programme, the Secretary of the Management Committee, Mr Al Creighton will tell you who have been the judges of this year’s competition.

Since the Prize was first instituted by the President of Guyana in 1987, this year’s awards will be the fourth in the series of awards; and I am pleased to be able to say that competition for the Prize has grown steadily since the inception of the Prize.

At the first award in 1987, there were 28 entries in the
competition for the Prize. At the second award in 1989, there were 42 entries. At the third award in 1992, there were 49 entries. And in the competition for this year’s award, there are 99 entries.

The large number of entries in this year’s competition is in part due to the fact that the Management Committee allowed unpublished manuscripts to be entered for the first time in the competition, and to be judged in a separate category.

This decision of the Management Committee was taken in response to public complaints since the 1992 competition that many worthy and talented authors were being excluded from the competition because of the difficulty of finding publishers for their work, and the high cost of self-publishing.

The Committee therefore took note of that complaint, and following advertisement in the media 46 unpublished manuscripts were received. Even without these however, the number of entries for the present competition would still have been unsurpassed in the history of the Prize, as a total of 53 published works were entered as against 49 in 1992.

I think it appropriate however, to draw your attention to the objectives of the Guyana Prize as they have been announced and repeated over the years. These objectives have been stated as follows:

To recognise and reward outstanding work in literature by Guyanese authors in order to:

a) provide a focus for the recognition of the creative writing of Guyanese at home and abroad;

b) stimulate interest in and provide encouragement for the development of good creative writing among Guyanese in particular and Caribbean writers in general.

The significance of these objectives, of their emergence at a time of great economic and social difficulty in the history of Guyana, and of the aspirations they convey for the triumph of the human spirit over the material difficulties of our world, have been commented-upon in previous award ceremonies, and have been recorded for posterity in the commemorative booklets for the
different occasions of the awards.

But in the midst of all that has been said, the focus of the objectives on excellence in creative writing has implications which merit continuing reflection and which have not yet been completely exhausted in our records of such reflection.

The creators of good creative writing, let us say good literature, are very often those among us who, more than the rest of us, have the habit, as one great writer puts it, of holding the mirror up to nature; and by so doing they show us who, what, and how we are.

And what our creative writers show us of the world and of ourselves is very often what we tend to shrink from seeing or acknowledging, but what is true nevertheless. And even if, like Pilate we question the nature of truth, and disagree with Keats that it is synonymous with beauty, we still have to admit that it is through our creative writers that we come closest to a perception of what truth is, in terms of human interaction.

The ancient Greeks felt that the skilful portrayal of human interaction in great tragedy has a purifying and cleansing effect on the emotions, but in reality great literature can always be said to have such an effect on the emotions and on our perception. And it is our creative writers who are responsible for this.

It is our creative writers who keep analysing for us, and reminding us of the antitheses of our human existence. They distil those antitheses through the purifying fire of the imagination, and make us conscious of them more clearly than we otherwise would be. They remove the vagueness of abstraction and generalisation from the big antitheses such as beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, goodness and evil; and they break them down into the more concrete contradictions of our everyday human behaviour: honesty on the one hand and dishonesty on the other, whether of material matters or of the intellect; impartiality or fairness on the one hand and bias or discrimination on the other, magnanimity on the one hand and small-mindedness on the other; love or neighbourliness on the one hand and animosity or rancour on the other; and we can enumerate indefinitely these
antitheses that our writers of good literature help to analyse and clarify for us in concrete ways not otherwise possible.

In our Guyanese society of today, and indeed of a long time preceding today, we need this help of our creative writers to analyse and clarify the conflicting realities of our everyday existence, so that we do not attempt to blind our eyes to those realities. And the Guyana Prize, which aims to encourage our writers, is thereby putting within our grasp a benefit which goes beyond the mere availability of good literature; it can possibly give us an enhanced opportunity to see ourselves as we really are.

The fact that competition for the Prize continues to increase is therefore a source of great hope for the future, since it suggests the possibility that a growing proportion of our talents as a people is being directed towards that transformation, analysis and clarification of our individual and collective experience that is the foundation of creative literature.

In considering these things, we probably will also need to consider that if as a people we are to benefit from this outpouring of literature, then the size and quality of our reading public becomes a critical factor, linked also, of course, to the role of our local booksellers, and the facilitation they receive in their fulfillment of that role. For surely, it will be a tragedy of enormous proportions if our writers write and our nation does not read. But these are questions that I will leave for others to explore.

I will close my remarks by expressing the hope that you will enjoy the programme that is to follow, and that you will take away with you, enduring memories associated with this evening’s award of the Guyana Prize.
EDWARD BAUGH/ KEN RAMCHAND

Judges’ Report

His Excellency the President, Mr. Vice Chancellor, Ministers of the Government, Committee of the Guyana Prize, distinguished Guests and the Prize winners, before reading out the report and findings of the judges, I would like to spend a few moments on the significance of the pioneer Jamaican writer John Hearne who died last week.

Those who grew up with West Indian Literature remember John Hearne as an early master who helped to put our writing on the map of the world. As a novelist, short-story writer, and brave journalist he touched upon every important issue in West Indian societies. The titles of his first five novels are like mantras sounding our desolation and our glory: *Voices Under the Window; Stranger at the Gate; The Faces of Love; The Autumn Equinox; The Land of the Living*.

It took all of twenty years for John Hearne to see in print his most recent novel *The Sure Salvation*. Between 1961 when *The Land of the Living* was published, and 1981 when *The Sure Salvation* materialised, Hearne was active as journalist, political commentator, and as Director of the Creative Arts Centre in Jamaica.

For 20 years he suffered, and some of us knew it. The manuscript was always nearly ready, almost there. But for 20 years this courageous man was unable to deliver his precious cargo. For 20 years the artist was becalmed. Like the wilful protagonist of a Hearne novel, however, he fought the beast to the ground.

The Sure Salvation is on a slave-trade expedition, an abomination only recently made illegal in the novel. The action takes place mainly on the sea, in the year 1860, but there are flashbacks to earlier periods in England, the American South and the West African Coast. Like George Lamming’s *Natives of My*
**Person** and Wilson Harris's *Palace of The Peacock*, Hearne's latest offering is an historical work built upon the motif of journey, a motif that is well-derived logically from our experience as a nation of forced and voluntary immigrants.

But Hearne is not just writing history in novel form. The opening description for example *(The vessel ringed by its own garbage, the crew tense and in panic, the slaves repressed like the id, and all looking for the promised salvation)* takes on several symbolic significances:

*By the 15th day, even the most insensitive of the 516 souls aboard tried not to see this clinging evidence of their corruption, which the water would not swallow and the sun could not burn. Occasionally a small shark rushed avidly from the depths, seized a jettisoned fragment and vanished on a turn. Otherwise the ship was the still centre of a huge stillness. In this prison of unyielding silence and immobility their only proofs of being were the writhing edge of the sun and the nightly fattenning of the moon. They were tantalised by the conviction that immediately beyond the walls of opaque blue — on the horizon's edge, if only they could get there — they would find waves running before the wind, curling at their crests with a hiss of spray, and a sky loud with swooping birds that shrieked beautiful and reassuring discords. More and more surely, as the novel proceeds, the conviction grows in the reader that the stalled ship with its unresolved tensions and its will towards a healing future is an image of West Indian societies after independence, trapped in a stagnation, an explosive no-growth condition that is as much a legacy of the past as of failure to confront and digest the past.*

*There are in the description, suggestions of the dejected artist waiting for inspiration, waiting for the calm to break. (It is inevitable that we should notice that in the novel the wind comes after 20 days just as in Hearne’s career the book is published after a 20 year silence). West Indian literature has got to where it is because of the*
sacrifices of artists like John Hearne. I highlight *The Sure Salvation* here because it is his last novel, the one published at a time when people seemed to have forgotten him, and because it symbolises the stagnant condition into which our islands have drifted, and because it starts the struggle of the artist to invoke the creative breeze that might free us from our larger self-generated sargassos.

This report was written by the Chairman of the Judges, Professor Edward Baugh, who unfortunately cannot be here tonight. It is a true record of the findings of the Judges. I may deviate from Professor Baugh’s words in place but in no way am I altering the substance and the essential judgements.

There were 99 entries in all, an overwhelming number to go through, especially since the Judges received the books not singly but in patches and since the Judges were aware that in a national competition of this sort, where everybody knows everybody else, justice must not only be done, it must be seen to be done. I can assure you that all entries were given the most careful consideration. The Judges were based in Jamaica, the United States, the United Kingdom and Guyana and were happily unable to enter into any kind of discussion until their arrival in Guyana in October for the meeting of the Judges.

We found ourselves in agreement without any talk necessary that the categories of published fiction and poetry were particularly exciting.

There were some 13 entries in the published fiction category, more than half the number being of high artistic quality. They covered an impressive range of subject matter, style, and narrating technique: the grassroots, vernacular sensibility of the interior monologues of Rooplal Monar’s *Estate People*; the richly allusive subtlety of David Dabydeen’s reversal of colonial discourse in *Disappearance*; N.D. Williams’ wry, low-key exploration of the alienated Caribbean “island” consciousness in *The Silence of Islands*; the compassionately detailed canvas of Narmala Shewcharan’s representation of
recent Guyanese socio-political history in *Tomorrow Is Another Day*; and the elemental passion and mythic promise of Churaumanie Bissundyal’s *Whom the Kiskadees Call*. Of the seven short-listed entries in the fiction category, five were first books. This augurs well for Guyanese prose fiction, and I suppose you can say it speaks well for the judges who were not automatically drawn by well-known names!

In contrast, none of the five short-listed books of poetry was a first collection. And therefore there were no prizes for Poetry: First Book category. However, all of the five should enhance their authors’ reputations. Here again there was a pleasing range of voice and theme. For example, the long overdue collection of Ian McDonald’s early portraits of Caribbean folk and folkways in *Jaffo the Calypsonian* was a nice contrast with the imaginative tour-de-force of post-colonial historical excavation in the title sequence of David Dabydeen’s *Turner*; with the teeming, obliquely darting intelligence of Brian Chan’s *Fabula Rasa*; and with Fred D’Aguiar’s variously ironic-satiric, angry and warmly humane expression of the claim of Britain’s emergent West Indian/Black citizenry to their stake in the landscape which they have inherited from history. So much for now, for the categories Published Fiction and Published Poetry.

The general level of entries in the drama category was not high. Although there were a few interesting ideas, the level of craftsmanship was generally uneven, and the theatrical viability of many of the plays was questionable. Of the three short-listed entries, one is really a film-script. In view of the fact that the rules of the competition did not make it clear whether or not film-scripts are eligible, the judges felt obligated to consider it. We recommend, however, that in future competitions some precise indication be given as to what is meant (or not meant) by “a full-length play,” and in particular whether radio and screen plays are admissible.

The judges noted with interest and with a particular sense of responsibility that this year, for the first time, the category
for unpublished poetry and prose fiction was introduced, apparently to provide an opportunity to bring to light outstanding work which, for whatever reason or mischance, had not achieved publication. Regrettably, we were unable to recommend any entry for a prize. However, we wish to recognise some merit in the following: *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* by Lawrence Byass; *The Voice of a Son* by Lennox W. Cornette; *Returnings* by Parmeshwar Lall; *With Raging Thirst* by Leon Moses; *Without Names* by Margaret A. Stuart.

We do not believe that this category should be thought of as a consolation category for second or third rate work, for this would only devalue the prize. We think that any unpublished entry worthy of the prize should be able to stand unapologetically beside a published prize winner, and should be a work which the judges would unhesitatingly deem publishable.

Since the mere existence of the category as separate might encourage the conclusion that entries in it will be given special, privileged treatment, the judges recommend that there should not be in future a separate category for unpublished work. If unpublished entries are accepted, they should be entered alongside the published works in the appropriate genre category.

There is another recommendation from the Judges which we think this might be the occasion to air. There were two or three non-fiction prose works of some merit which were ineligible because there is no category which caters to them. And we are aware of a number of non-fiction works by Guyanese authors that should be considered for national honours. The Judges recommend therefore that the Prize Committee give serious consideration to creating a non-fiction category, to include Essays, Social Studies, Histories, Autobiographies, Biographies etc.

The Judges agreed to recommend the following for prizes, following the precedent that if a first book is awarded the main fiction or poetry prize it does not also get the first-book prize.
DRAMA
The recommended play treats the important subject of race in a way that is reasonable and true to contemporary Guyanese experience and does not disintegrate into cliché. If the issues are ultimately made to appear intractable, that is part of the author’s honesty with himself. If there may be reservations about the handling of dialogue, the unfolding of the plot nevertheless maintains dramatic tension and has theatrically effective possibilities. The transitions are well managed, and there is an engaging blend of the stylised and the naturalistic, the documentary and the fictive. In the drama category, *Two Wrongs* by Harold Bascom is recommended for a Guyana Prize.

POETRY
The winning poetry collection has been chosen for its accessibility, which is sustained without any talking down to the reader, for its sheer consistence and a control of poetic craft, achieved without showiness, gimmickry or posturing, and maintained throughout a subtle variation of moods and themes; for the way in which a deep sense of place is assimilated into a mythic imagination, an imagination in which mind and landscape, the Guyanese landscape, are fully integrated; for the way in which quietly probing, illuminating thought is integrated with an immediacy of deep feeling and sensuous texture. *The Language of El Dorado*, by Mark McWatt (Dangaroo Press).

FICTION
Even if there may be something of the ‘set piece’ about the novel, it is, on the surface, a sustained act of historical imagination, representing the tragedy of slavery on the North American plantation. It is a tragedy of broken families and ruptured relationships and at its finest it is a novel about the tortured, exasperating, relationship between father and son. Sharply focussed, and with every word carefully placed, it moves towards its inexorable climax with a clarity of line, poetic concentration, and economy of detail. *The Longest Memory*, by Fred D’Aguiar (Chatto & Windus).
FICTION (Best Book)
The judges regard the winning novel as something of a “find”, one of the most exciting and refreshing pieces of new fiction to come out of the Caribbean in recent times. Gripping, simply at the level of story-telling, it is all the more remarkable for the way in which it combines plot features of popular fiction with a serious exploration of important themes grounded in Guyanese socio-cultural reality — themes of race, class and gender. It handles these with eminent good sense, including a subtle sense of humour and linguistic nuance, and not allowing the reader to repose in any easy, comfortable or self-indulgent position. The social and political themes are realised in and through individual personalities, not imposed on them. This novel is an account of how a medical doctor of the bored and self-indulgent middle-class finds himself being drawn into an involvement in the lives of ordinary people so that he begins to discover himself as a person of Indian origin who is also a Guyanese, and also a human being. At the end, the main protagonist is seen working out the implications of his new caring. More significantly, for Guyanese society, he has begun to explore the implications of his previous alienation from people of African origin. In the budding relationship between himself and the hospital dispenser, a man of African origin, the narrator begins to discover and define the terms and conditions of respect and self-respect in ethnically mixed and tangled societies like ours. The novelist shows excellent skill and honesty in character-drawing and the winsomely self-reflexive first-person narrator is a fine addition to the gallery of memorable characters in Caribbean fiction.

The winning novel, Cosmic Dance, by Harischandra Khemraj is a philosophical and metaphysical work written in a way that everyone can understand and imagine. It is this philosophical dimension that makes it one of the most positive statements about the nature and prospects of our society and especially the societies of Guyana and Trinidad.
Your Excellency, President Jagan, Vice-Chancellor Craig, Honourable Ministers of Government, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour for me to be here tonight as winner of the Guyana Prize for Poetry, and I am doubly honoured to have been asked to make the acceptance speech on behalf of all the winners - though I must say that I approached this task with some trepidation. I remember when I was in the sixth form I lived for a while with a great aunt here in Georgetown and this good lady had taken to reading some of my adolescent poetry of the time. She viewed with misgiving particularly the love poems, with their talk of “soft breasts” and “river-smooth skin”, and she said to me: “Boy, you see this poetry-writin’ foolishness? You better take care it don’t get you in trouble.” Although I am sure that this is not the kind of “trouble” she had in mind, I nevertheless feel as though her warning has come true tonight, as I stand before this gathering to speak on behalf of my fellow writers.

For I find that I have only an imperfect understanding of my own work and what it means in the context of Guyana today — let alone the work of others; and while it is wonderful that there are more and more Guyanese writers (some of whom I had not heard of before I saw their names on the short-lists), I find that it must be an act of monstrous hubris to attempt to speak for other writers. I intend to speak, therefore, mostly about my own work and experience as a writer and my own relationship to Guyana and Guyanese writing in the hope that there will be some shared perceptions and some general relevance.
Before that, however, there is one important task I can perform on behalf of fellow prize winners and that is the happy duty of expressing gratitude first to the sponsors of the prize, the Government of Guyana, and especially to President Jagan. It is good to be assured, Sir, by your presence here and by your continued support of these awards, that you do not consider artists and writers to be irrelevant to the business of nation-building. Persuading your treasury to pour, from time to time, the people's good money into the invisible bridges and imaginary edifices that writers build must be no easy task, but justified, perhaps, by the longer view in which the insubstantial constructs of poetry, drama and fiction contain and support and define a people and their identity beyond the capacity of their expensive and necessary material counterparts.

I thank also the Management Committee of the Guyana Prize, particularly Professor Craig and Mr. Al Creighton, for their hard work; and also thank the judges, Professors Eddie Baugh and Ken Ramchand, Dr. Velma Pollard, Dr. Stewart Brown and Mr. Alim Hosein, who had to read all the entries in the space of a couple of months while doing their own full-time jobs. Perhaps it is appropriate that all the judges should be university teachers as these are accustomed to the servitude of having to read and assess large piles of writing within short deadlines. Judging literature is more difficult than judging undergraduate essays, however, and the results of the judging probably satisfy far fewer of the candidates. Special thanks to the judges, therefore, for performing a thankless task.

In reflecting on my own reasons for wanting to write poetry — and in an attempt to account for the kind of poetry I write, it occurred to me (with some dismay) that I, in terms of consciousness and deliberation, may have had very little to do with it. I think my own writing, like that of many another Guyanese writer — including my fellow prize-winners tonight — tends to confirm the observations of Jeffrey Robinson in a haunting little article entitled "The Guyaneseness of Guyanese
Literature”. Robinson suggests that there is something arising from the confrontation between the mind and the Guyana landscape that shapes or precipitates the peculiar themes and the flavour of Guyanese writing. This would make the Guyanese landscape itself a primary, yet a mysterious factor in the process and, in my own case, this is certainly true. Thinking back, it seems as though there have always been, for me, two magical possessions or obsessions: language and landscape. The sense that both belonged mysteriously to me and were vital to who and what I am led inevitably to the necessity to reconcile these two areas of experience. ‘Reconcile’ is not the right word — the need was to bring about more than an encounter or understanding (which itself appeared problematic) — it was to cause these two to interpenetrate and to interrogate each other. The question essentially was: what does the language that was shaping my mind have to do with the landscape that was also powerfully affecting my thoughts and feelings? In a sense this question is what much of Guyanese writing – particularly writing about the interior – is about.

And what is the answer to the question? I think one would have to say that the answer becomes irrelevant as the question continues to insist upon itself as question and to impose its imperatives on what one does and thinks. The answer can be any partial or provisional thing — any poem, novel, short story or play, but a definitive answer could only be the facile imposition of the kind of closure which would be a monstrous betrayal or failure. So the exploration and inter-penetration goes on and on.

The inevitable notion of which is ‘prior’, landscape or language, introduced for me the third obsession – also mentioned prominently by Robinson in his article, “Time”. And it is time that introduces the dread, the element of horror that balances the senses of boundless adventure and that mediates, perhaps, between landscape and language. A writer like Wilson Harris, it seems to me, insists on the full and bewildering complexity of these relationships, even to the point where language itself
(as representing mind, knowledge and understanding) is on the verge of breakdown. Most of us are too timid, perhaps, to follow Harris into those realms, though I think the work of many Guyanese writers shows awareness that this is where one is being led.

All this is an attempt to say something about what I think I was trying to do in *The Language of Eldorado* or in poems about interior landscapes in general: playing with notions of language, landscape and time in an attempt to clarify or understand their inter-relationships. But perhaps all that one does in this kind of exploration is to create a longer and more boring equivalent to any one of the relevant poems. To try and redress this shortcoming, I am going to read a couple of poems that have to do with all that I have been saying so far — you can judge which makes more sense, the explanation or the poem.

First I am going to read a poem called “Heartland” because it has to do with trying to capture something mysterious and elusive at the centre of landscape in terms of a language that is always inadequate.

*Heartland*

*We thought we had found it once*
*in a pool of resonant emerald*
*beneath an unnamed waterfall.*

*But who knows where, among the miles*
*of rotting and spawning green*
*is the smallest*
*of the concentric circles,*
*heart of growth or oblivion,*
*green heart or granite*
*— and how secure*
*from the bleak eye of God*
*blue beyond the leaves?*
*The shifting premises of hope*
wound the heart's certitudes,
as heartland swims eternally beyond place,
drowns in seas over the horizon,
hides down the path not taken when
a parrot snake shuffled across its leaves.

The heart's conception
and the heart's deception
may occur in the self-same place.
where movements in the undergrowth
are more than a fugitive breeze
but less than the breath of God.

Although it often seems we live
so that reason can erase
the numinous glyphs of love
inscribed in every landscape.
There is something there.
after all,
that is the central spider
in our web of dreams,
that weaves the net of Eldorado,
that launches the drunken boat...

There is something
other than the setting sun,
that catches the river afire.

This next one is called "Amakura" and I am reading it because
it has to do with what I have been saying about time – particularly
the pain of time that landscape seems to inflict.
Amakura

Spokes of dusty light
descended from a hub above the trees
and pierced the black skin
of the river. Twin engines
of wheel and water
created an interior space
where memory now blooms
like the smell of time
in long-shut rooms.

Blue butterflies stitched the rare sunlight
to the jealous gloom of the overhanging trees
that shaped your womb of silence:
thus visual simplicities constitute the reality
of rivers one must live by ...
the way all of life, sometimes,
is reflected in an orchid – or an eye.

Men, like vivid butterflies, must
end by losing themselves
in the density of thought that surrounds you,
like those men in the beginning
(of my time, not yours) whose crude oaths
broke your silence, not your spirit,
as they searched in vain
your dark veins
for signs of Eldorado.

Yet it can not be true
to speak of silence and of you
in that same breath that stalks
the surface of your dream, like a spider...
I have only to think
of Amakura, and your distant vowels
enter my soul (inter
my soul) – a cold seepage
from an old, old world – and help shape
my life-sentence: ever
to be apart
from your sacred sibilance
and the language of my heart.

I suppose that what one is thankful for – as I was trying to
say earlier in connection with Government funding these prizes –
in whatever it is in Guyana – in custom, in schooling and other
aspects of formation, that allowed us the privilege of perceiving
and exploring these areas of thought, experience and expression.

Of course these personal obsessions (that may or may not be
shared by most Guyanese writers) are only one aspect of what is
being recognised tonight. Another is the further establishment
and strengthening of a tradition of Guyanese Literature. If those
of us who are winners tonight can be said to have achieved
some current prominence, it is only because a previous
generation of writers toiled and suffered to create something we
can now call Guyanese literature.

Apart from a general indebtedness to that generation, I want
to acknowledge three Guyanese Writers whose works, I feel, are
always hovering about the margins of my own consciousness
when I set about writing anything; these are A.J. Seymour,
Martin Carter and Wilson Harris.

Seymour’s poems, which I began reading before I left school,
were magical; they showed me, not so much a new world, but
a way of evoking and expressing a world which I had already
glimpsed, of rivers, waterfalls, forests and Amerindian lore.
From poems such as “Amalivaca” and “The Legend of Kaieteur”
I learnt that it was possible to marry language to these landscapes
in a way that produced powerful feelings of sympathy and
identification, and I can never re-read one of my own poems
about rivers and waterfalls without hearing an echo of Seymour. Here is a poem called “The Native of Questions”, where the elements of river, mist, waterfall and sunlight bear witness to my own indebtedness to Seymour:

The Native of Questions

Mist on the morning river
summons a spirit of questioning
like the dawn of revolution,
as your paddle cuts water and space
like a knife of cold laughter
opening a vein of memory.

What place is this
whose shape the mist erases?
Can it ever be sculpted again
into the clarity of home?

What drums – no, what wings
are beating? And how can bird fly
to a perch no eye can see? – unless
the world’s weave is being unravelled
just for me.

What fire insinuates
its damp smoke into the mist?
Or is it all smoke?
Is the world’s flesh burning?

O God! O Heracleitus!
What can bone wrapped in smoke aspire to?
And who asks these questions?
– Is it I? Or you?
Later, when you look
for the native of questions
you find he has already become the answer
to a riddle that is irrelevant ...
as the bright dog of sunlight tears the morning mist
at the fiery brink of the waterfall:
your final comic twist.

From Martin Carter I learnt that there were fundamental political questions, having to do with the struggle for love and dignity and freedom, inscribed in all landscapes and that these could be summoned into startling prominence in the most ‘innocent’ of poems. I have not written many poems that are overly political, but I suppose I came closest to doing so in the final section of *The Language of Eldorado*, which is called *A Potaro Quartet*. Here is the final poem of this section – and of the volume – in which I refer to Carter as “the poet” at the very end.

**Gorge**

The kingfisher touches beaks
with its own reflection
in the river’s bending mirror
near the lip of the waterfall.
The bubbled vein of secrets hurries over
the edge, to be lost – or encoded –
in that unforgettable thunder.
But nothing is that clear from under,
from the gorge that could so easily
become a labyrinth of self; I
(the pronoun instantly betrays me)
continued to reach for metaphor
where I’ve always felt at home;
but could not read the writing
on that white, tumbling wall
before my eyes. Sound, I decided, must be all. So I heard again the kingfisher, its whirr of wing liberated by the black stones that sliced the coded column, translating it back to river. But then I could hear anything I listened for: my father’s voice, horses flashing past, the whispering dead, Bach’s B-minor mass...

That way lay madness, so I entered myself as labyrinth, as deep gorge of words waiting in ambush for the legions of the future. I flung a shibboleth, like a stone, to the foam-covered river, stepped over the white bones of a shaman disguised as the dead branches of a tree, and entered that inner country:

Heartland of the gorge
where river horses flashed past,
their cataracting manes
and tails of foam combed
by black teeth of stone.
that flowed back in time
to where the falls first began
gnawing their way up-river –
like that insufferable old man
who has chewed his long beard
for centuries and spat
wisps of wet hair into my gorge...

Takes me back to the time
I stood on the second-floor landing
and tried to pee into a mayonnaise bottle at the foot of the stairs:
‘Are you mad?’ were the only words my father said to me when I was hauled into his presence. I didn’t feel I could answer, so he turned back to his papers; but all my life I have heard that voice questioning my sanity, and I wonder if even death can reprieve me...

Dead people talk in whispers; I meet them in dreams and have to strain to hear their tales of woe. They have all been killed by their leaders; scholars, priests, pot-bellied wives and children – each has a bullet to show, or a gash in the side or yards of withered or poisoned gut; but worst of all is the whispering...

My country gorges itself on all like me, as this river subsists on rock and memory. Peace. A soft Sanctus from lips of the living somehow reaches me and hallows this place where I cling to the wet skirt of a waterfall: (despite the poet) all are not consumed. Not yet.

The title poem of *The Language of Eldorado* is dedicated to Wilson Harris and he is the Guyanese writer whose work haunts me most, in my capacities both as poet and as critic and teacher. I will not read the long title-poem, but rather a brief one called
"Invitation to Tender" which has to do, I think, with Harris's notion of the necessity to visualize and maintain the embrace of violently opposing forces or points of view. In his novel *Heartland* Wilson Harris has a remarkable image of love and hate as two clasped hands as follows:

_"Love and hate had been instructed to join painted hands, hands of arresting blood or fame, in a ferocious enigma... Unclasp them, out of altruistic pretensions, if one must at one's peril. For they were the stable (because unself-righteous) constitution one had set over one's untrustworthy self to restrain the wildest unimaginable panic in pursuit of the ghosts of longing and fantasy. Who could say how dangerously arrogant one might become if one followed one's purest instincts of absolute rage for good?* (Heartland, p.84)

For me this sums up the necessity for avoiding easy closure in the name of progress, understanding, clarity, whatever. In these days, for example, competing claims in Guyana between environmentalists who fret about turtles, heart-of-palm and deforestation and those who shout equally loudly about the need for jobs and the profitable exploitation of resources, Harris's image makes us see that whatever actually happens (and something must happen) a prime duty is to see and feel profoundly the pain of the conflicting positions which constitute the dilemma. This little poem that I am going to read is about that kind of pain and necessity and love:

**Invitation to Tender**

*(Project Eldorado, Phase I: Clearing the Site)*

Place your ear to the thick wall of my chest, gently – as on the rough bark of a tree; listen to what my lips can never tell: there is a deep down drum that beats for you and me.
Place your thin lips, like a scar,
upon my cheeks – crisp as dried leaves
clinging to their stalks;
and ask then why I close my eyes and sigh:
you are the place where my fevered spirit walks.

Put your arm around the trunk of my neck,
and remind me that the flesh is warm
like the breathed vowels of your name;
then if you feel me sway beneath your touch
imagine I am bending in the storm.

Then swing your axe above my planted feet,
savour each stroke that severs earth from sky;
let the pain of love pierce your wooden hands.
And it is not for me that you must weep
and it is not for you that I must die.

It is therefore because of writers such as Seymour, Carter
and Harris that there are four winners of the Guyana Prize for
literature here tonight. And it is because of a country, a landscape
and a people. It is my privilege and pleasure to acknowledge
these awards, in the name of Guyanese writers in the past and of
those to come. I thank you.
Poetry

DAVID JACKMAN

A Carib Remembers

In Arima Forests
we caribs knew
no columbus
no care
but that was a
long time ago.
We hunted, fished,
Manzanilla, Mayaro
was our playground.
Birds fluttered free
through forests pure
we caught lappe
agouti, manicou
made casareep
planted peacefully
ate drank slept
in this garden.
Then
the serpent entered
no hope
no happiness
no health
but slavery, misery.
The four horsemen
rode rough-shod
over our green fields.
Today,
our gardens are dry.
sweet water turned mud.
Diseases rakes the embers of the land.
The city – polluted – stinks like carrion,
crows crouch where kiskadees called
but there was a time when we caught crabs in the forests roamed Naparima free without fear.
An old carib remembers.
MICHAEL GILKES

Prospero's Island

1. Ferdinand

Shipwrecked,
following the arrows
of a Sandpiper's track,
on foot, prince
Ferdinand, cosmic cartographer,
checking the beach
for footprints,
screws the island
to his telescopic eye,
sets down his gyroscope.
Stretching the taut ropes
of his back
he reads the dial of the sun.
Sudden rain puckers the sand
marking, in braille,
his reading down.

"To make a sea change
you must seek beneath the surface.
You must drown".

Righting the spinning earth again
he stumbles on
watching worlds collide
in his mind's cyclotron.
2. *Miranda*

There, on the beach,  
all copper and cornsilk hair,  
the eyes a blur of blue,  
she might have been the girl  
on the brochure  
of this green, paradisal island.  
But mind, her mind has mountains  
where deep forests grow,  
liana-hung:  
another Eden where, as yet.  
no bird has sung.

It calls to her in dreams.  
She cannot go there yet.  
There’s too much needing  
to be done  
there, on the beach.  
Each day, sand to be swept,  
firewood to fetch:  
The island’s not the paradise  
it seems.

Lately,  
there have been storms  
and hammering seas,  
and she must run  
to comfort Caliban  
when he screams.
IAN McDONALD

Massa Day Done

Viv in a mood today, you only have to watch,
See the jaw grinding, he stabbing the pitch, back-lift big.
Look how he look down the wicket, spear in he eye,
He going to start sudden, violent, a thunder shock.
Man, this could be an innings! This could make life good.

You see how he coming in, how he shoulder relax,
How he spin the bat, how he look up at the sun,
How he seem to breathe deep, how he swing the bat, swing,
How he look around like a lord, how he chest expan'.
You ever see the man wear helmet? Tell me.
They say he too proud an' foolish.
Nah! He know he worth, my boy,
The bowler should wear helmet, not he.
Remember long this day, holy to be here. See him
Stalk the high altar o' the mornin' air.

You ever see such mastery in this world,
You ever see a man so dominate so?
This man don't know forebearance,
He don't know surrender or forgive.
He lash the ball like something anger him
Look how the man torment today!
He holding the bat, it could be a axe.
Look how he grinding he jaw again, my boy.
Look how he head hold cock an' high
And he smile, he gleam, like a jaguar.
Don't bring no flighty finery here, it gone!
Bring the mightiest man, he proud, Viv husk he. 
He always so, he stay best fo’ the best.

I tell you, he smile like he hungry
You ever see this man caress?
He pound the ball, look at that, aha!
Like he vex, he slash, he pull, he hook,
He blast a way through the cover man,
He hoist the ball like a iron ball
Gone far and wild, damaging the enemy.
It be butchery today, bat spill blood,
He cut like he cutting hog on a block
Nobody could stop he in that mood.

That mood hold he, Oh God, it feel good!
It bite he, the foe turn tremble,
Men step light, nervy, far, danger all about.
Almighty love be there! Almighty love, my boy.
We know he from the start, one o’ we.
Something hurt he bad, you could see,
As if heself alone could stop we slavery!

Homecoming
(For Brian Lara)

There was such a mass of people,
There was so much joy.
We stood in the sun for hours.
Sweat-soaked, hungry, happy.
A gust of rain came, we exulted.
As first there was a barrier
But that broke, a surge of people
Flooded to the platform’s foot.
I was carried in that surge,
Jostling for position, good humoured,
Police just part of the crowd.

The whole world echoed with his fame.
He was ours: we waited to consume him,
Feed on his Glory in these thin times.

We roared when the young prince came,
We threw our hands high in praise:
The crowd had a full throat!
Everyone was in good voice, some singing.
Everything vivid, a bird soaring, black ant on the skin.
This was when life gathers and unfolds
At a wedding, a birth, a deliverance.

He said a few simple words:
It was from God the runs came,
It was for everybody, not him alone.
A few more words he said,
That he was glad,
He had done it for his father, for his mother, for us.
He thanked us, it was a blessing.
He waved the bat, full of the sweetness of those runs!

What a glory to be there!
We drifted away in our sodden clothes.
Heavy with tiredness, satisfied.
We walked into our other lives.
Kiren Shoman

Once a Week With Rag or
Three Ducks Syndrome

You suffocated me.
Became a choker
Around my neck
You disguised my
originality
Made me one
among many
Left me hollow
and raw
Like the tiniest
Of the three
flying ducks on
your wall,
plastic
and dusted once a week.
LUIS POMALES

Concordia Street

When we were children
we used words or actions
like all children do,
most of the time not knowing
what they meant: ahh, eso es un bili,
was something easy to accomplish.
We didn’t know where it came from,
we simply used it, fashionably.
“Cruz y raya debajo del culo ‘el caldero’,”
I’ll never speak to you again-indifference
that didn’t last too long.
Spitting on the floor or pavement and
stepping on it, dragging one’s foot:
the worst insult upon your mother.
The other day, reading about West Indian Heritage, I hit upon
one of my favourites: Tu eres un riff-raff,
riff-raff, ok?,
elegantly, I would throw it upon my
adversaries, from a certain distance, of course,
ready to run, if they were stronger than I was.
It was meant as an insult.
Just in case you don’t know, it means: worthless or
disreputable element of society; trash,
but we never really hurt one another then,
an hour later we were in the mountains
sharing mangoes or eating guavas and
getting stung by bees,
or swimming naked in the river.
It was a time of innocence
that will never return.
Cecil Gray

Spinning Tops

Some afternoons after school we spun our tops on the road; some bought, most were home-made out of guava wood and spined with fat, horied nails.

Up from the point the cord was tightly wound around the cone, then lined along the middle of the palm so thumb and index finger fixed it to the hand. The great thing aimed for was the mastery of the swing and arc of arm to bring the north-south axis upside down square to the ground and sharply whip the string away pulling with speed to where your left leg stood to feel that skilful exercise in grace.

To see your top dig in the pitch and swerve, then settle upright to go to sleep and sing before you flicked it on your palm and cradled it humming there to tilt it over and knock your rival skidding, reeled lines of satisfaction to our minds, such as the sparks of victories later on could never equal. They made us pray perfection's curve will bend to anchor what we do, guiding our hands from all things mediocre.
Triptych

1
My mother, Lillian, was silken black, proud as if she wore some tribal honour queens in her great-grandfather’s Africa were bedecked with. Pain’s mock counterattack. She was called Dolly, the name they gave her when someone said she looked like a baby doll just born. But that face stirred up weather that pitched her adrift, a lost refugee. So she kept singing *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* and *Blue Moon* through all the years that her skies gathered its storm clouds. She would croon and plait her woolly hair just as if a combat was not raging. She kept squeezing from life all it yielded from days blackened with strife.

2
The hall was crowded with the talk that came from female versions of Cab Calloway and Step’n Fletchit. Ironed hair the same death-hood worn to perform in Jim Crow’s play, forced by hot combs to lie un-African as it could. Words skittered round about black roots as the source of ethnic pride. Auburn wigs wagged yes as Madame Pompadours clacked about identifying with one’s race. Hairdos were styled to sway down to shoulder length. Bangs on foreheads fringed over the face. From childhood ‘bad hair’ hatched a clawed stigma that still pecked at black pride like carrion. But skins, unpressed, stayed dark silk, African.
3
In towns like this you are always retaught if you're black facts you might have forgotten. For instance, why your forefathers were brought out of Africa. You hear the lesson from guns the police ease from their holsters as soon as your hair is seen, and in stores you are followed by eyes like a mobster staging a hold-up. At such times real laws are enforced. Those who beat kangaroo courts of the mind use stun guns of scorn to beam rays that jolt those lynchers. That is what thwarts bullets that still make enslavement their theme. Plaits wove the pride that adorns that story. Irons recoil from curls of dignity.

Ole Talk
One of those arm-chair dons sitting on his expertise was telling us all that the island was doing wrong. He was getting a Ph.D in an unknown American college. The rum made him sound good. Later on a woman from some agency that used the word aid, i.e. trade in favour of the U.S, criticised our attachment to Carnival. It was really a nice lime. Plenty ole talk like true-true philosophy passing around. As long as the rum kept flowing
the chaser was words. The Ph.D student thought he impressed us and the agency woman was ready to tell Washington how deep was the opposition to the Government. We give them enough basket to carry water, like we stupid. Neither one catch on that after the liquor eyes bound to clear. She would take the blue shape of a jab-jab, whip and all. He would look like a clown dress up in Uncle Sam. Next morning more laughter would spill on all that phony erudition they spit out at us. Though some remain fond of the lash and would stay pupils of tutors that tell them children need guardians to look after their national interests.

*Drums*

(For Edward Kamau Brathwaite)

We now hear every throb on the skins of the drums but only because you pounded them out in words of poems that made the sounds come across from Kumasi, Tano, Takoradi, from Aburi, Tekyiman, and Axum beating over the Passage to the ears of these islands.
Orisha and Ogun were shackled
in corners of mine
though sometimes their drums
rioted out of the silence
stuffed into their mouths
to gag them. We acted deaf.
On still ominous nights
the masks and the rites
menaced what was called progress.
In hideouts down Moruga
Yoruba priestesses
put on their robes
but long guns of the law
reached for their heads.
So we strummed on cuatros
and guitars instead
as if Venezuelan,
Cuban and Brazilian sambas
and the thump of tamboobambo stomping out calypso
bass rhythms did not beat
the bronze of Benin.

So when the poems
undulated from Chad, Mali, Volta
they brought nothing new
to the shores of my island, but
reopened blocked channels
to the boats of the Niger.
You, who left your isle’s coral
soil’s shallow layers of history,
an emigrant searching a womb
of the past to re-enter,
commanded we listen
to what we had heard
when the blood called us.

We hear and acknowledge.
The onoborobo orders
all of the tribe to gather.
From paved-over middens
where we once buried
goatskins and golden stools
we draw out bodom beads
and wear them to dance
the adowa. Everywhere now
Odomakoma is answered.

You hoed the ground smooth
for the feet to rejoice
so at each celebration
we bring you libations,
though they are only as pure
as the sperm dropped in the canefields
has left them.
SIDNEY ALLCOCK

Missing

The evening was late and lonely
But the sun was in all its glory
I sat spellbound on the hills of Rupertee
Admiring the natural Rupununi beauty
Around me the rolling green and yellow savannah land
To the east of me the majestic Makarapan
Away into the distant south the mighty blue Kanuku
And beautified by the sunset the well known Pakaraimas too
As I sat there soliloquizing
It dawned on me that something was missing.

As I gazed away into the Rupununi evening
I focussed my mind on some good reasoning
Visible for miles was the dusty old trail and crisscrossing tracks
The few ranch houses and empty corrals seem now only to be shacks
No vacqueiros on the great plain doing their normal chores
Of riding, lassoing or singing their regular Yehoes!
All that was moving were donkeys fighting!
So sickening
Something was missing
Physically missing.

While staring over this vacqueiro range
The idea of missing cattle seemed so strange
Can you imagine that cattle were missing!
The famous Rupununi cattle herds slowly diminishing
I remembered the good old days from Dadanawa to Takama
Chasing thousands of cattle over this famous savannah
Now there are only occasional carcasses bleached by the weather
Here and there on the great plain might be a lonely tired rider
Oh Rupununians! Gone are the cattle days
No more bellowing, horse riding, lassoing or happy old ways.

The twilight, missing cattle and hideous braying saddened the evening
The distant hooting of owls and moaning wind against hills left me grieved
I wondered, could it be Politics and Development?
Or was it rustling and poor management?
The cattle were gone, gone over the border
And here is where we can search and no further
Over hills, throughout valleys or on the plains
Through night, sunshine or in the rains
Here I’ll roam and here I’ll remain
Determined to rear cattle once again!
Reading you, over a book in the shade,
I see you pelting your cutlass,
black cubital veins in the sun,
spiff dangling from your mouth,
keeping the garden sweet for Madam
(as you call her), my wife’s grandmother.

I remember yesterday when I asked you your age.
What kinda man is he that don’t know his own age?
I am Wellington Sir, 64, of Scarborough, Trinidad and Tobago. True true.
Then you laughed and said, Is okay, follow me.
You picked a mango – give this one to your Lady –
showing me the difference between starch and Julie mangos,
and how to look for that very special mango,
the one you don’t pick: The Jack Spaniard.

Today you tell me how you would go under as a fisherman,
your little boy-old man smile glimpsing the ocean.
Stay under for a long time boy, long time man,
face growin’ green green, you say wiping your brow,
but that was in younger days.
Can I get you a drink, a Carib? I ask.
Is okay, you say, pointing to your knife by a coconut,
trimming the frangipani, flamboyant and oleander
with spear power of triceps.

And I go back to my chair and read my book.
The aloe vera is omnipotent in your hands.
You look at a man-o’-war in the blue sky and say,
It looks like rain, an’ wet too.
You use that half hour of rain to boil pigeon peas
and papaya, with sapodilla plums for desert.

And my wife and I,
we shop for groceries at Miracle Mart.
DENISE GRAY-GOODEN

Generation Trap

It occurs to me
I am relieved to be
no longer prime
meat no longer
worthy prey
for those ejaculating eyes.

I must admit
I'll happily forfeit
the stares
from grinning 14Ks
as the crotch crusaders
set their sites
on fresher targets
than I
with far less cellulite.

Measuring

Measuring
measuring and pouring
out
a life
from cup
to cup
not measuring
up
to your mark.

But
I am no
practised formula.
no one's
scale or currency
I am no
right proportion
no exact measure
marked on
your perfect glass.
The way they told it was like legend, this Ti-Maru, a one-eyed hop-an-drop old man, reeking of rum, his mash-mouth twisted out of speech, appeared one afternoon unknown and unannounced, to bush the hill behind the house. Down in the town they’d sworn this place curse bad, and none would come to clear the bamboo off the slope no matter how much cash in hand “and too besides,” they said “it steep like mountain side, bush thick as hell!” But the ol’ man just jump right off the deck with his machette and start to hack, the jungle was reclaiming back that view developers had charged such thousands for but Ti-Maru was more than match for it, he hack and tramp and weave himself a floor of cut bamboo to reach the outer stems; he work like frenzy, like he possess, he took no res for water or for food. But then the bees swarm, big and black and fierce, African bees, angry too, his cutlass mus a cut their nest right through, they sting him bad bad, in his face, his mouth, his hands – and there was nothing we could do.
we couldn’t get down there, we couldn’t fight the bees off anyhow. The ol’ man he just roll up in a ball and scream – some ugly noise like nothin else you ever heard –

and sob him sobbin after – we thought he dead right then an there but, when they lef him finally he body start to crawl towards the house till we could haul him out.

Then straight we knew him had to dead soon soon, although we rush him into town, to hospital. The nurse jus look at him and strups, could see she thought he didn’t stand a chance.

But when we check next afternoon he’d gone. just up an lef that mornin, couldn hear to be inside, she said, and strups again. We checked all round the town – till then

we didn’t even know his name – but Alphonse in the rumshop knew. “That’s Ti-Maru okay,” when we described him, “he used to go prospecting in the bush ‘round Mon Jemmie. He’s lived out there for years, it send him mad folks say.
He was a big man once, whole and strong and liked his women. No-one seem to know what happened to his eye, his mouth, his rotten foot.

but he still strong for true. An him can drink, boy, he came in here one night las week an nearly drink us dry, rum boy, jus’ straight white rum. Is then he mus have heard about
your bush. The boys was sayin, I suppose, how your place curse, an though he mutter sof till then he roar burs’ out like thunder with bad word, say how they don’t know what is curse

at all, an how he livin in the hills with every kinda ghost and spirit and jumbie ting as they is small boys to fear some ol’ womans’ foolishness about your yard. An then he start
to preaching on bout visions an how Death come by that very morning – like a black cloud screaming his name. he said – coming to claim him. So he ran, all hop-an drop, down into town
to hide an drink an make his peace, somehow. And then he gone...” We left his money with Alphonse, and some besides, and a message asking him to please come by. But no-one saw old Ti-Maru again.

The bush engulfs the house on every side.
JACQUELINE de WEEVER

Fires

(Jill’s Dream)

We stir the stew
on the top of the stove;
to our cook-up rice
we add the spice
of our treasure trove
of talents, and brew
our natural gifts,
unthinking of the seismic shifts.

The brew, strong and rich,
explodes. The fires
compel our flight
into the dark night;
consume the desires
like lighted pitch.
hidden long in childhood’s place,
showing only childhood’s face.

The flames climb higher, red as blood;
We flee, to claim our womanhood.
Requiem:
The Feast of The Holy Innocents

Killed in their sleep
while they lie in the street
bloody rags barely
shroud small bodies
bellies now and ever empty.
The Brazilian police
moonlight as “garbage men,”
sweep the streets of urchin
thieves whose sorcery
demolishes magically
the shopkeepers’ money.

The slaughter of innocents
by twentieth-century
efficient machinery
Herod could never conceive.

The sniper in the hills
sights his gun on the hunt:
children laugh, not taking heed,
in their play, on the street;
his bullets with unerring speed
split the boisterous Bosnian games;
bicycles twist in their frames,
the blood runs red,
seven children dead;
their mothers’ keen
rattles the TV screen.

The slaughter of innocents
by twentieth-century
efficient machinery
at dinnertime there’s no reprieve.

The faces of these moon children
pitted by the maggots of famine
brown cheeks pale and shrunken
moon cratered black eyes open,
bellies daubed with muddy mire,
legs and arms are fuel sticks,
ready for unholy fires.
Children heat the sacrifice
in Somalia to men’s pride;
Pools of sorrow flood their eyes
now a nesting place for flies.

The slaughter of innocents
is not only Herod’s sin;
Moloch lives, it seems, forever,
a present god of greedy power.

Children fired to men’s ambition,
a coffined giddiness
a sarcophagus in readiness
to hide the rot within.
Dead little bodies still can speak:
Do not repeat. Do not repeat.
SASENARINE PERSAUD

Postcard to a Sister in South America

This lilt of light in rain
clouds swarming sun over woods
bleached of leaves except the spruces’
sticking of sky in answer to rusting
oaks remaining willows ripening
like August oranges bowing down
limbs catching blessings of finch
kiskadee blue-sakie bunting

This lilt of light in last night’s
cotton wicks in oil in diyas
marking Ram’s return to Awadh
with his bride — yes the waiting
for the last jay-calls to go south
sparrows chirping chickadees tweeting
the tip of the days of the long nights

To meet again off Karahi-holed roads
clasping the dust from wings of sugar
cane stalks the thousand limbed coconuts
swirling Shiva’s dance over browntongued
creeks nipping the ocean your sons celebrate
not this lilt of autumn light; the blooded
childhood sunshine of cannotleavebehind.
STANLEY GREAVES

Dream of Demerara

In my land
No known ghosts walk.
Our history
Is but a strange wind
That leaves no mark
Upon the sea.
Even monsters dwell elsewhere
In another safe place
Where victims know themselves.

De Profundis

Today,
I did not go
To the ocean.
Instead,
It came to me
Somehow
Through tears.
No sorrow.
No joy.
Nor else
Save that they came.

Boats and feelings
Should have only sails
and a wish
Elemental,
As flags and arrows.

Uncle John

Through the window
By your bed.
I see stunted sorrel plants
Fight the tight yellow earth.
I listen out of time
As your child-voice
Grown out of manhood.
Reaches some trite memory
Taut as a kitestring.

It was here
In your somnolent room.
I learnt companionship
Is many things.
The commonplace
Has a point.
JOHN FIGUEROA

Windows

Chartres: Outer and Inner Space
A Consort of Six Variations

I
Suppose the windows whirled
to us from other spaces, ships
of the sea and air that seek
safe harbour.

Steady now
they draw us through tiny roots
from hardened lumps of clay
to transparencies that vortex out
to outer space — their colours
whirl us, reviving all our dreams,
concentrating our minds,
subliminating all our fears
through visions of the sky,
and blood, and pallid Spring.
and Autumn of the gold and yellow furnaces
aglow with molten rage, and violet
that dreams us back to peace.

The wafer melts upon the tongue,
the glass upon the eyes,
and through the blood and brain
collects us to a wheel that moving stays
and staying spins us out
to inner space
across the threshold
to a steady centre:
Mother revolving round her Child,  
Her Child at the breast;  
all tilting, looping forward  
stitching time's waves with peace,  
weaving us into a silence that  
revolves upon itself —  
music forever returning to its dawn—  
turning and steady like Da Vinci's  
St Ann and Virgin and Child;  
like tropic stars about the Pole  
like a woman hearing the deep  
silence of her child, and the silence of the seas,  
like anyone listening  
to a rounded deep  
silence speaking...

II

Think not that these rose windows  
Chanced to be  
Like Venus from the sea  
In naked beauty born.

Lifted above the pond  
I saw the stirring of the waters  
The bubbles whirling to a bond  
Of petals, dancing like younger daughters.

From disquiet in the deep  
The disk turned to the light;  
I saw the vortex spinning up the steep  
Subaqueous mountains seeking frame  
Of stone which holds the windows tight  
Harbouring us who whirl in the night.
III
Round curved green
Flat red square
Breast grey smooth

Hard pink tight
Hole green deep
Brief red place

Curved smooth green
Tight pink place
Deep round green

IV
Windows colour coded
green for hope and red for blood.
Christ so green so red
call me up from the dead.

Now before I die
I’m finding that I am dead
Christ so green, Christ so red
raise me up from the dead.

Whence the colours of the windows?
Have you not seen the sky
the seas, the seas,
the golden fall of leaves

the distant hills in purple clothed

(And Christ in Roman motley mocked?)

Have you not seen the sky
the seas, the seas
and blood upon the thieves?
Christ so green so red

O raise me up from the dead.

V
And now the windows hang
from space to inner space
a measured sublimination of dreams
and tumblings into visionary grace...

VI
Spin the wheel and spin the wheel
that steady on its centre point
skips off from Time's gentle moorings
and edges through the dark
a disk a discus thrown and sparking at
its edge, against the granite dark.
a burst, a constant burst of stars.

Spin the wheel
turning, returning still

(the notes return and music turns
turns back on self, returns
to close the cycle.

Steady like Da Vinci's
St Ann and Virgin and Child,
they too are whirling, arms and feet.
the trills that take the music round
that spin us out to inner space.)

And spin the Autumn leaves,
whirl up and down the mountain roads
into a wheel: the purple, brown.
the gold, the green and crimson, whirl
a wheel that spinning shapes
the spaces that turn, return
the scattered glimpses into stained
glass windows holding up
the bouncing ways of time,
recycling sand and mud and coloured trees
to spin the mind away
out to inner spaces.

And Chartres holds the glass
up like a wafer, glowing us
to another world.

A wafer melts
upon the tongue; and windows on
the eyes; we arise to
a world of silence and
images tuning into stillness,
and still in place until they whirl
us through the vortex where we spin
by tiniest cracks
into illumination;

where we kick
the gassy earth away and find
our inner galaxies
through the whirling of the wheel
the spinning of these windows till
they seem not to move
like the stillness
in painting, as
they gather up their breath
to dance away
and with delicate rim
spark off from distant branches a burst of leaves,

of Autumn leaves;

From the inner dark a blaze of blossoms.

A still exploding wheel of stars.

NicolGri9f1h
(age 14 years)

The Falling Star

I saw a star slide down the sky
Blinding the North as it went by
Too lovely to be bought or sold
Too burning and too quick to hold
Good only to make a wish upon
and then forever to be gone.

* This poem won a prize in the Young Poets of Guyana competition sponsored by the Commonwealth Trust, inaugurated in December 1995.
Once upon a time there was a woman who had three children. Their names were Primanbutania, Mini-Mini and Quaacootanoo.

Primanbutania and Mini-Mini, as their names tell, were two very pretty girls. Quaacootanoo, though was a very ugly son. He had a big head, dull narrow eyes, large teeth which his lips could not cover, marks all over his face, very thin arms and two thin legs with over-sized knees.

The mother hated Quaacootanoo and wished that he would die. She often fed her two pretty daughters and left him hungry. At feeding time she would say in a song: “Mini-Mini” come here, Primanbutania come here, Leh Quaacootanoo one stay dere”.

It really made Quaacootanoo sad, to see his sisters scamper off to eat, while he remained hungry. His mother often fed him much later or not at all. Then, if he was given no food, he stole from the pot or the basket. She beat him when he stole. If she did not beat him, she punished him in some other way.

One day, Quaacootanoo stole bread from the basket, because he was very hungry. His angry mother beat him and locked him in a room. For one week, she threw him bits of bones or other left-over food.

She let him out, when she peeped in and saw that he was nearly dead. Yet, she felt no pity for him. She gave him some food, but ordered his sisters not to play with him.

This woman and her children lived near a forest. Her husband worked far away and was hardly ever at home.

One day a very hungry jaguar, searching for food came close to the house and hid in a nearby bush. Then the jaguar heard the
woman sing this song:

"Mini-Mini come here, Primanbutania come here, Leh Quaacootanoo one stay dere".

The Jaguar’s ears stood, as he listened and listened. The woman sang the song thrice to spite Quaacootanoo but, by then, the jaguar had learnt it and was singing it to himself. He had also caught the woman’s voice; so he sang softly to himself, again and again.

After the woman and her daughters had eaten, she gave Quaacootanoo the scraps. Then she locked him in a room, kissed her daughters goodbye and left for the market. The market was many miles away. Getting there, usually took her a long, long time.

After she left, Mini-Mini and Primanbutania played in the house.

The jaguar had not left. He looked carefully around him. Then he moved cautiously towards the house. Sometimes, he stopped to look around him. Sometimes, he dropped his body lower to the ground. In a short while, he was under the house. Then, he climbed the steps, slowly and quietly, ever so slowly and quietly. Once at the top, he began to sing: “Mini-Mini come here, Primanbutania come here, Leh Quaacootanoo one stay dere”.

The girls heard the familiar song and stopped their play. It surprised them that she had returned so soon, but they were glad that she had. They rushed to the door and opened! And the hungry jaguar grabbed them both and took them away. They screamed, but not for long.

The mother returned from the market, many hours later. She saw blood in the yard! She rushed up the steps and saw blood there too! She felt the strong silence. Her heart beat quickly, but she calmed herself and sang her song.

There was no reply of running feet to open the door. Instead, there was another song:

"Mini-Mini done wid, Primanbutania done wid, Only Quaacootanoo one deh here".
She realised that something dreadful had happened! She fainted where she stood.

When she recovered, she managed to break the door. She sadly let her ugly son out. With tears in her eyes, she hugged him, as if she would never let him go.
On the north eastern tip of the Lesser Antillean island, tucked in among curves and juts of dry, hilly land, land sometimes green in clumps and patches, a house stands atop stone pillars and looks out to sea. It was built against a bank carved out of the earth so the house could be cool and shaded close to the earth. Level with the house’s roof there are trees and their land slopes upward to bushes and other trees that almost hide a wire fence. The grass between is scrubby and crackles underfoot. The dry season is ending. There are inclinations on the smooth, white roof so that half-cylindrical plastic drains lining the edges can collect rain water and direct it to the cistern under the house. The house belongs to my cousin Paul. I come here to write.

From the roofed balcony of Paul’s house, an area where wooden green walls of horizontal planks and varnished wooden pillars – an extension of the stone ones below – supporting the roof dominate, I can see small islands sitting on the blue sea. Apart from the north eastern tip of one, they are untouched, looking as they did, I imagine, when they had adjusted to the atmosphere after being pushed up out of the sea. The “touched” part of that one island, the biggest one visible, Crump Island, is a scar of white earth, made by some idiot who ripped the green away for some resort idea he had. I thankfully cannot see it from Paul’s house. But if I go along the driveway with the scented plum tree shadowing part of the driveway closest to the house, the part where it widens circularly and is laden with dark grey gravel and rotting plums – if I pass that, and walk toward the dull-green gate at the end, then continued through onto the road turning inland left, I’ll come to a hill whose top allows me to see
the scar.

Paul, who is on holiday for six weeks with his wife Monique, has two dogs. Ojay, the younger, a white Alsatian, was capricious, even growling, at first, but I spent time with her each time I came here so now she tolerates me. Whiskey, a fat, sensual Dobermann pincher whose coat has faded to copper on his underside and pale chocolate on his back, whose ears are loose and floppy, is gregarious — always was — and old. He relies on Ojay to keep watch on things in the distance and joins her rarely. Ojay is playful, rushing blue-grey herons that feed on little crabs and fish on the shore-line. The herons break into the air when Ojay changes, and she looks after them, a front paw raised, her ears at their straightest while she whines, as if regretting the evolutionary path her species followed.

Tied to Paul’s jetty are three boats. One belongs to his brother, and is called Miss Lisa. It’s a biggish boat, the kind used for deep-sea fishing, with a hood on top, two powerful outboard Yamaha engines, and aerials. Blue and white, it points east, as do all the boats. The next boat is Paul’s – a Boston Whaler called Rumrunner, also blue and white and much smaller than Miss Lisa. Paul’s boat has a light, sharp look as it sits on the water. Once the Boston Whaler picks up speed and the bow levels off — maybe I’m going to the island near Water Heaven (an expanse of super-clear blue water where the sand is salt white), the island where there are stranded llamas because of a deal some local and American men attempted — the Boston Whaler skims over the water like a flying fish. Not used to the climate, the llamas have been dying. And with the area for many miles around becoming vacuous due to building storm-systems, hardly a breeze during the days, and the great heat upon the land, I think the llamas when they die, die with relief.

The other boat tied to Paul’s jetty is a small, wooden rod-boat. No one seems to use it anymore. Perhaps the night watchman is the owner. He arrives at four-thirty every afternoon to feed Whiskey and Ojay. An old man, he walks with a limp
and keeps upright. He has white hair and has told me Paul said I
can stay nights whenever I wish, sleeping upstairs if I wish, eating
food, and using the television. Such a generous offer leaves me
guilty: I have not made my life into something yet.

(Later, swimming off the jetty with snorkel and face mask,
doing a comfortable free-style and seeing the life below, the
thought of allowing myself to feel that kind of guilt will seem
silly: Paul is much older than twenty-eight.)

There are mornings when it’s difficult to work. At the
eleven-foot long table on the western side of the balcony, next to
the corner of the green wall, the corner that enables me to see the
sea and islands, the shadowy stretches of reefs by the islands,
and the lighter greens and blues of the close sea, the hardships
encountered in the work discourage me. Have I overstepped
myself? Is there something else at which I would be better
suited? At these times the colours of the land and sea, the quality
of light and the reflection of sky, and the massive expanse of sea
(nothing between here and Africa), help to connect me to a part
of myself with which I’m uneasy. A part which too infrequently
gives me faith.

The swimming occupies an hour in the late afternoons. To
swim earlier is dangerous, the news stations in the States have
said. Added to that there was a documentary my sister
mentioned she’d seen in London about the high increase in
skin cancer. Do the work and be careful, she’d said. I am doing
both.

The watchman’s arrival to feed the dog, around the time I go
swimming, and the occasional airplane and boat in the distance, are
the only distractions. The others are welcome ones. Birds, dark
and brown with short arrow-head shaped beaks, a dab of red on
their chests, visit the wooden, planked railing on the balcony;
some alight on the long table I sit at. They have a high-pitched
chirp, and sometimes I’m startled. Ojay appears then, giving a
quick bark and stare as they fly off to the plum tree by the
driveway.
Humming-birds, too, are frequent visitors. These have tiny, sabre-like beaks and are the colour of dark jade and dark emeralds. Their minute feathers shine as if drips of glistening oil had been delicately rubbed onto their chests and heads. Whirring sounds from their blurred wings. It’s that quiet here, now that the pre-storm weather has come. When there’s breeze, and the bougainvillaea rustles dry leaves and waves bunches of red and peach flowers to bounce against each other, I can’t hear them; but today, like most days, grants it. How dry the air is when breezed, though; often all I feel is the heat in it, sinuous and engulfing.

One day a humming-bird meandered through the bougainvillaea growing above the barbecue pit beneath the western side of the balcony. I was sitting at the umbrella-shaded table on the porch whose steps come up from the circular part of the driveway. The porch is an open area, the floor is concrete and rectangular, and sometimes I sit there because the sea distracts me; not that I can’t see it from here: I simply don’t see the horizon before me, just one island and its edges of mangrove. I was sitting there one day and saw the humming-bird hovering among the bougainvillaea blossoms. It lacked the dart-like movements peculiar to humming-birds. The movements were in slow-motion and the wings didn’t whir as fast as they should have. The bird seemed barely aloft, barely gripping the fragrant, soft-red air of the bougainvillaea. At moments it rested with a weary look, the sabre-like beak cast down, the minute feathers without glossiness. Then I saw the small, tired, dark eyes, the nearly imperceptible lolling of the head and, for a humming-bird, the dishevelled fold of wings. Soon, though, it was back in the air, resuming feeding in slow-motion and still managing the precise insertion of its beak into the bougainvillaea flowers.

Paul’s jetty begins with earth, with sudden slopes of rocks on the sides. That ends after thirty or so feet and then a wider piece of jetty starts, made of concrete and lined in planks of greenheart angled upwards. The nails holding the planks onto the edges of the jetty are roughly rusted, and in some places the planks, if you
stand on them, will angle the other way, pulling the nail up and tipping you into the sea. I was standing on a plank one morning two months ago, Monique by my side. Paul was in the house and it was Sunday. My aunt and her husband and one of their two children, Robby, were in the boat. The boat was Rumrunner and Rumrunner had steering trouble, so my aunt’s husband was in the stern, while Robby took things from me. I’d put my foot on a plank and staggered; Monique grabbed my arm and apologised, then explained. Greenheart. I thought it would have lasted longer, she’d said. Still, it’s been there for quite some time. Trees don’t grow like they used to. And she smiled.

I didn’t think of Monique’s words then, only now, alone on the balcony where Paul and Monique offered wine, cheese, and German sausage after the return from Water Haven and viewing the llamas – only now do I remember her words. And during the quiet approach of twilight, the sea current angling in past Paul’s house, Monique’s words surface more and more with meaning. The solitude here, the selection of blues, greens, and greys of the sea undulating towards me, and the shades of green on the land, permit my mind to fall into itself. Like a map the past unfolds for leisurely examination, and all the truth, as I received it, is sighted with a clarity which silence, solitude and time are responsible for.

On the sea once, twice a week, a wind-surfer’s sail-end flaps and I look up from my book or writing to see a boy leaning beneath the oblique wing, the bulge of air firm in a red, yellow, and purple sail. He moves swiftly and I feel regret: I never learned to do it, there had always been time, long ago; always the assurance that one day the time would come when the opportunity would be given in a mood to my liking. Now, I’ve seen the foolishness, the absolute trickery, youth is capable of. A wonder I was so ignorant then.

The young man out there against the blue and on the blue is between sixteen and twenty years old. And with further ignorance I think I’ve missed the right time; that youth of his
kind is a requirement for the joy he is having. His age, I feel, is the
time a genuine passion is possible for windsurfing, a passion that
will sustain him and his windsurfing for many years.

The windsurfer fades away and I continue my work. The
hard light has gone; the late afternoon is soft on the islands, hills
and sea. The tints are more to my liking, and I wonder whether
it’s because I am getting older. The descent of light to twilight,
and the sea becoming crepuscular before the sky, the sea
reminding me of what the sky will do, causes the mood of bright
daylight to depart. The world is different. At the end of the jetty,
I collapse into cool, clear-green water. This colour lasts until fifty
or so feet. After that blue takes over, a warm, close blue, made
close by the sand drifting in on the current coming from the north
east, from where West Africa is. The particles bunch to light up
around me, making it visually impenetrable beyond seven feet.
But the blue remains vivid, and the impression I am swimming
in an immense aquamarine is not too vague.

On certain days the current is not strong. The blue spreads out,
dipping away into depths I feel a desire to explore but don’t. I
swim in six feet of water, sometimes eight or four. The nearest
point is three hundred yards away. The sound of my breathing
through the snorkel is as familiar as the splashes my arms make.
I’ve been doing this every afternoon for two months, and the
results are good: I sleep better, have fewer nightmares, and more
pleasant dreams. My work has improved. The opportunities of
Paul’s house made life richer while at the same time showing the
accomplishments left. I have to finish writing the dissertation. I
have to make a living somehow beginning in one and a half
years. But seeing how the economies of the world operate, seeing
how they devour the dignity of nations and peoples, of families,
individuals, the disquietude of my labour being done for a
broken world, a world which may have no use for it, stills my
enthusiasm.

A blue and white fish, the blue a denser one than what
I’m swimming in and sweeping up from the fish’s belly to fade
into the silver dominating the top, curves out of another, hidden blue. It circles in front, mocking my progress embedded in the surface, a sheet of white light marking the edge of its world. Nearer, the thin teeth are noticeable, pointing upwards on the outside of the mouth; a deformed grin. The fish is large and acting like an aquatic vulture. In two months I’ve seen much marine life – barracuda, sting-rays, leopard rays, parrot fish, eels, and copious others – including sea-centipedes, crusty-brown, ridged, lethal-looking lengths of Chilopoda – and most behaved normally.

Further on orange star-fish, settled on the vegetation below, appear about one every fifteen feet. Their undersides are a canescent yellow; the pimply bumps on the top of the tentacles and in the centre look like neat, tiny mountain ranges in reddish sunsets. Down the middle of each arm (underside) there are short feelers, with tiny suction-cup tips, lining the sides of a long thin opening, a series of mouths. The arms tighten but do not fold as I bring one to my mask. The design of their arms, how they taper to a blunt point from the thick centre, engages me; and the delicate, precise movements of the feelers, as they sense the sunlight and then recede with a quick, tucking-in movement into a cluster. I hold the star-fish halfway between surface and bottom and let go. The creature sinks, parachuting with five extended limbs, rocking from side to side, and I catch it after a couple of feet, resting its small hard protrusions in my palm. Then I deliver the starfish to where I found it.

On my right mangrove reaches into the water in curved forks. The water is green there, clear still, and calmer. Where I’m swimming the wind is bouncing on the water, making wavelets which abstract the passage of air through the snorkel and the rhythm of my arms. I clear the snorkel with a furious spurt of air and kick harder, concentrating on my arms, too determined today to get the burning sensation in my heart and shoulders that gives the deep body peace I’ve become addicted to. Later I want to sit on Paul’s balcony after a shower of cool fresh water and
reflect on the day. Whiskey will be there begging for affection, and Ojay will condescend to be stroked around her perfect ears. Until then, I must earn it, so I sprint for a while, glancing at the shoreline for direction.

Clouds cross the sun; the water darkens, then brightens — waves of light whose heat I feel on my back, now shade my pupils sense and dilate to. Soon, late afternoon and the approach of night, which brings sharks into shallow waters.

The water is as warm as my blood and tempts me down to cool depths that make me wish I had gills. An article I read a few years ago said the possibility exists for men to create humans with wings and other animal attributes. Are gills possible? A barracuda angles on my left and I realise the desire for fins, for speed, would be necessary.

Soon I’m tired, swimming slower, floppily, looking up out of the water now and then to see how far away Paul’s jetty is. The water off the end of the jetty has areas of hot and cold temperatures. As I glide over them, the sub-merged section of the jetty on the left replete with openings in which fish hide, an eerie thought occurs. The crustaceous, green growths on the jetty shafts – how silly the thought and feeling. It’s from the story about an eel a fisherman in the village told me. He also said eels wouldn’t bother me if I leave them alone. I’ve seen movies which have done considerable harm to the reputation of eels. Many animals have been wrongly presented. I know this. But the number of old fishermen I’ve spoken to in my life cannot compare to the monstrous quantity of films showing the savagery of wildlife to man. The undisciplined years of childhood, the easy access to video-clubs – keeping boredom at bay. But trying to maintain a disciplined and focussed mind for my work helps to control and disable the emotions before and after thoughts on eels.

The ground floor of Paul’s house is tiled in smooth squares of red-brown. There is a ship’s bell at the bottom of a flight of steps; the steps go toward the northeast, then turn one hundred and eighty degrees to the southwest. Up there is the balcony. Downstairs is the laundry-room and a guest-room. The sliding-
door of the guest-room is unlocked and inside there are books, a bed, a sophisticated radio (one of Paul’s hobbies is tuning into as many stations as possible), and a stack of newspapers and magazines atop a little table next to a set of drawers. The bathroom has the three necessities for civilized cleanliness; and for someone beginning to sweat after a swim in a warm sea, the liquid pressing out with each beat of my heart, the shower is all I’m interested in. The water is cool and delights my skin as the film of salt is washed off. When I’m completely wet, I turn off the shower and soap, then rinse again in a luxurious cold rush. There is a claustral sense in the bathroom. Right outside the louvre-window near the ceiling I can see the bank against the house, shadow, and hear nothing. The earth smells of iron and salt. As I walk out of the guest-room a dove with streams of white on its chest, a sleek head and wet-brown eyes, flaps violently out of its nest set above the archway leading to the jetty. I stop. I go up to the balcony.

The sea. There it is. Words fail, I fail, to describe the immediacy of the twilight colours, the distance stretching into a blue night. Only in memory is the picture clear, true and, therefore – most importantly – mine.

The sea becomes darker. Briefly, amidst all the blues and promises of darker blues, amidst the promise of night, a desire to swim returns. The length of Crump Island has blotches and bald earth, a light brown capable of dull silver on moonlit nights. What kind of moon tonight? I recline in a lounge-chair, extend my legs, and sigh.

The day is over. Perhaps the work could have gone better, perhaps I could have swam further. I slump deeper into the chair, trying to discern an object on the distant ocean.

Away from the international charivari of cities, the silence of Paul’s house near the century’s end with the islands, sea, and colours of evening, soothes me, causes wishes of success in my work to present themselves in dreams made of seclusion.

It is all I ask for.
That was Lilian Peters all right. She always knew when an occasion needed to be marked.

"We must have a celebration," she announced to her daughter, as soon as her eldest son Lucas returned to Pakuri. She upturned the hammock and shook some crumbs of cassava bread out that one of her grandchildren had left there. It was eleven o’clock in the morning. She flicked a rag rug out of the open door to shake out the dust. At the age of eighty, she still kept her house neat and clean and swept the church out every Sunday morning. She never lost an opportunity to bring her family together and her son’s return was just such a chance. Mrs. Peters decided there should be a family party to mark his achievements.

On the day of the party, she looked with pleasure through the kitchen window of her one-room, zinc-roofed house, across the short expanse of sand over to where Lucas stood, serious, arms folded, talking to his youngest brother Mart. Mart’s house was on the edge of the village where the bush began again. Lucas was leaning against one of the four posts supporting the shaggy palm roof that extended beyond the wall to provide shelter from the sun. Mrs. Peters watched him as he listened intently to his brother, making patterns in the sand with his boot. She noticed, with satisfaction, how strong and well he looked. He wore new blue jeans, heavy bush boots and his black hair had grown long enough to touch the collar of his yellow shirt.

The two brothers were deep in conversation. Both had their heads down as they talked. Mart’s black, felt hat shaded his bronze face and formed a halo-shaped shadow on the front of his ragged, white T-shirt. His necklace, made from two curiously twisted copper spoons, hung just below the shadow and glinted in the sun. Lilian worried sometimes about her younger son. He seemed restless.
Once the two of them had fought. Mart had chased Lucas round the outside of the house with a machete. They had circled her house four times during which she heard nothing but the scuffing of desperate footsteps and the heavy, gasping breaths of both of them. Lucas had managed to dodge back in the doorway. He jumped Mart and brought him crashing to the ground. Lilian Peters knew that Mart would have killed Lucas that day if he had caught up with him. But life did not take that path. It took a mysterious turn. And now, no-one could remember what the argument had been about, although at the time, tempers were so roaring hot that Lucas had to spend a week on the other side of the village with his uncle. But now, they got on well and it was a relief to Mrs. Peters that Mart had someone to talk to about his sculpture. In the last few weeks he had become irritable and run out of inspiration for his work. Lucas will be good for him, she thought as she jabbed at the bubbling rice. Sometimes the village gets too small for Mart.

Suddenly, both brothers put back their heads and laughed.

All of her three children had been born right there in Pakuri village. Four yards of sand separated her house from Mart’s. Both houses stood near the edge of the village where the sand came to an end and the grasses, muri bushes and awara trees began. Behind his house, Mart had constructed a palm roof shelter where he worked on his wooden sculptures. Whereas Mart had built his house flat on the sand, her own house was elevated a foot or so from the ground on short, slightly uneven stilts. Mart had recently built her a new kitchen extension of wattle sticks. The main part of her house, which was not more than ten feet long had wooden, plank walls. On the outside wall hung a sifter. A white, enamel bucket and some plates dazzled the eye in the bright sun from where they were stacked on a small table in front of the house.

Mrs. Peters checked with her hand that her white hair was in a neat knotted plait at the back. She had put on her best, green cotton dress. Glancing in the direction of her two sons, she noted that Mart’s roof would soon need re-thatching with dalibana leaf. Her own brother would see to that. He was the village expert. He
laid it out and plaited it right there on the ground and then a group of them would get together and lift it onto the roof.

It was Lucas who had paid to have her traditional palm thatch roof replaced with zinc. The zinc had deteriorated into rusty, brown rivulets. But Lilian Peters was still proud of it, even though it made the interior so hot by mid-day that she had to go to her daughter’s house in the afternoon and lie down there. For a moment she stood still. I shall be eighty-one years old in February, she thought in astonishment, wondering how time had flown by so fast.

She could still manage to make cassava bread, casareep and to weave hammocks, but every now and then Lilian Peters felt her heart jump like a small patwa fish. It fluttered and shivered and made her stand stock still until it found its regular beat again. Planting and weeding the cassava farm had become more and more of an effort. But there was still a lightness and spring in her step and her bearing was straight and upright. Her face was weather-beaten but lined. Her gaze was direct and unmistakeably intelligent. Anyone could tell that she had been a woman of considerable beauty. When she spoke to people she faced them square on, which gave them the feeling that she could be trusted. And she preferred to walk barefoot, even when the sand beneath her feet was burning hot.

If there was one place she hated, it was Georgetown. Whenever she was obliged to go there, she left again as quickly as possible and headed back to the bush. At home she spoke Arawak. Nearly all the youngsters in the village spoke English now, but she preferred Arawak. Women still called on her experience and skills when they gave birth. She was a practical, industrious woman who had brought up her two sons and her daughter with a firm hand. And in her opinion her son’s achievement should be celebrated.

Lucas Peters had passed his exams in London and become Lucas Peters, M.A. No-one in the village, including his mother, quite knew what this was but every one knew that he had gone
away for a long time and mixed with a lot of white people to get it.

“Just a quiet celebration with the family,” she announced firmly to her daughter who was helping her with some chores. “We’ll have it tomorrow at Uncle Stanley’s house because it’s on the far side of the village. Otherwise everyone will turn up. Saturday’s a good day. Uncle Horace can make a speech.”

And the sun hammered down on the village as she wandered across the sand to inform Uncle Horace of his family duties, stopping to talk to people on the way. They were related to half the people in the village anyway, so there promised to be a good turn out.

It was mid-morning on the party Saturday. Uncle Horace, speech-maker in chief, stepped out onto the top step of his house and looked out over ribbed tiremarks left by a passing truck in the damp track outside. He stood there for a moment like a general inspecting troops, wanting everyone to see him in his best shirt and trousers. He held up the piece of paper on which he had outlined his speech. People must appreciate that he was about to perform an official function.

Immaculate was the only word to describe Uncle Horace’s appearance. He had taken several hours preparing himself for the occasion, snapping at his daughter because his blue-check shirt was not properly ironed, although she had spent all morning heating the iron over the flames and pressing the offending item. He was a short, grey-haired man conscious of his reputation as a neat and dapper dresser. As he made his way across to the south of the village, he glanced at his speech and paused occasionally to rehearse the most moving and dramatic parts of it.

By the time he reached Uncle Stanley’s house, the family had already started to gather. It was a scorching hot afternoon. Coconut trees shaded that part of the village. Uncles, aunts, cousins and their children milled around.

Uncle Stanley had fixed everything up nicely. A small table perched in the sand, leaning slightly to one side. On it was a
white cloth, two bottles of vodka on a tray with some glasses and a red and pink hibiscus blossom in a jar. Uncle Horace inspected this speakers podium before seeking out Lilian to re-assure her that he had arrived with his speech prepared.

Inside Stanley’s house, Lucas, Mart and their sister Sylvie poured out drinks for the children from jugs of coconut water. The fat figure of Auntie Zizi huffed and puffed over the sand and up the steps with two bottles of rum from her shop.

“Which do you like best?” She whispered to Lucas, “Fast and Nasty or Cheap and Sweet? I brought both.” She chuckled. “You know what they call my shop now? They call it Jonestown because people come and drink this rum and disappear for good.” She cackled. “Is you celebration. Make sure you have some. I puttin’ it under Stanley’s bed for the moment.” She slapped him heartily on the back. “Congrats, Lucas.”

Lucas smoothed back his springy black hair with both hands. He felt tremendous relief to be amongst his own people again. He looked round at the smiling faces, shining with heat. People came to pat him on the back. His two eldest uncles came up and shook him earnestly by the hand, almost shyly, not saying anything but nodding their heads with toothless grins. Whenever he caught anyone’s eye, they beamed at him. He watched his pretty niece of sixteen diving to rescue her baby son from falling down the steps. One of his nephews, bare-chested, came flying up to him, out of breath:

“Uncle Lucas. Where you get those boots? You can get me some?”

Lucas looked down at his thick boots:

“England I’ll write and see if someone can send you some down.” The nephew danced off, satisfied. Uncle Linus was telling a joke. Soon everybody was gaffing and laughing.

Uncle Horace kept himself a little apart from everybody in order to emphasise the solemnity of his speech-making duties. Uncle Stanley was the self-appointed master of ceremonies and after what he considered to be a suitable interval, he announced
that he was now going to call on Uncle Horace to speak. The thirty or so members of the family and the few close friends who had been invited took the cue that the sober part of the proceedings had arrived and began to gather round the table, sitting down on logs, squatting in the sand or brushing the grit off the planks and sun-faded, wooden benches and making themselves as comfortable as possible.

Uncle Horace took up his place behind the table, cleared his throat and waited until everyone had settled down. He poured himself some vodka in a plastic cup and added some coconut water from a jug. Then he took a sip and faced the crowd with an expression of utmost seriousness on his face.

Always, on these occasions, Uncle Horace spoke in Arawak. He considered himself to be the best Arawak speaker in the village. He prided himself on this position. He was seventy-six years old. Younger members of the village consulted him when they wanted to know the Arawak word for a certain object. He never failed them. He was the grandfather of Arawak speech and no-one was allowed to forget it.

He had made a few notes for his speech in English and intended to translate as he went along.

Lilian Peters was seated in the position of honour on the front log, feet planted firmly in the sand, holding the smallest of her grandchildren in an iron grip to prevent him from wriggling free. Mart, still wearing his black felt hat, crouched down next to Lucas and scrutinized the proceedings through dark glasses. As Uncle Horace began, Mart lifted up his glasses and winked at Lucas. They had sat through many of Uncle Horace’s family speeches together.

Uncle Horace coughed and gave one more glare at Auntie Zizi who was still talking loudly. Finally, everyone became silent and the only sounds came from the kiskadees in the bush, and a dog barking somewhere on the other side of the village.

The sun blazed down from a clear, blue sky. Uncle Horace took another swallow of vodka, wiped his forehead with the back of
his wrist and began his speech:

"Helay ko-ha, tu kasakabu . . . ."

Now, although Uncle Horace made his speech almost entirely in Arawak, he had been obliged to use some English words. ‘London University’ came up quite often as did ‘aeroplane’ and ‘degree’ and ‘the Queen of England.’ All told, he had found it necessary to include a good many words of English.

His voice was thin and wavery. After every few sentences, he helped himself to some vodka. Gradually, Uncle Horace’s chest swelled up like a tree-frog and the speech became more emotional with longer and longer pauses. Soon he began to lean slightly to one side like the table but in the other direction. Unfortunately, because his voice was not strong, people sitting at the back had to crane forward to hear him.

Every now and then, someone looked round to grin warmly at Lucas. Uncle Horace breathed heavily. That morning he had cut the front of his hair short with a razor and now some of the youngsters started to giggle because they could see the paler line of flesh where the hair had been. He paused frequently, squinting up at the sky, grimacing with the effort of finding the precise Arawak word that was required, wrestling with his emotions and the vodka.

Into one of these pauses, striding across the sand, burst Uncle Tommy Peters. Uncle Tommy was raw Arawak. His mouth was twisted under his stubbly moustache. He was late because he had just returned from his farm five miles up river. He had been weeding all day and had not had time to smarten up for the occasion. He had paddled as hard as he could back to Pakuri and left his canoe by the river bank. Then he hurried to the family party. Now he turned up, barefoot, smelling of sweat, wearing a torn grey vest and with his trousers rolled up to the calves of his muscular brown leg. On his head, he wore a black and white striped baseball cap. He pushed his way amongst the audience and made room for himself on one of the logs. He listened carefully as Uncle Horace continued to the climax of his speech in which
Lucas and the Queen of England made several unscheduled appearances together.

Uncle Horace brought his speech to its conclusion. There was a round of applause. He folded his paper carefully and was just putting it back in his shirt pocket and moving away to receive compliments on his speech when Uncle Stanley unexpectedly invited Uncle Tommy to say a few words. Tommy rose to his feet and walked awkwardly round to stand in the speaker’s place behind the table.

His muscles still aching from the strenuous bout of paddling, Uncle Tommy began to speak. Standing stiffly and holding on to the corners of the table with his gnarled hands, he spoke pure and unhesitating Arawak from the heart.

“I want to speak because I remember Lucas from when he was a tiny baby. We called him Horotoshi because he had no hair. Calabash-head we called him. Or sometimes we called him Potakashi because he looked like an old bald-head Portuguese man. And now look what Calabash-head has done. He has gone away and studied in some far-off place with white people. He has even learned to speak like them. He has learned about all sorts of things that I have never heard of. That calabash-head is now full of learning. I can’t read and I can’t write but he can. And he can speak for all of us. I know this boy’s family. His brother we called Corihi because he scampered all over the village. His mother we sometimes called Kaimaru when she got cross with them. I knew this boy’s father. If his father was still alive he would be very proud to see what his son has achieved. I helped to raise him when his father died. Everybody did what they could to help Kaimaru. I am proud of him. All the people of Pakuri join in his success. I will drink to Calabash-head.”

Uncle Tommy’s voice was robust and carried way over their heads to the trees beyond. Several people cheered. Someone leaned across and passed Uncle Tommy a bowl of bambeli, the local drink. He raised the bowl to his lips and drank it down, then turned to spit out the dregs behind him.
Mart nudged Lucas and then embarked on a deliberate ploy to tease his Uncle Horace:

"Uncle Horace. I thought you were supposed to be chief Arawak speaker. Listen to Uncle Tommy. He speakin’ fluent Arawak and no English words either."

Uncle Horace’s face changed colour to an even darker shade of bronze. He sipped at his vodka and shuffled from one foot to the other, glowering at Mart and then retorted:

"I have to use some English words. The youngsters these days don’t speak enough Arawak. They wouldn’t understand unless I said some things in English. It’s more tactful to use a little English so they can understand."

Mart teased him a little more:

"But you had to have notes on a piece of paper. Uncle Tommy spoke off the top of his head. And you drinking vodka. Uncle Tommy drinkin’ bambeli. I reckon Uncle Tommy is the true Arawak."

Everybody shouted with laughter and the children copied the adults, squealing with delight. Uncle Tommy, who had no top set of teeth, jutted his lower lip out as he joined in the joke.

Uncle Horace was clearly upset. His knees sagged a little under the influence of the vodka as he threw his plastic cup down in the sand with a violent gesture. Then he took his speech from his pocket, scrunched it up and flung it after the cup. Turning his head away from the assembled family in disgust, he stomped off in a huff, shaking his daughter’s hand from his arm as she tried to placate him. There was more laughter as he went and stood by himself where the sand ended and the tall grasses began. The sun was beginning to set. Shadows from the coconut palms lay in jagged slashes across the cooling sands. People got up and began to stretch after sitting on the logs and planks.

Lucas stayed sitting, smiling as he watched the proceedings. The week after his results had come through, the radio station in Georgetown had recorded an interview with him about his master’s degree in ancient history. The next day, just as the
programme was being broadcast, Lucas was in the city, walking past a house in Camp Street which had the radio on. He heard a young black girl saying in amazement to her mother:

"Hear the man on the radio, mummy. You hear how buck man could talk?"

And then he had gone straight to the museum where he had worked on and off for years before leaving to study for his post-graduate degree. He wanted to share the joke with the director. Instead, the director of the museum, looked at him coldly and told him that, now he had qualified, his services would no longer be required.

Shocked, Lucas had returned home to Pakuri. Unwilling to spoil the celebration, he told no-one what had happened, that now he had no job, no prospects despite his success. Not much future. He might have to leave the country. He looked around. Auntie Zizi waved at him. She was high on Cheap and Sweet and was wrapping herself affectionately around Stanley’s waist. His mother was frowning as she sat on a plank and tried to take a splinter out of her writhing grandchild’s foot.

All during the last year, Lucas had wondered how he could apply his new knowledge of ancient, indigenous farming techniques in a way that would help his own people. Since he was a child he had always worried about the condition of the people in his own and neighbouring villages. He remembered lying in his hammock as a boy and fretting over how he could make things better and planning the defence of his village against invaders. Now he had ideas of experimenting with some of the raised field farming techniques of old and seeing if they could still be useful to his village and he thought of using solar-powered computers to link up the scattered Amerindian communities in the country. With E-mail they could be in touch with each other and with groups outside the country.

Mart’s hand was on his shoulder:

“Look at Uncle Horace”. He said. “We got to do something.”

Mart was high on Cheap and Sweet too, his eyes shining.
They looked over to where Uncle Horace stood miserably beneath the trees, staring at his feet.

Lucas got to his feet. They gathered up Uncle Tommy and the three of them made their way trudging through the sand to where Uncle Horace stood on his own in the shadows beneath the awara trees. A slight wind had got up and the branches of the trees tossed slowly like the plumes of circus horses. Uncle Horace stepped out of the shadows, nervous and upset, determined to defend his title of chief Arawak speaker.

Mart put his arm around Uncle Horace’s shoulder:

“O.K. We’ll settle this business about who is chief Arawak speaker once and for all before the sun goes down. I’m going to ask you both a question.”

Mart shut his eyes and screwed up his face in concentration:

“Right. O.K. I’ve got it. Which one of you can tell me what is the Arawak word for . . . padlock?

There was a deadly hush under the trees. Both men stared at each other as they wracked their brains. Mart looked up at the army of huge clouds marching across the skies from Venezuela. A long silence ensued. Spots of rain fell. Uncle Tommy’s mouth twisted up further than ever and his eyes rolled round in his head. Uncle Horace stroked his chin repeatedly. Then Uncle Tommy spoke up:

“We don’t have such a word. We had our language before we had iron. So the word doesn’t exist in Arawak.”

Uncle Horace saw his opportunity and pounced, shaking his finger at Uncle Tommy:

“Ah. But you have to be wily. You have to think round this problem. You must ask yourself, what is it that a padlock does. A padlock holds onto something tight. A padlock will never let go. A padlock will grip to the death. And, therefore, the Arawak for padlock is . . .” — a jubilant Uncle Horace announced loudly his inspired solution — “The Arawak for padlock is Baremo Okutu — The Grasp of The Ant-Eater,” he said triumphantly, drawing himself up to his full five feet and punching the air with his fist.
Spontaneous cheers and applause burst from a few people who had come over to see what was happening. Uncle Tommy threw his cap in the air and laughingly ceded defeat.

Lucas chuckled. Mart was nearly crying with laughter:

“I pronounce Uncle Horace Chief Arawak Speaker.” Said Mart with affection.

Uncle Horace bowed and shook Uncle Tommy by the hand. Then he said good-night and strutted proudly off home to the other side of the village as if he were walking through the sky.

It was dark. A few figures still sat around talking. Lilian Peters made her way back to her house, flanked on either side by her sons. Mart said goodnight and went across to his house where the youngest baby was wailing. A huge moon swam into the sky between the clouds. Lucas waited outside for his mother to undress and get into bed, then he went in, slipped off his boots and jeans and climbed into his hammock.

“Goodnight, mai.”

“Goodnight, Calabash-head,” said Lilian Peters and went off into peals of giggles in the dark of the night.

From first light in the morning, Lucas heard the chipping of his brother’s chisel on wood. By the time, he had woken up, bathed in the creek and gone round to the back of Mart’s house, the sculpture was already underway.

Mart looked up momentarily from his work and nodded. The small, pointed head was taking shape and the two massively powerful front legs with unretractable claws dominated the front of the work.

“Baremo Okotu?” Enquired Lucas.

“Baremo Okotu..” Affirmed his brother, grinning.
Pratap and Lal cut down the bamboo poles and transported them to the site on which Pratap’s wedding tent was to be built. It was Monday and the wedding was to take place on Saturday. His father Soonilal had invited a pundit from Fuente Grove and he had hired some of his family to help in preparing the food. A tassa group from Endeavour was hired. Dhoolarie Ramlochan was expected to arrive with her father Seth and her mother Shivanna from Cunupia.

Tuesday came and again Pratap lay on his sugar sacking bed looking at the bamboo rafters and meditating. Although he had started building the tent, he did not agree to the marriage. He had ruled out the thoughts of taking gramazone! because Pratap by nature was not a coward and felt that poison was a coward’s solution to the problem. All during the day while he and Lal thatched the roof with coconut palm fronds, he wracked his worried brain trying to find a solution to the problem. He worked dejectedly and reluctantly.

“Take a break man!” Lal said as they got down from the roof and sat on a bench in the half-made tent. Lal produced a calabash of cool water and offered it to Pratap. Pratap took a sip, twisted his face and spat. The thoughts of the wedding had made him nauseous, and everything tasted insipid in his dry mouth. The more he thought of Dhoolarie the more nauseated he became. Bisoondaye brought them a tray with some roti and curried chutney which Lal attacked voraciously, but Pratap had no heart for it.

“Yuh not eating man. Yuh need all yuh strength for the weddin’,” said Lal as he champed and squelched the roti.

“I not eatin’ till after de weddin’,” said Pratap spitting with disgust on the earth floor.

“What!... Yuh must be mad or what Pratap!... Yuh not eating’
till after yuh own weddin?"

Lal looked at Pratap as if he had been paralysed with astonishment. Pratap repeated:

"I not eatin’ till after the weddin."

"But yuh have tuh eat the kedgeree or yuh wouldn’t get no dowry!"

Lal reminded him of the Hindu custom in which the bridegroom was given a plate of food known as the kedgeree to eat. The groom was supposed to stop eating only when he was satisfied that the bride’s father had given him enough money and property.

"I goin’ to eat the kedgeree,"
said Pratap collecting his cutlass and trimming a coconut tree branch. Then he added:

"I goin’ to eat de kedgeree, but I will show them”.

By Friday, Pratap and Lal had finished the tent. His mother Bisoondaye was worried over him for he had stopped eating altogether. At first she thought it was because of anxiety over the wedding, but when Pratap persisted to the point of extremes, she asked Pratap with a worried expression on her brown wrinkled forehead:

"Why yuh not eatin’ boy? I really worried why yuh not eatin’. Tell yuh mai why yuh not eatin’.

"I fastin’ fuh de weddin so I could have a good time.”

Pratap answered Bisoondaye and Bisoondaye felt content. Saturday came and with it came droves of family from all over Caroni and South Trinidad. The tent was overcrowded with Hindu men and women dressed in their sarees, capras and dhotis. Pratap was bathed and massaged and oiled with coconut oil; then he was dressed in a white dhoti and capra and was garlanded with necklaces of beads and shells. He sat under the tent in front of the pundit. Dhoolarie arrived veiled and bedecked from head to foot in fine silks of blue, white and yellow. She wore jewellery on her entire body. Her forehead was hidden by bands of fine gold which hung from her head in pendants. She was draped in a saree
which hid her entire face and she looked like a walking tent as she approached the blanket on which Pratap was seated. As she walked, she made a rustling metallic sound which was produced by the various pendants, rings and bells which adorned her body. Seth Ramlochan, her father, seated her in front of Pratap. The pundit blew his conch and rang the five little bells next to him on the ground; then he struck the brass gong and immediately a quiet fell on the assembled crowd. It was the signal for the beginning of the ceremony.

Seth approached Pratap and a woman placed a plate containing the kedgeree in front of him. Seth dipped his hand in his pocket and came out with five one hundred dollar bills. He placed the bills gingerly on the brass tray in front of Pratap who looked at them in contempt. Pratap did not even bat an eye. The crowd looked on intently. One of his uncles from the front row got up and with a flourish, placed three hundred dollars on the tray. Again Pratap pretended he didn’t see the money. Several men and women from the audience came forward with gifts of jewellery, cloth and money, but Pratap’s gaze was far away. He seemed unaffected and nonplussed. The pile of money and jewellery gradually grew larger and larger until it couldn’t fit on the tray and money started spilling onto the blanket on which Pratap was sitting. Seth was annoyed and sweating profusely. The audience looked on amused. Faint murmurs grew among the crowd which gradually turned into a rowdy and unruly cacophony. Comments were flying wild about the tent. One man bawled:

“Aye Seth yuh stingy dog. Why yuh doh give de man money man?”

Seth fumed as he handed over another five hundred dollars followed by several others until he had given five thousand. Only then did Pratap start to eat the kedgeree but very, very slowly. Seth had given all his money and the only thing left now was his property. He signed over thirty head of cattle to Pratap. Pratap chewed on slowly, slowly and painfully, deliberately marking time as if he had all the time in the world. The audience was enjoying the
spectacle and they became unruly as peals of laughter filled the bamboo tent. Dhoolarie looked on hidden by her tent of veils and jewellery. Seth signed over the parcel of land in Five Rivers and the audience cheered. Pratap kept eating slowly. The brass plate containing the kedgeree was still three quarter filled. The guests were overjoyed. It seemed as if the wedding had degenerated into a theatrical farce.

Women held their sides as they burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter; some even had tears of joy as their bosoms heaved rhythmically from the effects of the spectacle which was presenting itself before them. Seth started to fuss and fume. He sweated profusely and his black countenance turned a deep purple. He wiped the sweat off his brow and pranced up and down in front of Pratap like a wild animal as if he wanted to pounce on him. Dhoolarie sat petrified in her tent of veils. The pundit looked on in silence. The crowd roared but Pratap chewed slowly, slowly; one spoonful today, one spoonful tomorrow. Soonilal and Bisoondaye looked on. Soonilal with an anxious half-smile on his face trying to get Pratap’s attention; Bisoondaye with a ruffled brow of panic, embarrassment and anxiety. Seth started to swear:

“I eh give yuh enough boy? What yuh want again?” Yuh want flesh and blood?”

Dhoolarie fidgeted and shifted her eyes which peeped through the little tent like a scared black bird from Seth to Pratap. The black pupils, if the audience could have seen them, expressed fear, panic and anxiety. Pratap kept eating until almost half of the kedgeree remained in the plate, then he stopped and continued slowly, slowly and painstakingly. The audience roared:

“Seth, yuh stingy old man,” a fat woman from the front row bawled: “Give the man money yuh stingy old dog. Yuh eh see de man hungry? Give de man money!”

The other women giggled, the fat of their breasts jumping like jelly as tears of laughter streamed down their brown faces making little rivulets in the thick coating of powder with which
their faces were besmirched. Seth signed over part of the dry goods store and looked anxiously at Pratap. The crowd remained silent, anxiously awaiting Pratap's next move. But Pratap continued chewing slowly. Then one man bawled from the back of the tent:

"Give him de Cinema, Seth! That go make him stop eatin' ."

And the crowd took up the cry:

"Give him de cinema... Give him de cinema."

They chanted in unison and started to beat benches and bottles making a lyric out of the phrase and the tassa drummers joined in with a regular drumming: "Give him de cinema. Give him de cinema."

At this point, the drummers felt that they should add a little dancing to the evening's entertainment and presently, the audience having been overcome by the rhythm of the tassa, joined in the fun and merriment.

It was at this critical point that Seth, sweating profusely as he walked to and fro in front of Pratap, decided that he had had enough. He stopped in his tracks while the audience awaited his next move.

"Was he going to sign over the cinema?"

A hush fell on the revellers, the tassa trailed off into a sporadic roll, then stopped altogether. The women stopped giggling. Seth approached Pratap, grabbed the money and promissory notes from off the brass plate and said:

"Boy you could haul yuh pissing tail little arse, but I eh givin' yuh nothin again. Doh eat nah! Yuh think I care?"

He then grabbed the bangled arm of Dhoolarie and yanked her to her feet and started shoving her from under the tent. She made a jangling jingling sound as he pushed her towards the exit. And the crowd roared and bawled and bellowed. The pundit got up, packed his bells and other paraphernalia and left. Pratap sat quietly. A group of relatives whom he did not know approached Pratap and smilingly patted him on his back. Soonilal and Bisoondaye came forward. One uncle said to Soonilal:

"Doh be vex with this boy. Is not he fault. Yuh see how
Ramlochan stingy. Everything work out for the best, man. This boy is a hero, and besides I doh blame him. He save heself from marriedin’ a real beast.”

And everyone cheered as they led Pratap victoriously towards a table under the tent. And Pratap attacked the sumptuous display of victuals with a voracity that amazed everyone and this caused added mirth and entertainment to the celebrations which continued with drumming, dancing and singing well into the wee hours of the morning. It was as if nothing had happened and as if the wedding had proceeded as planned; only there was no bride. As a matter of fact, the comic part of the whole situation which was realised by everyone was no one had yet seen Pratap’s intended bride. That night, Pratap ended his fasting as planned. Whatever money and gifts remained in the brass tray still belonged to him. Later on, the people of Felicity would look at him with respect and they would have a special reverence for him because he was the first man in Felicity who had a wedding without a bride and the first man to obtain a dowry without a bride.
Mark was not surprised when the Mission Head told him to come over later in the day. He had reported no conversation for over a month now and Robertson would naturally be concerned. What would the local pastors think if a visiting evangelist stopped getting converts and, besides, what would Headquarters in Pasadena think?

Mark found that he didn’t care what the local pastors thought or what Irving Robertson thought or even what Pasadena thought.

Those sanctified folk, confident of celestial glory, were all part of what had begun to seem a fabric of fantasy threatening to unravel itself into nothingness. He had not abandoned belief: it was as though belief was abandoning him and he was frightened. He had come to this country to save souls and he seemed to be losing his own.

It was not as if he felt burdened with sin. He was familiar with that feeling and practised in the method of relief. But how could he seek to be shriven through confession and prayer when he had no conviction of wrongdoing only an oppressive sense of himself as of someone cut off from his moorings and drifting in a tide whose direction he could not divine? He had done what he thought was right and good at the time, even now believed he could not have acted differently but he found no comfort in this judgement. He had whispered a name and sent a man to shameful death, to eternal damnation also if the doctrines of his church were true. But he had come to realize that he, too, would be damned forever even if he attained the Heaven he seems destined for. There was sure to be memory in that Heaven — if it was not to be a convocation of zombies — and he could not conceive how that horrendous clanging of that trapdoor at eight o’clock on that Monday morning in July could ever be erased from his.

A need had arisen in him to discover error in teachings he had
before held sacrosanct. He had accepted those teachings on faith but commonsense now told him that even faith must balk at folly and there suddenly seemed much that resembled folly in them. Resembled only, a part of him kept protesting, maintaining a whimsical hope that seemingly manifest absurdities might yet be resolved to his satisfaction or assume again the inviolable character of Holy Mystery.

Robertson had said on the phone that he would be in the reading room at the Mission House between four and six in the afternoon but he was not there when Mark arrived at four-twenty. No problem. He was sweaty after the brisk walk, at least a mile and a half, from his quarters at the hostel and glad of the chance to cool off by himself. Switching on one of the two wall fans, he loosened the top button of his shirt and began angling his body this way and that in front of the fan.

A silly thought came to him — Were there fans in Hell? He chuckled, tilted the fan downwards a bit, locked it in place, and then adjusted the position of a reclining chair nearby. A moment or two, and he was lying back, head against a limp cushion, naked feet resting on the long protuberances at the sides of the chair. Surely Brother Irv couldn’t begrudge him these small liberties — after all, he had returned to the hostel only this morning after a weekend stint at a forgettable hamlet somewhere in the countryside, and today had been a very hot day . . . a real sizzler. Damn!

No, not fans, air-conditioners — Ole Reb ought to have set up heavy-duty units a long time back, and if he hadn’t because he didn’t know how to, why not arrange for top execs from outfits like Koolayre or Bergbreez to join his confederacy? With their know-how and drive, those guys would have the place humming before you could say Beelzebub. And why stop at air-conditioning? Roads, factories, telecommunications all these things could be put in place if the right people were identified and given a free hand. Dives and similar fatcats could be lured out of retirement by packages which included personal watercoolers —
adequate quantities of H₂O shouldn’t be hard to put together from the chemical elements available — and with their money-making expertise put to work, the economy was sure to boom. One couldn’t say the sky was the limit — after all, tower construction would have to be a no-no for obvious reasons — but it was easy to visualize the place transformed into a Heliopolis that Baal himself could point to with pride. True, there would still be much pollution from brimstone fumes, but one could argue that it gave the place its own special character, an undefinably fascinating ambience — that devilish touch, so to speak — and when all was said and done, it might stink to high heaven but it couldn’t kill anybody.

No, and it won’t be long before . . .

‘ Said, you been waiting long, Mark?’

‘ Sorry — didn’t hear you the first time, Brother Irv.’ Mark jumped up with a guilty start and slipped on his sandals. He glanced at his watch — four thirty-one and shook his head vigorously from side to side a few times. He hadn’t fallen asleep but he had been so caught up in yet another of the fantasies occupying much of his time of late that he had not taken note of Irving Robertson’s entry into the room. He couldn’t have seen Robertson, the reclining chair was backing the doorway, but he ought to have heard him clearly in the small area since he breathed with a pronounced wheeze and walked with the audible scuffling of overweight old men. ‘Just came in, actually,’ he added, extending his hand to Robertson, who had hung his hat on a peg near the door and was now shuffling forward, back slightly bent, with outstretched hand.
CY GRANT

Blackness and the Dreaming Soul

"Tell me what a man dreams and I'll tell you what he is"

(Arab proverb)

I was born in the little village of Beterverwagting in Demerara in British Guiana, now Guyana, an independent and impoverished Republic on the North East coast of South America and part of the British Commonwealth. Its history is inextricably bound up with that of the West Indies and with the European expansion and domination which started when Christopher Columbus thought he had ‘discovered’ the Indies.

I grew up in the sleepy village for the first eleven years of my life and then in New Amsterdam, the capital of Berbice. Dutch place names are everywhere and the flat coastal strip with its canals looks much like a tropical version of Holland without the windmills.

Even as a boy I had been aware of the class structures and white privilege, but I too had been privileged in a country divided by race and class and the colonial system. I had inherited all the middle class values of British society; my father was a Moravian minister and we lived in a huge manse with servants, next to an impressive wooden edifice of a Church with an imposing steeple. The sound of Church bells and choir practice and of sermons blend in my memory with the song of Kiskadees (Qu’est-ce qu’il dit?) and the tapping of woodpeckers on the tall coconut palm that swayed between the Church and the Manse, the distant drumming, African and Indian, and the screams of my brothers and sisters; these suddenly ceasing at the approach of my father, a kindly but austere man.

We were brought up in a strictly Victorian manner — respect for our elders, correct behaviour, home work, piano lessons, Sunday School and outings to Georgetown to the Bourda cricket
ground to watch West Indies against Wally Hammond’s England eleven. We were clean and respectable and proud. Like most of our ‘class’ we had household servants but my mother always insisted that we kept our own room tidy and generally helped with the housework. My sisters sewed their own clothes, baked cakes and studied the piano. The household ran smoothly and life was very ordered indeed. Twice a week the house was filled with the delicious smell of baking bread and a healthy atmosphere prevailed. These are among my earliest memories.

Beterverwagting’s two main roads ran North/South, parallel to each other. A canal ran alongside the road on the West separating it from the land on which the Church and Manse lay and it was crossed by about six or seven bridges. You could either walk, drive or cycle along the road or row along the canal northward towards the railway station connecting all the coastal villages between Georgetown, the Capital and Mahaica where you could take a ferry across the mile wide mouth of the Berbice River to New Amsterdam.

As a small boy, together with other boys and girls, I would go swimming in the nearby creek, or visit a sugar plantation nearby called La Bonne Intention, from the days Guyana had been French. We would set out on day excursions in small boats along the canal system that led to the Sugar Refinery, negotiating the big iron punts laden with sugar cane lining the final approaches to the factory. The heat and noise and smell of molasses pervaded our senses. We were allowed to sample the molasses and chew the sugar cane by a black foreman in charge, returning home when it was beginning to get dark with tales of the dangers that lurked in the interior — the small bands of escaped slaves, who so many years after emancipation chose to live apart from the village as the Amerindians did.

Whether there were still small bands of ‘wild men’ we were not to know as I never saw any. But such bands of escaped slaves, men and women and their children, certainly did exist during the days of slavery and after and their memory still lived on in the
minds of people when I was a boy.

Occasionally, we would catch sight of an Amerindian, or buck Indian, as they were derisively called. These were the true owners of the country who had been decimated by contact with the civilization of the white man. Their 'simple' life styles scorned, their beliefs no more than superstitions. Yet, like all the many and varied native people of the South American continent they knew how to live in harmony with their environment having a vast knowledge of the plant and animal life; a knowledge the West is only now beginning to recognise and to respect.

But then we did not know a great deal about the indigenous peoples, nor for that matter did we know a great deal about ourselves, our origins, and who we were. My childhood had been sheltered, we assimilated the education we were provided and our morals and our values were shaped by our upbringing; little did we know about our own parents’ histories.

Fifty years after his death, my memories of my father are still strong and the quality of his life has challenged my own outlook and, indeed, my life experience. His strong character certainly influenced my character. I may not have realised just how much until recently, visiting my sister, Valerie, I started asking questions about him and my mother. It seemed I knew little about their lives before their marriage. I had of course been aware that my father’s father had come to the country from the island of Barbados and that my father had been a teacher before deciding to go into the Ministry. He had met my mother whilst at the Moravian Theological Seminary at Buxton Grove on the island of Antigua in the West Indies.

As if to remind me that the only significant truth about my father was not to be found in his antecedents but rather in his life, my sister produced the Bible which she had somehow inherited and had been my father’s for most of his life, from the time he began his studies for the ministry until his death some forty years later. On the fly leaf, was his signature which had remained exactly the same throughout his life; and the date, 1901.
To hold this book was like holding a sacred icon. It had been his daily companion, the pages discoloured and the edges frayed. It bulged slightly and the covers were in danger of coming apart. It had obviously been rebound to accommodate the vast number of additional pages, swelling its size at least one fifth of what it had been and on which my father has made annotations, reflections and cross references. My sister explained that my father had studied book binding at some point, hence the neatness and care commensurate with the reverence he had for it. I had always held my father in some sort of awe, but holding this book so many years after his death, forcibly brought home to me just what an extraordinary person he had been. Now so many years on, I believe that this book deserves to be preserved and revered. It would provide valuable evidence for a thesis on Religion and Colonialism. It had been the cornerstone of his faith and of his ministry, a testament to a life of dedication and integrity.

With colonialism had come Christianity. It is ironic that those who brought it to the colonies no longer attend Church, whilst forms of Christianity flourish among the black community in England and also in ‘darkest’ Africa. For my father Christian principles were the bases for all morality, service to the community and value within society, the very principles that formed the core of Moravian belief. The Moravians had been ruthlessly persecuted by the Church of Rome, and the leader of the movement * for the reform of the Roman Church, John Hus, had himself been burned at the stake.

*A Short History of the Moravian Church in the Eastern West Indies Province* is a book in my sister’s possession which had been my mother’s. It, too, bore her signature in bold clear characters. In it is listed the subjects that students at the Seminary had to study over a five year period. They included Latin, History, Logic, Elocution, Rhetoric, Physiology, Greek, English Literature, Ethics, Church History to the Reformation, Systematic Theology, Pastoral Theology, Homiletics, Liturgics, Physics, Composition and Music. No wonder the extreme erudition of the notes
attached to my father’s most impressive personal bible.

My father’s study had been crammed with books on every subject and on every wall from ceiling to floor and he hardly ever left it except to visit his parishioners or to take a service. I believe my love of books comes from the hours I spent as a boy browsing in this library whenever my father was out. As well as the classics of English Literature and scholarship it contained many books about black heroes and black achievement, material which had not been easy to come by in his life time. There was the poetry of Langston Hughes, whom I was to meet later in life in London, and of James Weldon Johnson and the writings of W. E. Du Bois. I also learned that the great Russian writer, Alexander Pushkin, and the French, Alexander Dumas were black, facts which are still not generally known today.

It was my father who introduced me to the exploits of the legendary Toussaint L’Ouverture, the great Haitian leader. One day he called me into his study, showed me a print of Toussaint and asked me to enlarge it. I fancied myself as an artist in those days and it was an honour to be asked by my father to do something for him.

Not only did his scholarship, his imposing presence for a shortish man, and his immaculate dress, hold me in awe, but it had been whispered that he had been born with a strange, light birth mark in the shape of a cross on the dark skin in the centre of his chest and which faded as he grew older. I had never been able to verify this. As a very young child I had often watched him shaving, building up a big foam with his shaving brush before scraping at his face with a ‘cut-throat’ razor. I remember the consternation I caused when I cut myself trying to emulate him after he had left the wash basin in the bedroom to go and have his shower. I was discovered shortly afterwards in tears, one side of my face covered in foam and blood. I bore the mark of that nick on my cheek for most of my life.

When I was bigger I never dared watch his ablutions nor asked him to show me his bare chest! In fact we never did ask enough
questions of our parents, about his father and grandfather — what memories they may still have dating back to the days of slavery! Perhaps we did not want to know about slavery as if shame were attached to the slaves for having been made slaves.

My mother was a great beauty and obviously well brought up as befits the daughter of someone of the privileged upper-middle class in a small West Indian island. Her father had been a Scotsman, a sergeant in charge of Prisons near English Harbour where, a century before, Nelson’s Fleet had been fitted out on the island. She played the piano and indeed taught it to about grade 4 of the British School of Music. Most of us children were made to study the piano, but only the eldest, Ruby, attained any great proficiency, up to grade 8 I believe. My mother was also a competent painter in oils and water colour and did exquisite embroidery and crochet-work.

Despite the closeness of our family we somehow never got around to ask our mother about her childhood, or about her parents or how it came to be that she had Indian (from India) blood. We also never asked about our ancestry on the European side. We identified so much with the ‘coloured’ middle class that we had little curiosity about our ancestry on either side of our family tree.

My father was revered by all. A powerful orator, his sermons were masterpieces. I’ve seen him leave the pulpit and shake a member of the congregation who had dared to doze off during one of them! He was deeply concerned for the welfare of his local community. In Beterverwagting, for instance, which was subject to frequent flooding, in drainage and irrigation problems, he helped run a Farmers’ Co-operative from an office under the Manse, and supported the political campaigns of local men, against the stranglehold of the plantocracy, to gain seats in the Legislative Council of the Colony.

He was fanatical about cricket. He had a stack of ball-by-ball score-books from all the major matches he had attended. He formed a cricket club in Beterverwagting, with a good pitch and
pavilion and many inter-village matches were played. One of the rules of the club was that cricket must not be played on Sunday. One of my most vivid memories of him was when some people tried to break that rule. A very prestigious match was arranged between some members of a visiting West Indian cricket team and a team from Guiana. When word got to him that this was taking place, he set off, after his sermon, for the ground armed only with his umbrella. He placed himself between the wickets and stood there all day in the boiling sun. There was no cricket on that Lord's day, that Sunday in Guiana. It was headline news in the papers the following day.

When I was about eleven years old the family moved to New Amsterdam, in Berbice, where my father was sent as minister for four Churches, two on either side of the Berbice River. This move entailed considerable changes in our lives. Before it, my elder brother and sisters had travelled to Georgetown from B.V (as Beterverwagting was known) for their secondary education. New Amsterdam was over sixty miles away and travel by the local railway, always a great adventure, was out of the question. Other arrangements had had to be made. Also my father's work load increased dramatically, and I was later made to accompany him on his frequent visits to his congregations in those remote outposts.

But New Amsterdam, although a small town, was very beautiful. Our new home was another huge wooden two-storeyed house in Coburg Street. The street was red-brick and shady, and the colour of the flowering trees, bougainvillaea, and hibiscus and the wide range of fruit trees imbued a picturesque elegance to our new surroundings despite the fact that our house was opposite the Police Station and Fire Brigade. I remember making friends with the Sergeant in charge of the Fire Brigade. He was quite a musician, playing the guitar in the typical Guyanese fashion with strong African influences. He also played the saxophone.

I had been getting bored with my piano lessons, the sounds of the guitar and saxophone were seducing me away from the piano. But my father would not hear of me taking lessons on either. I
could learn the flute if I wanted, and the Sergeant was quite qualified to teach me. This seemed a good idea, as I was a bit young to start on the saxophone. It would also be a good introduction to playing a wind-instrument. But I found the flute extremely difficult, and when I realised that my father was expecting me to play in Church as soon as I was able to squeak out the simplest tune, I decided to call it a day. I did manage, however, to learn a few Chords and some bass riffs on the guitar from the Sergeant in between my futile attempts to ‘lip’ the flute.

One weekend, my younger brother and I and a few friends went swimming in the estuary of the Berbice River. Now this river is at least one mile across, and the currents around the Stelling quite strong at times. The end of the Stelling, where the twice-daily river-boat docked, protruded about a hundred yards from the bank. We rowed out from the side in a small boat towards the mouth of the river and dived off. Soon I found myself on my own and caught up in a strong current. I made for the supporting posts of the stelling. To my horror they were covered with barnacles, gleaming like broken glass, dark and green, and I knew I would cut myself to bits just trying to hold on against the whirlpool swirling round each post. There was nothing else to do but try to find a way out of the current and head for the boat a hundred yards away. I managed to pull away from the current, but found my strength failing; and panic was making it difficult to breathe. My brother and the others were some way off and I shouted for help. They seemed to think I was clowning!

I was unexpectedly and dramatically fighting for my life. Engulfed in the surge of my effort and my flailing arms, I felt it slipping from me, murky water everywhere, in my mouth, stifling my grunts, in my eyes and nose. The river was claiming me fast, my short life a blur before my eyes, as in a dream. Then, the merciful relief one feels on waking from a bad dream, a firm hand was under my chin supporting me as I was about to go down for the third and final time. I knew instinctively that it was my brother’s. He had heard my shouts and had kept an eye on me just
in case. Were it not for him I would not be telling this story. Unfortunately, over all the long years, I have seen very little of my brother. Our ways were to part shortly after our school days. We both were to become self-imposed exiles living away from the country of our birth, he in Scandinavia and I in England.

We attended Berbice High School in New Amsterdam passing the Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge examinations, the same ones that were set for Secondary School children in England. Sitting next to a boy of pure African descent, or of Chinese, Indian or Portuguese descent, the education we received implied that everything black was inferior. The only language we spoke confirmed this. History lessons told us nothing about ourselves or tried to explain the great diversity of our population. Slavery, the slave trade and the true nature of conquest and colonialism were never significantly dealt with. We learned about English Kings and Queens, the war of the Roses and the Napoleonic war. We learnt about English conquests, Nelson and the Armada and about the Magna Carta and Queen Victoria. We sang Rule Britannia every year on the 24th of May (Victoria’s birthday celebration day) and England was our Mother Country. We were never told about the civilizations in the New World that were destroyed by the Europeans. Columbus and Raleigh were heroes. We were made to think of some of our forebears as savages.

In Geography we learned about London, Newcastle (that one does not take coal to Newcastle), of the Pennines (not of the mountain peaks of Guyana and its magnificent Kaieteur Falls) and of Liverpool and Bristol (but not of the vital roles they played in the days of the Slave trade). In English about Shakespeare and of Stratford on Avon, *The Merchant of Venice* (The disgusting Jew), and *The Tempest* (of Prospero and Caliban) of Oxford and Cambridge (to which we all aspired — literacy in Guyana was once (alas, not so today) one of the highest in the world!). For Biology we learned nothing of our own flora and fauna (but the different parts of a daffodil instead of the hibiscus).
Guyana was idealised in the dream of Sir Walter Raleigh, the English adventurer who had dreamed of discovering the City of Gold, El Dorado. It was not until many years later that I began to reappraise our history and my relationship to it. Raleigh had been released in 1505 from the Tower of London, where he was being held for treason, to go on an expedition to find the mythical city. In his book *The Discovery of the Empire of Guiana* (1596) he described this expedition claiming that the mythical city, supposed to be Manoa in the Guyanas*, had “more abundance of gold than any part of Peru and as many or even more great cities”. He was to lead two other unsuccessful expeditions between 1595 and 1616 but his dream was not fulfilled and in 1618 he was beheaded.

European expansion had started, in 1492, when Christopher Columbus set sail in the Santa Maria, accompanied by the Pinta and the Nina, in search of gold and glory in the name of God and country. He was embarking on an outward journey into darkness that was to set in motion the destruction of cultures, civilizations, and of races and peoples on an unprecedented scale, setting the pattern for the eventual domination of the entire world by the European powers.

Over the ensuing years the conquest of the Aztecs and Incas took place and the greed and brutality of the Spanish conquistadores has been well documented. Many other civilizations perished, that of the Olmec in the Gulf coast of Mexico and the Maya in Central America. What the Spanish had started was soon eagerly taken up by the Portuguese, the British, French and Dutch. The scramble for new territories to conquer was to last for centuries.

Guyana had not appealed to the Spanish. It was not as immediately attractive to them as their earlier conquests. Columbus had sailed along the low unattractive coastline on his third journey to the ‘new’ World in 1499, but did not make a landing. And although the Spanish landed a year later and occupied the region now known as Venezuela, it was the Dutch who first
settled and colonized the eastern region.

Even though it is situated on the South American mainland, Guyana is considered part of the West Indies. The history of these islands is similar to that of Guyana — the result of Columbus’ voyages of ‘discovery’ and the ensuing European scramble for possessions which rapidly changed hands. Politically, culturally and economically their destinies are irrevocably intertwined. Their histories are chequered by conquests.

The Dutch settled the eastern territory known as Guyana for a period of over one hundred and fifty years. Their first settlement, in 1616, was on an island some forty miles up the Essequibo River which they called Kykoveral (look over all) near the Cuyuni and Mazaruni Rivers. Later the settlement spread North towards the flat coastal strip.

Guyana has many river systems and it derived its name from this fact — Guyana (Land of many waters). With their intimate knowledge of low-lying lands, the Netherlands, the Dutch were responsible for the irrigation and protection from an encroaching sea of low lying coastal strip. The clearing of, and protection of agricultural lands was hard work and the introduction of slaves from Africa began with a Charter to the Dutch West India Company in 1621. The indigenous inhabitants, the Carib, Arawak and Warrau, usually referred to as Amerindians, were not considered suitable as they died like flies on contact with the settlers. It is no wonder that they were inclined to disappear into the forested interior.

All the European powers indulged in the despicable slave trade. The most barbaric atrocities were perpetrated and not surprisingly the slaves constantly revolted. The most famous slave rebellion in history, took place in Haiti, then St. Domingue, in the late 18th Century. It led to the establishment of the first black Republic in the New World. My father had introduced me to the leader of that rebellion, Toussaint L’Ouverture, when he had asked me to enlarge his portrait.

My father’s interest in black history and culture was to
influence me greatly. In a period rich in remarkable men, Toussaint was one of the most remarkable. C.L.R. James, the great West Indian historian and man of letters, had this to say about him: “With the single exception of Bonaparte himself no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this black man, a slave till he was forty-five.”

But what is perhaps more significant is that there had been a slave rebellion in our own colony, Guyana, in Berbice, which preceded the famous one in Haiti by nearly 30 years, in 1763. It was led by Cuffy and the slaves were in complete control of the Colony for nearly a year before it was finally suppressed.

Slavery was to continue for almost two centuries. The trade itself was abolished in 1807 and the institution of slavery in 1833, not as is often suggested, for humanitarian reasons. Economic considerations were manifesting themselves more and more. But in order to fill the gap in labour which resulted after emancipation, a system of indentured labour was introduced initially from China, and from the Portuguese island of Madeira and later from India. So the population of Guyana comprises peoples from England, Holland, Portugal, Africa, India, China, a strange and exotic admixture of all these peoples and the indigenous Amerindian. It calls itself the Land of Six Peoples, which is not quite accurate. It is a land of great racial and cultural diversity.

Slavery had shaped every aspect of life, the social structure and the very psyche of West Indians. The mixing of tribes during slavery had disrupted families, social values and the communalism of the traditional African cultures. The slaves were mere chattels, brutalised and forced to work in the most appalling conditions, punished with the greatest bestiality, the women raped, the men disempowered. The effects of slavery on the West Indian black population was quite simply traumatic — the menfolk betraying an ambivalence amongst themselves and towards white people who had suppressed and mentally castrated them — distrust of the white man and yet not showing it, and of those they do not know
including other West Indians.

They were defined by patterns that were alien to their very being making them more divided, contemptuous of others and of themselves, jealous of those who oppressed them. As Frantz Fanon put it: “Every colonized people — in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality — finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nations; that is, with the culture of the mother culture. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of his mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle”.

I, myself, am only about four generations removed from slavery and a mixture of three racial groups, African, Asian and Scottish. We were colonized in body as well as in mind and a strange darkness pervaded our souls. We divided ourselves into classes, as the English did, but based on shades of colour — the mixed races, the coloured, below the white English and Portuguese, but above the blacks and the Indians who were ‘coolies’ (we actually used the terms our masters used!). The policy of divide and rule was one of the most effective ploys developed by Colonial powers.

Attempts had been made to stamp out the African heritage. Africa was the continent of darkness and of ‘brute beasts’. A country without a history of its own. Africa had contributed nothing to human knowledge, there were no civilisations there — Egypt, like Greece, was part of Europe! The African gods worshipped, only in secret and in ‘primitive’ incomprehension. Slavery had obliterated the past. The early slaves had been split up into different language groups so they could not communicate. They eventually lost their language and their religious rituals were prohibited; and the drum, central in so many of the world’s cultures, only permitted to be played on certain days. Boxing Day, with its masquerades, drumming and feasting had more significance to the African slaves than Christmas Day.
But Africa was not suppressed, it went underground and lived in the heart beat of the black population. To their credit, black West Indians, like their African forebears, have retained a vestige of their lost values. But the loss of communality has resulted in an inability to organise effectively as a community. Individualism, and going it alone became a trait of the West Indian personality. Only in moments of extreme crisis was there the need of coming together for the common good. But even here individual ambitions frustrated the attainment of the desired goals. Economically disenfranchised, the black population was much later to gain political power creating even more racial tension.

The Indians had come as indentured labourers. They too had their festivals, pujahs, or tajahs as we called them, with their elaborate, glittering towers that were carried through the streets to the sound of drumming, only to be thrown into the river at the end of the festivities. The Indians were industrious, working in the cane fields as the blacks before them, but setting up shops and other enterprises. They still had their languages and their religious beliefs. Mosques mushroomed on the horizon, alongside Christian Churches where the worshippers were mostly black.

Black and Asian people were not homogeneous and so inadvertently served the interests of the white ruling class. The colonial legacy had encouraged division, and has created confusion politically as well as in the economy. The hierarchical structure, which even after the Europeans had finally been ousted, had left its own value system as the cultural norm. Despite its many cultures, Guyanese had been educated to value only the culture of England, and so have lost their true identity as Sir Walter Raleigh, the would-be discoverer of Guyana, lost his head.

In such a climate I grew up. Able to appreciate Bach and Beethoven and to recite Keats and Shelley. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." "Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." I went for long walks in the Botanical Gardens and mused... beauty and truth. I even had a poem, dedicated to "Poesy", published in the Sunday Chronicle.
My father read it aloud to the entire family, my mother, my two brothers and my four sisters, before Sunday lunch after he said grace. My embarrassment was palpable.

I was to discover Aime Cesaire and blackness much later. My true education only began when I came to England and discovered that I was black, the initial shock and later the deep revelatory and healing potential of that discovery and that England was not my mother country.

Today Guyana is still bedevilled by its past. Privilege and racial conflict have festered beneath the surface of political life. It is little wonder that as a young man I dreamed of going overseas to widen my horizons. I did not have any strong feeling of quercencia, of belonging. The coastal strip is flat and uninspiring and I never experienced the numinousity of the interior. My only visit to the interior of the country of my birth was a day trip to the Kaieteur falls years after I finally left it. I have always envied Wilson Harris and his ability to create a meaningful mythology with his evocation of Columbian myths and of redemption in the collision of cultures; the brilliant tortured landscapes in the novels of Edgar Mittelholzer, my next door neighbour, who had been barred from visiting our home by my father for his frank anti-puritanical views; and A.J Seymour’s long poem The Legend of Kaieteur glorifying a dubious history; and all those who strove so hard to blend a distinct and unique Guyanese consciousness. I could not turn my back on the classical music that had filtered through the house as a child nor the distant drumming, African and Indian, the banned Cumfa dances and the Indian tajah, and the Spanish music over the airwaves, all of which resonated in my soul; as did the sound at night of a lone guitarist accompanying a doleful African melody: “Martha, sweet Martha, Martha, sweet Martha, tell me where you get that money from”.

What was distinct about our culture was its diversity but at that period of my life I did not appreciate the symbolic
significance of this. The social, political and economic realities overshadowed any awareness of possible cultural synthesis or any real sense of belonging. To my young mind, the unbroken flatness of the physical landscape along with a pervading sense of colonial stagnation seemed to impose limits on my future innermost horizons.

*This movement had led to the formation in Czechoslovakia of the "Unity of the Brethren", the official name for the Moravian Church which had its origin in Moravia and Bohemia.

*Cy Grant’s spelling of Guyana (with a ‘y’) has be retained throughout the article.
RainForest Creatures depicted in Illustrations:

**MOT - MOT & LEAF INSECT**

Mott-motts are distinctive for their long racquet-like tail feathers. These develop as the birds preen which causes the feather bars to drop out leaving the long feather vane exposed. They feed on large arthropods such as cicadas and nest in burrows usually along a watercourse.

**FROGS**

Frogs are usually associated with ponds and creeks. However, these amphibians are adapted to a wide range of habitats. Some make a home in the pools of water that collect at the base of bromeliad leaves, others live in trees and have tiny suction disks on their feet to help them stick to the leaves and stems. Frogs must also adapt to avoid predators, for example the gaudy red and black tree frog has poisons in its skin. These poisons are so effective that they are used by some Amerindians to make poisoned darts for hunting.

**TAPIR**

Tapirs are stocky, almost hairless and can grow to the size of a small donkey. They are herbivorous but use only a few plant species which they select by their keen sense of smell. The stripes on the coat of the young act as camouflage and are eventually lost.

**HUMMINGBIRD**

These iridescent coloured birds feed on nectar and are attracted to red, orange and yellow flowers. They are wonderful fliers, can hover and even fly backwards using a unique adaptation where they can rotate their wings. The humming sound is caused by the wings which can beat up to 80 times per second.
Tapir
FRANK BIRBALSINGH

Interview with Martin Carter

FRANK BIRBALSINGH:
In the late 1940s, how did you become involved in politics?

MARTIN CARTER:
I was always interested in verse and as a consequence of that I became interested in political activities. I used to write, and was friendly with Wilson Harris, Jan Carew, Denis Williams and A.J. Seymour.

But how did you connect with Cheddi Jagan?

Cheddi came back to Guyana in 1943 and began agitating. I used to hear about his agitation and became interested in the movement he had started. He had founded the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), and used to hold political meetings at the Kitty YMCA. I attended those meetings.

What about the groups at that period, for example, the League of Coloured Peoples, (LCP), the British Guiana East Indian Association, and the British Guiana Labour Party?

The LCP was somewhat reactionary in our view. So was the British Guiana East Indian Association.


Sidney King [Eusi Kwayana] was a founding member of the party.
and I ran as a candidate in the 1953 elections. I ran in New Amsterdam and lost to W.O.R Kendall.

*In 1953, after Dr. Jagan was in power for six months, the British Governor Sir Alfred Savage quashed his government and suspended the constitution which was the most liberal in Guyanese history. Then you and others were imprisoned. How did that happen?*

I was abroad when the constitution was suspended. I found the suspension in force when I came back. Several members of our party went from Georgetown to Blairmont to speak to the people about the suspension. We were arrested for breaking regulations that required us to remain in Georgetown. Sidney King, Bally Latchmansingh and Ajodha Singh were also arrested and we were put in a detention camp for three months.

*Could the suspension have been avoided? Does the party bear some responsibility for provoking it?*

There was mass hysteria in the country at the time. There was talk about Cheddi Jagan being a communist. That was a big thing. There were all sorts of movements in the Caribbean, including the local labour movement in Guyana with Critchlow; and one of the main things was to point a finger at those who were communists. The only way you could say that Cheddi brought the suspension on himself is if you agree that someone like Mahatma Gandhi brought his death on himself. If he was not a pacifist who stood for power sharing between Hindus and Muslims, he would not have been killed; but he would not have been Mahatma Gandhi either. It is a closed (rhetorical) question to ask if Cheddi brought the suspension on himself.

*What role do you think Dr. Jagan's American student background played in the suspension. Had he studied in England instead of*
America like most Guyanese at the time, could it have made the suspension more unlikely?

I think his American education gave him a sharper cutting edge. Colonial politics was British. American politics was different. For instance, a lot of the literature that Cheddi handed out was American. We must keep in mind that the British Communist party was playing an active role in the labour movement, and British socialists had their own (British) ideas about how we could achieve colonial freedom. At the same time you had Americans like Ferdinand Smith who was the Caribbean representative of the World Federation of Trade Unions, and Paul Robeson who was Communist. So Cheddi brought a new (American) element into the scene of British Caribbean politics.

American Republicanism is different from British Constitutional politics which favours gradual social and political change. Since republicanism is more radical in style. Dr. Jagan brought an (American) rhetoric that was alien to the British style of colonial politics.

That point is well made. It makes sense. Look at Cheddi’s speech and rhetoric: his vocabulary is different from that of people who were trained in Britain. Even the PAC was based on an American model — the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of the US.

What happened between 1953 and 1955 to cause the fragmentation of the PPP? What role did Latchmansingh and Jainarine Singh play?

They were not our allies in the beginning; they were more or less what Cheddi would call fellow travellers; they were looking out for themselves.
They had no ideological commitment.

None at all.

Who were the genuine ideologues in the party — there was yourself, Rory Westmaas?

Sidney King and Ram Karran.

Were you at the famous meeting at the Metropole Cinema?

Yes.

Was there a plan to oust Dr. Jagan from leadership of the party, or was it a fortuitous circumstance of which his enemies took advantage?

They took advantage of it. It was not organised; but there was an agreement that if the Burnham faction of the party moved a motion to put a spanner in the works, the Jagan faction would walk out.

At the Metropole Cinema meeting there were already two factions of the PPP: one led by Burnham and the other by Cheddi?

Absolutely.

What was the basis of factionalism? Was it ideological, personal, cultural, racial?

It was everything. It was racial and cultural because there were Indo-and Afro-Guyanese party members, and those who belonged to Georgetown (the city) — generally Afro-Guyanese — were against those from the countryside, generally Indo-Guyanese.
What happened after your faction walked out?

There were two PPP’s — one consisting of the Burnham faction, and the other of the Jagan faction.

Eventually, the Burnham faction became the PNC. They fought elections in 1957 which they lost to Dr. Jagan’s PPP. Then they lost again in 1961. But they manoeuvred successfully to win the elections in 1964. Apart from the change in the electoral system to Proportional Representation, what other factor caused the PNC to win in 1964?

They had input from the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and there were Guyanese “agent-provocateurs” who were hired and paid by the CIA. Many of these, though not all, were urban Afro-Guyanese, some of whom were trade-unionists.

By 1964 the country was racially divided and the socialist Burnham had teamed up with the capitalist D’Aguiar. Dr. Jagan himself has said that Burnham had lofty socialist ideals in the early years of the PPP.

There is no doubt about that at all: Burnham was considered as a leading figure in the fight against Colonialism in the Caribbean.

What happened to him between 1953 and 1964? Did his ideological commitment give way to personal ambition?

I think it was a question of opportunism plain and simple.

But Burnham did not only team up with D’Aguiar. He looked at the signs, and saw that if he played certain cards he could take power; I don’t think it is any more mysterious than that. He ruled for twenty one years until 1985, when he died; and his party remained in power until 1992. Between 1964 and 1992 Guyana
declined disastrously. There was massive emigration, economic ruin, social breakdown. Burnham couldn't have been so evil as to be motivated purely by opportunism while his country was reduced to shambles?

He did not begin as an opportunist. He was Titoist rather than Stalinist. Tito was not communist: he was a man in the middle, and I believe that Burnham took his political positioning from Tito. Tito was interested in himself.

You knew Burnham well and worked for him?

Yes, I worked as a member of his government from 1967 to 1970.

Considering the integrity of the ideological commitment in your writing, how could you work for Burnham?

It was a time when the racial crisis in this country was severe. I had become convinced that this country would not get anywhere because of the racial division. First I went into Bookers from 1959 to 1967, working as an information officer. Then I joined Burnham's party for three years and came back out again. It was a time of transition. One was trying to find a way to bridge the gap between the races. There were competing power blocs between Burnham, Jagan, D'Aguiar and a set of splinter groups between them. In that period everyone was trying to find his own way in the confusion. There was also a feeling that it was possible for Guyana to achieve a sort of independence, different from other countries in the Caribbean. We always looked on Guyana as a separate place from the Caribbean.

But Burnham's party would still be ruling if the Cold War had not ended.

That is because the world has changed to a great extent, from what
it used to be some years ago. The Americans can't get away with what they used to get away with in the past. Countries like Germany and Japan now have economic power. Americans have to be very careful about what they are doing.

Are you happy that Dr. Jagan is back?

Cheddi has a right to be in power; there is no doubt about that. But people feel that he is leaning over backwards, allowing people to do things that they shouldn’t be doing. He is kowtowing to pressure when he should be implementing his own policies. That is the feeling at large.

What role does Mrs. Jagan play in the life of the party and its leader?

It is wrong to suggest that Cheddi is controlled by his wife: that’s not true. What is important is that she is a good organizer, but she doesn’t have a political bent.

Assuming that Dr. Jagan has the vision and Mrs. Jagan the organisation, she might still be able, through organization, to influence his vision.

Yes, but I still don’t think that she has had the influence that people seem to think she has had.

Let us turn to your writing. You began in 1951 with your first collection of poems The Hill of Fire Glows Red, the further collections — The Hidden Man (1952); The Kind Eagle (1952); and Returning (1953). Then came Poems of Resistance (1953) the volume that made the strongest impact. Edward Brathwaite has said that your early work, up to 1953 is rhetorical or empty. He sees in your work a “drift into dream and (false) rhetorical hope: into images of resurrection and monumental cosmos.” I suppose he is
referring to lines like: “I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world.” (p.11); or: “I will make my shirt/a banner/for the revolution.” (p.15). What is such expectation based on?

It is based on the same thing that Brathwaite’s poetry is based on. Poetry is not argument. Poetry is statement.

But there are statements and statements. One statement can say I am weak and I accept defeat. Another statement might say, I am weak, but I will fight oppression. Brathwaite is a major Caribbean poet, who claims “there is no nation language” in your work by which he basically means the vernacular or Guyanese creole. The fact is that you know and speak Guyanese creole, but do not often use it in your poetry. But I do not see why good poetry cannot be written without the vernacular.

Both ways: with or without. His argument is based on what he calls “nation language” — I don’t know what he means.

I think he means the vocabulary, rhythms, cadence and oral practices of creole.

Creole or Creolese.

Not creolese, because that is pejorative, whereas he means a language that is an authentic form of expression in English.

That does not satisfy me. I am writing in a personal language that I know. I don’t write in a language that I don’t know.

And the language that you know expresses your feelings to your satisfaction?

That is right. I suspect the fight for “nation language” is false. When you speak of “nation language” you’re speaking of
something which I don’t know.

Brathwaite’s poem “Rites”, about cricket in 1954 is written in the vernacular with all the gestures and exclamations that West Indians use when speaking of cricket. That is an authentic West Indian language. But so is the language we are speaking now.

That’s right: it’s conversational language. That’s why I don’t understand what he means.

Still, I want to follow up on the charge Brathwaite makes that your poetry, up to Poems of Resistance, betrays unconvincing rhetoric. I detect confidence or aggression, not necessarily optimism/pessimism, because those terms become meaningless, as you have rightly said. But your early poems have a stridency which seems to go away after 1953. After 1955 or 1961, your tone changes from one of assertiveness to one of self-examination. In a 1961 poem, for instance, you say “But when I tried to utter words — I barked”. To me, that would have been impossible in the 1953 period.

It’s a different situation altogether. Also, some poems were published much later than they were written, so you cannot relate a particular tone to a specific period.

Poems of Succession has poems from the 1950s to the 1970s. I still think, though, that there is an intellectual consistency and ideological coherence to your 1951 poems which express either a strong sense of nationalism or a sense of global solidarity with the oppressed of the world. These poems are inspired by a Marxist agenda proclaiming universal solidarity against international oppression: “But wherever you fall comrade I shall arise.” (p.48). That ringing tone of liberation is absent from your later poems, in the 60s. Now, your tone seems more tragic, as if you accept bad situations as perhaps incapable of
being remedied. Your early poems vigorously asserted a will to remedy such situations, and a faith that they would be remedied, if not by you, by someone else. But, in “What Can a Man Do More” you seem to accept the fact of a muddled situation in which people are confused and the ones you trust are betraying you:

‘And how to leap these sharp entanglements
or skirt this village of the angry streets?
How utter truth when falsehood is the truth?
How welcome dreams, how flee the newest lie?’ (p.84)

Moral incoherence envelops everything and one is trapped in it. Also in “There is No Riot” there is no resistance to pervasive loss and despair:

‘Now in these days
though no rain falls, and bombs are well remembered
there is no riot. But everywhere
empty and broken bottles gleam like ruin.’ (p.128)

There is no human will to protest against ruin and desolation. It’s as if you are saying that everything is too corrupt, muddled and hopeless. What happened with the Marxist vision that did not sleep to dream but dreamed to change the world?

I don’t know. One changes, you know.

Brathwaite compared you to W. B. Yeats. He said that Yeats was a young revolutionary who became disillusioned. He took the path that you apparently did, which is to look at the suffering of humanity when you were young and say it must be changed; but after you reached middle age, you concluded that it was the lot of humanity to suffer.

Which may be true.

That is a depressing conclusion. What do the titles of your volumes mean? Poems of Resistance is self explanatory. What does Poems of Shape and Motion mean?
The idea of *Poems of Shape and Motion* is of movement and colour. That is why you have a combination of two things — shape and motion.

*Jail Me Quickly* is a strange title for 1964.

That was written when I wasn't in prison anymore.

*Jail Me Quickly* contains poems like *After One Year* which ends: “Men murder men, as men must murder men, to build their shining governments of the damned.” It seems cynical to suggest that it is somehow normal or inevitable for men to murder men.

“Men murder men as men must murder men” casually. It is ironic that men should do this. It is inspired by what the Guyanese were doing to themselves?

*It also induced the line:* “How utter truth when falsehood is the truth?”

“How welcome dreams, how flee the newest lie?”

*Your next volume was Poems of Succession* which consists of a medley, or a mixture of poems from early and late periods; then you moved to *Poems of Affinity*. What is the significance of Affinity?

Everything borders with something else. When you speak to me about something, I usually see it in one way, then in another in one flat second. And that is what I'm trying to do — to deal with two things simultaneously, not separately. For example, I have always found it difficult to grasp in my mind the difference between something which is extraordinary and something which is superfluous. These two things always merge, and I can see the merging only like a flash of lightning. It does not remain. I can
visualise it in my mind, but if I try to express it, it vanishes.

*It does not come out: you can’t express it.*

All you can do is contemplate it; you can’t do more than that. To express it is to lose it.

*But as a poet, your vocation is to express your illuminations to your readers. It must be a handicap to get illuminations which you can’t communicate.*

But it becomes a greater achievement when you finally do utter it; for then it is firmly uttered and only when it is necessary.

*What do you think of the work of Seymour and Harris?*

Arthur Seymour was a good friend of Wilson Harris and myself, also to some extent, of Ivan Van Sertima and Denis Williams. He was a mentor, but his own poetry did not have a cutting edge. I spent many years with Wilson before he went to England. I believe that his ideas came to a halt at a certain point. The two of us had a strong disagreement on what poetry is about. I don’t think that he’s a poet: he’s a prose writer. He has a volume of poems *Eternity to Season*. Nothing wrong with them. But I don’t think of poetry in that way.

*His reputation is based chiefly on his novels which can be quite baffling.*

They are riddles.

*Since you knew Wilson personally and discussed ideas about art with him, do you know if it was his aim to be mysterious?*

No, I don’t think so: Wilson really thinks and talks like that.
What about your techniques as a poet? The iambic beat is distinctive in your lines: "I almost stumble underneath the waste while squandered daylight mocks my deep remorse" p.84, has a high Miltonic ring.

T.S Eliot made a good point when he said that verse should have a rhythm of meaning. On one hand you have rhythm and on the other meaning, and the two should be united in good poetry.

The intellectual content should fuse with the music of the words?

Eliot and Pound and some other English and American writers achieved that fusion. Their meaning was not graspable: it was implicit in the poem itself.

You can't tell the meaning of poem. The poem exists and you experience it.

That's what he really means.

Guyana is generally classified as part of the Caribbean, because historically a common British Administration stretched over all these territories, and left similar patterns, for example, in the racial distribution of the population, similar legal and educational systems, the same language and so on. If Guyanese culture is non-Caribbean, to some extent, could you define it?

It can only be defined by its products. The writing produced by Wilson Harris, for instance, is different from the writing of George Lamming or V.S Naipaul. Their writing is relatively straight forward whereas Wilson's has a certain quirk.

You are using "quirk" positively?

Yes, it has a positive meaning. And not only him. There are many
young Guyanese writers. Very strange people. I would think that their work is somewhat different from what you will find in the rest of the Caribbean. They also reflect a quirk. Your own work, you would say, has a quirk, compared with the poetry of Walcott?

Yes. The word "quirk" conveys the essence of what is meant, something that is awkward — a twist.

"Awkward" is a negative word.

Possibly. But you have to turn it around, posit the contrary to "awkward." So it is both contrary and not contrary to awkward; therefore it commands attention from the reader, because it is not something you can easily find a place for.

This is true for Guyanese writing as a whole?

In general.

Where does the quirk come from? Is it something in Guyanese culture — the huge continental hinterland?

I think that it is much more than meets the eye. It is something to do with landscape.

We are not an island. The West Indies are islands.

That is one thing, but it is not necessarily the whole story. The work of Stanley Greaves, the painter, catches something of the difference between the West Indian imagination and the Guyanese. For instance, Greaves has some studies of birds, combinations of birds, and different kinds of artifacts. They are unusual and cannot be found in the Caribbean. They convey a sense of difference from the Caribbean. Another interesting
thing is that the difference suggests American rather than British influence in the arts in Guyana.

*In a previous interview you mentioned being influenced by Latin-American writers.*

Some of them, yes.

*Is there an affinity between the Guyanese and Latin-American imagination?*

Maybe. I don’t know. One day many years ago I was at home and a chap brought a book about Chile or Peru. It mentioned the name of a disease as something in the sky. I was struck by this. Then I found a poem I had written long years ago which mentioned a disease as something in the sky — exactly the same thing. It shows what could happen. In my poem I compared clouds to the mouth of an idiot child. And this is exactly the point that was made in the book. This means that at some remote distance in time, I had seen something reminding me that a child’s face could be disfigured in the same way that an Indian child was disfigured long ago by disease. We don’t know much about diseases in this country. So far, I’m just going about exploring possibilities that you can’t see on the surface, but when you go into them, you can discern resemblances that are rooted in the landscape.

*This is a South American landscape?*

Yes. It is South American, not Caribbean.

*In your early career with the P.P.P. you said you observed a black woman who gave money to support the party because of “the nice white lady” — Mrs. Jagan.*

It was self-contempt.
Which is a result of colonial indoctrination. You think self-contempt has something to do with the political problems we have had?

Yes. What I mean by self-contempt comes from our relationship with the so-called developed world. The American system of education, for instance, places us in position of contempt.

*It defines us as inferior.*

It makes us define ourselves in terms of others, and we come off worse. It is brutal. Look at what is happening with American T.V. What it gives is a visual image. Even when you have stopped seeing it, it remains in your mind. That is serious. Its effect cannot be counteracted by mass education, for instance, in schools. It needs individual education to work against that. That means it is going to take a long time.

*You have made a big change from your original vision of a collective solution to the world's problems through collective measures. Now you're saying that individual measures are needed.*

I think that is the situation.

*It seems to me that you are downplaying political solutions to the problems of the world.*

I wouldn't say “downplaying”. I no longer see politics as overriding. I still have no doubt about the importance of politics. But the personal is needed too — both. The word “and” is very important in my thinking, that is to say, something *and* something, not something and then something else.

*It is the idea of union.*
Not long ago, I wrote a poem that I called "Conjunction". That is the idea. Things must be joined. There has to be conjunction:

' Very sudden is the sought conjunction.  
Sought once over and found once over  
And again, in the same sudden place.'
DOROTHY ST. AUBYN

Star-World of The Amerindians

"Twas he that shook honey from the leaves, hid fire from view and stopped the wine that ran everywhere in streams — then first did rivers feel the hallowed alder, then the sailor numbered the stars and called them by name — Pleiades, Hyades and Arctos, Lycaon's gleaming off-spring".

Virgil

Georgics: Book I

The shining stars were an unending source of wonder, awe and delight to the early Amerindians. Their predecessors had been engrossed with material things of wood and stone but the early Arawaks, who came through from South America around AD 50-54, had believed in a spirit world, had seen the stars shining in the sky, and had realised that the sun's warmth gave life to the earth, and that rain refreshed and strengthened every living thing.

I had been looking for an introduction to this article when I discovered a well-worn volume of Virgil containing the several books of the Georgics and also the Aeneid. The books of the Georgics had been published first in BC 29 and I discovered that far from being only meant for classical scholars they made wonderful and inspiring reading. And then on page I came across this statement:

Even from the day when Deucalion threw stones into the Empty world whence sprang man, a stony race.

And one Amerindian tribe in Guyana believe that men and women sprang from the seeds of the Mauritia palm — those that the men flung became men and those that the women flung became
What a far cry it is from BC 29 to AD 1988 – centuries of development, of men walking on the moon, of famine, struggle and disease. But still man’s inherent belief in spiritual things remains. For a moment let us look at the early Amerindians and see what they called the shining stars of our universe. The Evening Star, which we call Venus, they named Warakoma. The Morning Star they named Huewa. And the star of brightness, which we know as Jupiter, they called Wiva Kalimero. If a star shot across the sky and seemed to fall they called it Wai-taima. The Milky Way had a special legend. It was the path of the Maipuri, the bearer of Wai-e, a species of white clay of which their vessels were made. The nebulous spots are supposed to be the tracks of spirits which leave their footprints smeared with milk. They also asserted that the three nebulae within the Milky Way represented a tapir being chased by a dog, followed by a jaguar who is not particular in his choice for he takes either dog or tapir.

Virgil called the Pleiades group the daughters of Atlas and the Greek legend states that at one time there were seven stars. The name “Pleiades” is from the root “plei” to sail, and refers to their rising at the season when good weather for sailing approaches. Towards the end of the second millenium BC a seventh star became extinct. In ancient Greek legends it is related that Orion vainly pursued the Pleiades, which occurs in the Bull constellation, referring to their rising above the horizon just before the reappearance of Orion. It is said that the star, Merope, a daughter of Atlas, was the only Pleiad with a husband in the Underworld. So she deserted her six starry sisters in the night sky and has never been seen since.

Many years ago when I did extensive research on various subjects, utilising the gigantic library of the British Museum, I came across the legend of the Pleiades as related by an Amerindian tribe in Guyana. It fascinated me so much so that I made notes in a red exercise book (fortunately in ink and not pencil) and when I was writing this article those notes were of
immense value. It is a story of jealousy in which a man falls in love with his brother’s wife and determines to get her. So he kills his brother and in order to prove to the wife that her husband is dead presents an arm of the murdered man in evidence. She is unaware of the guilt of her brother-in-law and in the process of time she becomes his wife. But the spirit of the murdered man haunts a tree growing near their home and the night air is filled with laments from the vicinity of the tree. She listens and eventually discovers how her husband met his death. She becomes moody and depressed and one day, unable to bear the burden any longer, blurts out that she knew he had murdered his brother. The man, disgusted that his deed had been discovered, decides on a terrible revenge. He will get rid not only of his wife but also of their child. On the pretext that he is going hunting for acouris he digs a large hole and entices his wife to the area. When she stumbles into the hole which he had cleverly covered with branches he also throws the child therein and covers them up. That night the spirit of the dead man appears in a dream and says to his brother “I am not angry at your deed for the woman had been transformed into an acouri and the child into an adourie. So they are free from your malice”. The cowardly brother entreats the pardon of his murdered brother. He is then told “If you wish to be free of being troubled every night you must disembowel the body and scatter the entrails. If you do this you will be free of any further terror and further, every year, an abundance of fish will gather in the river”. When the man awakes his dream is still with him and eventually he does what the dead brother had told him. He dismembers the body and when the scattered entrails float on the water they do not remain there but float upwards to the skies and assume the appearance of the Seven Stars or Pleiades. But one part of the dream came true – at the appearance of the Pleiades excellent fish are abundant in the rivers.

Certain birds were held in reverence by the various tribes and this is particularly so with the Arawaks and Warraus who associated the Powis (crax sp) with the Southern Cross. As the
Southern Cross makes its appearance they assert that the nearer pointer is that of an Indian just about to let fly his arrow. The further one indicates his companion with a fire stick running up behind. This constellation also serves as an indication for the hunting of the bird. At one time the Powis was shot so often that it was in danger of becoming extinct. The Macushi tribes regard the Southern Cross as the home of the spirit of this bird. In his book, *Travels in British Guiana*, Richard Schomburgk records that certain tribes believe that when the Powis commences its low moan the Cross stands erect.

The snake has always figured in every folk tale of nearly every nation and the Arawaks and Warraus have a beautiful legend about Pegasus and Scorpio. It is known as the *Babracote of the Camudi* (snake). Four bright stars with four imaginary lines constitute the square frame of Pegasus and another thick cluster represents Scorpio as a snake. The legend concerns a man living with his wife and mother-in-law. He is never lucky when out hunting and because of this ill-luck his mother-in-law continually nags him. For a time he does nothing, taking her taunts out of love for his wife. Finally he takes action. He makes his wife accompany him on a journey and they take sufficient cassava to last a long journey. When they are far away from home he kills the wife and cuts her into pieces. The flesh is then dried on a babracote. He takes back with him the victim’s liver and invites his mother-in-law to eat thereof, which she does without suspecting. The continued absence of her daughter alarms her and she finds out that she has been killed and her liver given to her to eat. She plans a cunning revenge. She goes off to see a water camudi and arranges with him to catch the man and swallow him. The water camudi agrees. She then induces her son-in-law to go out and fish in the vicinity but her actions are so strange that the man smells a rat and sends his younger brother instead. He is promptly swallowed by the camudi. She is thwarted of her revenge and the son-in-law departs leaving his mother-in-law behind. On a clear night you can still see the babracote where the wife was barbecued and close to her
you can just make out the camudi with his swollen body containing the younger brother.

These then are some of the legends of the Amerindians of the Guyanas and when the Morning Star or Okona-Kura of the Warraus rises remember that it was she who stuck in the hole when her people came to earth from above the skies and peopled the earth. And if you meet a member of the Macushi tribe they will remind you that the morning dew is the spittle of the stars and the Makanaaima once walked this earth and talked with men for are not his footprints on the rocks?
ANDREW SALKEY

Here's Thinking of You Sam - Sam

The first time I met Sam was in March 1952, in London; the last time was in June 1992, also in London.

Between then and at the time of his death, in 1994, we continued our 42-year exchange of letters, telephone calls, magazine and newspaper cuttings, and books.

Our first meeting was at the BBC’s Caribbean Service offices in the old Peter Robinson building in Oxford Circus in 1952.

At that time, Sam’s first novel, A Brighter Sun, hadn’t yet been published; in fact, it was a matter of months away from publication.

George Lamming’s first, In the Castle of My Skin, would be published in the following year, 1953.

Edgar Mittelholzer’s first, Corentyne Thunder, was out in 1941; his A Morning at the Office, in 1950.

Some of the English and Caribbean literary persons who were to give help and encouragement, in one way or another, in those days, were Henry Swanzy, Willy Edmett, Mary Treadgold, Willy Richardson and Kenneth Ablack, all of the BBC’s Caribbean Service, and Tambimittu, Arthur Calder-Marshall, John Davenport, V.S. Pritchett, Kingsley Martin and Marghanita Laski, in their own private right.

What do I remember of Sam and our first meeting in the BBC Canteen in Oxford Street? Well, first of all, I was there at Henry Swanzy’s invitation, because I had contributed poems and short stories to the “Caribbean Voices” literary programme, while in Jamaica; my first acceptance was a poem dedicated to George Bernard Shaw, on one of his very many birth dates; I had written it in 1945, while still in school at Munro College.

Sam was also a similarly invited back-home visitor. We talked season and weather. We chatted about the wickedness of the cold and bone-slicing damp of our respective London rooms his in
S.E.3., mine in N.W.3. We went on to remark on the fact that we (he from Trinidad and I from Jamaica) had really never before met people from Barbados or the then British Guiana or Grenada or St. Lucia, or indeed, from Nigeria or the then Gold Coast or Sierra Leone or Egypt...

For that we definitely had London to thank; actually, our colonial capitals, Sam’s and mine, could hardly supply what the metropolitan centre could so easily do, in that regard.

It wasn’t long after we had had our first cup of canteen tea and chocolate-covered digestive biscuits that I glimpsed Sam’s warm-hearted humour. He had said that his workmates at the Walls factory in the South East, where he had been employed as a sausage packer, up until a week before our meeting, all thought of him as a princely Indian down on his luck; to which Sam’s comment had been, “Man, I didn’t have the heart to tell them how my ol’ man, the Maharajah, ups and cut off my monthly allowance of rubies and diamonds, because I left home to live among sausage packers.”

Our next meeting, still in 1952, was at the launching party for Sam’s *A Brighter Sun*. This occasion was a marvellous boost to my no-first-novel-as-yet ego. Sam’s publisher was Alan Wingate. The fare was boarding school spare and health-giving: oatmeal biscuits, Cheddar cheese and Robinson’s lemon barley water.

Sam’s whispered, off-the-cuff remark was, “These people come like serious economizers, country!”

A fortnight after that, on a Sunday afternoon, we ran into each other at Hyde Park Corner, and discovered we were still baffled by the Alan Wingate party-fare. Sam had by then taken up to referring to me, affectionately, as Son-Son; and I, to him, as Sam-Sam. So, at Hyde Park Corner, he said, “Son-Son, like these publisher people don’t lash out in the food and drink department, if they can help it. Seems like a Tory habit! Frugal, for so!”

Henry Swanzy at the Caribbean Service held “at home” readings in the comfortable, booksy sitting room of his house in Swiss Cottage, with near-endless bottles of rough cider.
Worthington and Guinness to loosen our none too reluctant tongues.

Sam was always brilliantly funny at these soirees, gently hurling picong at unsuspecting, pompous, would-be writers or smiling disbelievingly at Henry Swanzy’s stories which were usually replete with portraits of alienated African colonial administration civil servants and military officers who had gone bush.

There we met Edgar Mittelholzer, Leon Damas, Cyprian Ekwensi and David Diop, and there we started discussions that would affect us all much later on in our early writing years: peasant and working-class personae as acceptable protagonists; the appropriate uses of dialect (as we called it, then) in narrative and dialogue composition; dialect orthography (which still occupies us, today); and the claim that we were not explicit enough in pointing out who was who, racially, in our stories and novels. Sam struggled with editors and the reports of publishers’ readers on those needling issues, for years and so did quite a few of his fellow-Caribbean authors.

The years rocketed by. My first novel was published in 1959. Sam wrote me one of his only purely serious letters I was to receive. In it he said, “Son-Son, you Jamaicans need Carnival in the worst way.”

Looking back, now, I don’t think that Sam meant much more than this: you fellows take things far too seriously. You need to laugh a little more often than you do. Don’t go headlong for the dramatic! Try comedy for a change!

Or as some of my American students would advise, “Chill out!”

In 1961, hardly by special arrangement and more by buck-up, because of a change collision somewhere in Piccadilly Circus, Sam and I went off to a PEN Club meeting in Glebe Place, Chelsea. We ran into John Hearne and V.S. Naipaul.

It was just before A House for Mr. Biswas was published and before John Hearne’s Land of the Living had appeared.
Vidia hadn’t yet dubbed Sam a peasant writer and John hadn’t yet found Sam’s comic genius a political embarrassment.

The four of us sat together. Sam and John had been at the sherry, with a will, for ages. Vidia and I were vastly hungry and loaded up cucumber sandwiches. Vidia was an emphatic vegetarian.

I can’t remember now what had triggered the curiously overzealous exchange between Sam and John but I do know that not a few equally sherry-addicted PEN members had taken clear sides: Sam’s, which argued that the Royal Family was a drag on the Colonies and John’s, which espoused the adamant opposite.

Sam’s parting shot to me and at John was: “Oh, Gawd, wherever you turn you bouncing up Empire Kitcheners. Britain needs you, bad, John!”

Even though he accompanied his grand charge with an extended arm and pointing index finger, as in the famous poster, Sam was all smiles and open chuckles. No sign of protesting bitterness! No vestige of anger or rage!

So typical of Sam’s way, I said to myself then. So easy-going yet astutely critical. It was fairly similar to his creative procedure in renaming and repopulating London in Caribbean terms, in his short stories and novels.

This superb literary facility, the ease with which he was able to transform whole sections of a centuries’-old city by adding to its social complexion, Caribbeanizing certain of its Anglo-Saxon attitudes and activities by affectionate renaming, and making his readers sense and see difference as desirable variety, is one of Sam’s major authorial achievements.

I personally believe that Sam did his renaming not merely up to a level of words only but up to a level of intended meaning and feeling.

Some time after the PEN Club sherry-inspired contestation between Sam and John, I got an untypically short letter from Sam. Let me quote from it: “Son-Son, you didn’t know, eh? That thing the other night up by the PEN place, it happened because I couldn’t take John and the Royal family foolishness, any
longer. You think John vex? You see him, since? I know you Jamaican fellers, you know. You can carry a grudge, too sweet.”

That was something that Sam had no time for, had no abiding memory of, wouldn’t countenance. He was free from holding grudges because he never once bore them in any of his relationships.

Throughout the forty-two years of our friendship, Sam seemed usually to arrive at parties or meetings or other venues, alone, walking slowly, in quiet loafers, always of upright bearing a companionable smile on his handsome face, a mischievous, quicksilver gleam in his eyes, a ready hello whenever he approached you. Often, I’d earn an embrace, particularly when I was to become the butt of his good-natured picong.

The apparent lonely entrances I mentioned, a while ago, which I have observed, time and time again, were never ones that made Sam look inconsolably dejected or gloomy. Why was this so? Because the seemingly lonely, physical prospect was usually offset by his innate warmth and amiability.

Sam possessed these two distinctive personal qualities, in shades writ large, in everything he thought, wrote and will be remembered for, as an ironist, satirist and comic intelligence.

Sam left the South East and went to live in Hereford Road, in West London, quite near where I would live two years afterwards, in Moscow Road, off Queensway. It was 1963. I think. Sam was well aware of my quiet mania for saving everything (except money, he would say); he knew I was an avid keeper of all sorts: people’s letters, casual notes, birthday and Christmas cards, posters, all books, inscribed copies of first editions, old radio scripts, literary manuscripts, theatre programmes and so on.

Sometimes, he called me “librarian”, sometimes “record office”. He frequently rang me requesting the name of the book reviewer who had had something iffy and possibly inaccurate to say about the relationship between Tiger and Urmilla, the central characters in A Brighter Sun, or asking me for my hugely uneducated opinion concerning the differences in the curry
powder mixtures between Trinidadian Indian and Guyanese Indian cookery; I knew that this last was asked with much mickey-taking uppermost in Sam’s mind.

Still on the subject of me as a keeper of all sorts: he once saw me searching in my letters-folder for a cablegram from my mutual friend, A.J. Seymour, and turned to our party guests and said, “If you ask Andrew for the time, he’s got a whole file on it.”

‘Picong’ and ironical teasing were all second nature niceties in Sam’s social style, and affectionately so. I bore their brunt in letters and in person, for years: because of my interest in Marxism, he used to hum Red Sails in the Sunset, over the telephone, whenever I would so much as mention anything to do with the USSR; after my trip to Cuba in 1968, he wrote me as “Jamaican Fidel”; in conversation, he described St. Patrick of Ireland as “the feller with the snakes”, Enoch Powell as “Rivers”, Prince Phillip as “the Queen’s Consortium” and Eric Williams as “Dick Tracy”; and much, much later on, after he and I had moved to North America, he to Canada, I to the States, he decided I was “Prez”, the impresario who was expected to arrange all his speaking and reading engagements and teaching stints in America.

I remember well his reading at Hampshire College; in my teaching practice, I had never before seen the wholehearted attention, the hair-trigger response to humour and wit, and the sheer affection coming from an audience of undergraduates: and at Hampshire, most of my students seem stylishly world-weary and apathetic.

But I’m getting ahead of my recall. In a BBC General Overseas Service interview I did with Sam, I asked him, “What’s your own favourite book?” And the answer came back like stretched elastic, An Island is a World. I went on to ask about his favourite short story, and he said, “‘My Girl and the City’”. Which made me think of the fact that Sam seemed always partial to cities or indeed escapes to cities, and partial to setting the action of his plot-lines in them, either at home in Trinidad or here in England;
true not only of his stories and novels but also of his radio and television plays, as well.

Of course, it doesn’t much matter now that I can’t argue with Sam but my own favourites are: the novels, An Island is a World and The Lonely Londoners, the stories, ‘Waiting for Aunty to Cough’ and ‘When Greek meets Greek’ and the plays, ‘Home Sweet India’ and Highway in the Sun’.

Sam and I were invited to read our work at five secondary modern schools, three in London and two in Brighton. That was some time in April 1969, I believe. I always enjoyed Sam’s readings, in the studio and at public functions. The school readings were equally splendid and his replies to the questions put to him by pupils were of the utmost clarity and moral merit. They were also very, very funny. The boys and girls loved his humour and his relaxed personality, at school after school. They also lapped up his stories of hardly concealed irreverence aimed jauntily at the teachers, principals and education authority officers who had had anything to do with Sam’s school days in Trinidad.

I suppose I thought it was my time to rib him a little, so I said, after we got back to London, when the tour was over, :”D’ you realize you could have started your own school after all those incredible readings and question-and-answer sessions?” And Sam said, “Time to joke and time to starve. You talking starvation, right now.”

Little did he or I know, then, that he would become a much sought-after writer-in-residence and professor of literature at universities throughout Canada. He also taught for a semester at the University of Iowa at Iowa City in the States.

What was life like for Sam in the fifties, sixties and seventies? The fifties and sixties were hopeful, promising and very fruitful. Among the many publications during those two decades, I remember some of the highlights were: A Brighter Sun; An Island is a World; The Lonely Londoners; Ways of Sunlight; Turn Again, Tiger; I Hear Thunder; The Housing Lark; and
The Plains of Caroni.

The Seventies could be considered a time of hazardous downturn, though I remember *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* and *Moses Ascending* as two of the significant publications, remarkable for their avoidance of sentimentality when their themes appeared to indicate sentimental artifice as the main thrust of both narratives; *Moses Ascending* was even thought of as Sam’s “come-back novel” by a couple of reviewers in the popular press. That novel was followed, eight years afterwards in 1983, by *Moses Migrating*, forming two novels in a trilogy or tetralogy which I’m not sure that Sam completed.

He always mentioned that he was at his short story and novel writing best, in the fifties and sixties. He was also writing radio and television plays well into the seventies. Whatever very little journalism and short fiction breaks he had in *The Evening Standard* dried up after about six months.

Whereas most of the English Language services of the BBC in Bush House supported freelance work for a handful of us (I recall Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul, Gordon Woolford and myself variously doing writing, editing, interviewing and reading), Sam only took part as a guest author in domestic service literary programmes and minimally in overseas broadcasts.

I wasn’t surprised when he wrote me in the States, in 1978, and said he was thinking of making a move to Canada. By then, much of the freelance work at Bush House had dwindled considerably, because of Foreign Office subsidy cuts in the English language services. I had moved on to teaching in America. Sam’s dream of Canada was very understandable; for, after all, his wife’s folks were already living in Calgary, Alberta.

By the way, I like Sam’s biographical entry in the 1988 edition of *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*; it reads, in part: “Selvon pioneered the use of Caribbean dialect for other than merely comic effects; he makes it a flexible instrument capable of farce, comedy, satire and even irony and pathos. All these modes operate in his sharp-edged interpretation of West Indian
settlement in Britain..."

Of course, Sam offered his generation of Caribbean writers and those following us so much more than the gift of the domestic as a viable and reliable source of fictional narrative; he gave voice and authenticity to the portraiture of peasant and working class ‘personae’. He made us believe in the depiction of their characterization. He made them laugh at the middle class anxiety and pretensions, and at the same time, he gave them ample semblances of tenderness and compassion.

Speaking of these considerate qualities, I remember the compassion Sam showed when we talked about Edgar Mittelholzer’s death in 1965. Edgar had walked out of his house in Godalming, Surrey, and entered a neighbouring field. He had with him a plastic bag holding a box of matches and a container of petrol. When he was found, it’s reported that his burnt body was in a kneeling, devotional posture, albeit pitched backwards.

In paraphrase, Sam wanted to know why? Why suicide, any at all? Why that extraordinary choice of death? Wasn’t Edgar happily married to his second wife? Wasn’t he the father of an infant son? Wasn’t he a writer of over twenty-three books, quite a few of them best sellers? Wasn’t he only in his mid-fifties?

Also, in paraphrase, Sam wanted to know why, at that point in his apparently comfortable life, he should have wanted to end it?

And then, Sam made his most profoundly compassionate suggestion. Yet, again, by way of paraphrase: in spite of everything, Edgar must have been lonely. He must have felt he was a failure, in some crucial way. What was he getting rid of by fire that he could not have got rid of in some other way, patiently, by living?

About eight years before Sam left for Canada in 1978, he, John La Rose, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Aubrey Williams, Austin Clarke and many other Caribbean writers and artists and I were invited to attend the 1970 inaugural republic celebrations in Guyana.
One of the many activities some of us were asked to participate in was a visit to a Georgetown school. And, as usual, Sam shone in the classroom contact with the pupils. It was London and Brighton, all over again. It was especially unique and memorable, because it was taking place in a country in our home area. And it was Sam’s largesse of generosity of spirit and his abundant creative talent and joyful humour that kept the teachers, pupils and myself thoroughly engaged and loving every moment of his readings and impromptu remarks.

I miss you, Sam-Sam.
History as Autobiography?

(In memory of my Mother who died in England on 10 October 1995, aged 63.)

....the really important reinterpretations in history come not from discovery of new material, but from a change in perspective .... History is autobiography, in that it is the instrument for getting to know oneself.... The central character in a history book is ultimately the author himself, in the same way as he is in a good novel.

Theodore Zeldin.

I was born in 1950 at Palmyra Village, in the East Canje District of Berbice, British Guiana, at the edge of the sugar-cane fields of the Plantation Rose Hall, Booker Estate. A few hundred yards away, at the back of our house, our rice field and those of other small cultivators ran, ribbon-like, for a couple of miles, disappearing to the foreshore at the confluence of the Canje and Berbice Rivers. The foreshore, about a mile wide, hid behind a swampy, impenetrable band of lush mangrove. It made this strip of coastal savannah feel cosy; the sleek cattle and unhurried herdsmen lent bucolic suggestions; but this idyll could be quickly saddened by visitations of floods or droughts.

A mile away, to the north-east, the Corentyne Coast began — the region so evocatively treated in Edgar Mittelholzer’s Corentyne Thunder. This monotonously flat, wind-swept strip of rich alluvium interspersed with sand-reefs, is a haven for sugar-cane, rice, coconuts, and cattle. We found it difficult to make a distinction between the resources of the sugar estates — cane, grass for our cattle, wild vegetables, water-nut leaves (the improvised plate at Hindu and Muslim weddings), fire-wood, fish, etc. — and our own.
One always felt elevated by the caressing, clean Atlantic breeze, under a spacious sky. The enervating tropics seemed out-of-place on the Corentyne. People were healthier here; malaria was less severe; one tended to dream and talk big; the dialects were spiced with hyperboles; going over the top was an instinct; the fantastic seemed ordinary. One Corentyne sugar plantation, Port Mourant, where ‘coolies’ were always allowed to keep cattle and plant rice, between 1948 and 1972, yielded several West Indian Test cricketers: John Trim (1915-1960), Rohan Kanhai, Ivan Madray, Basil Butcher, Joe Solomon, and Alvin Kallicharran. Across the river from us, from Plantation Blairmont, came another superb Test cricketer, Roy Fredericks. By the 1950s-1960s, Berbice had also produced many doctors, lawyers, school-teachers, civil servants, and businessmen. A cousin of mine, Len Baichan, played three Test matches for the West Indies in the mid-1970s. The achievement was solid; the cockiness had foundations; the people of Port Mourant even claimed credit for producing better, more accomplished, criminals.

We drank a lot; but we were religious in an easy way — no fanaticism. African people were Christians; Indians were Hindus, Muslims or Presbyterians (Canadian Mission). The contagious Hindu and Muslim festivals with their anarchic spontaneity and lavish feastings, were sustained by rice and cattle, commerce, or better wages on the sugar estates.

Three miles away from our village, on the right bank of the Berbice River, was New Amsterdam, the main town in Berbice, cluttered with Indian and Chinese shops, bulging with anything one fancied. I went daily to the town, to high school; but it is my late afternoons in the Public ‘Free’ Library, as the solid darkness descended quickly and myriad domestic chores were evaded, that will stay with me. The British Council Library, also, where I devoured English weeklies, The New Statesman, The Listener, The Manchester Guardian, often had to have several tries at getting me to leave.

I fed on two worlds — the village with its rich allure of a
reshaped Indian universe and its festivals, festivities, and peculiar rhythm of work and play, on one hand; and the creole world of African friends, books, and what I later learnt to call the ‘intellect’, on the other. We talked loudly, passionately; of Marxist politics and the Cuban and Chinese utopias; of the enchanting world of the imagination which Mittelholzer, from New Amsterdam, had pioneered in books,¹ and Martin Carter and V.S. Naipaul were crafting and rendering more meaningful; and, of course, cricket — day after day, as we concocted and embroidered upon our encounters with the great stars. The imagination never slept.

In New Amsterdam were the Berbice High School, founded by the Canadian Mission in 1916, and the Berbice Educational Institute, founded by an Indian Guyanese educationist, Alfred Ramlochand, in 1949. I went to the latter. At both schools, African, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Coloured (mixed races), even some European boys and girls, shared a rich childhood: everybody spoke creolese — only the dialect varied; malaria, the scourge of the colony had been eradicated by the late 1940s; life on the sugar estates run by Jock Campbell’s Booker had improved immeasurably; there were excellent cricket grounds, girls’ clubs, libraries, and other facilities at community centres on all estates; every village had access to a mission school with a nucleus of trained teachers; many girls were going on to secondary schools, even to teachers’ training college; a visibly growing professional class of university-educated people expanded our notion of possibilities.

But the sun was setting on the Empire. The nationalist movement, led by Cheddi Jagan and L.F.S. Burnham, had split on racial lines in the mid-1950s. The politics of hope had become infested with deep-seated racial fears, among African and Indian Guyanese, of the shape of post-colonial order. The slide into the racial violence of the early 1960s had begun. In Berbice, we were largely insulated from the more savage manifestations of our bigotry; old personal friendships, often, were
resilient, transcending the hate; but something pernicious, frighteningly diminishing, had crept up on us, penetrating our impressionable minds. Racism.

At 12 or 13, I tried but could not comprehend the anatomy of our intolerance. Our learning, in school, was still essentially irrelevant to our environment; no attempt was made to explain the roots of our troubles, not even at Queen’s College in Georgetown, where I moved later, in 1966. But we had become masters at talking away our racism — an aberration; yet another imperialist ruse to ‘divide-and-rule’; at times, even a false question which received Marxist wisdom quickly relegated to the ‘superstructure’. The problem was that we were offered no course in Guyanese history; we lacked the means for self-assessment.

It was not until I encountered Donald Wood’s great book, *Trinidad in Transition*, around 1971 in Canada, that I started to discern the rudiments of the shaping of the Guyanese intransigence. The most illuminating perspective lodged on the centrality of the coastal landscape — its implacability in the absence of a complex drainage and irrigation system, and its endemic malaria. Wood had written:

.....the coastal belt where they [the blacks] wanted to stay had been tamed into cultivation by the expenditure of much capital, labour and skill, and it is probably only the Dutch, with centuries of dearly bought experience in land reclamation behind them, who could have done it... The system could not be neglected, or portions would revert to swamp. A skilled vigilance was needed at all times to see where a dyke had to be strengthened and a new drain dug.  

I must have taken this for granted; I, therefore, could not grasp its implications: how landscape as capricious as this and different people’s perception of it, in changing historical contexts, shaped the present; how it could be seen as the primary framer of racial attitudes and, ultimately, as an element in the eclipsing of the optimism of the fragile nationalist coalition of the early 1950s. This
belongs to historiography. This was what Donald Wood taught me:

_The effects of this neglect of the drainage system [in British Guiana] really became serious in the 1950s, just when the Indians were making their mark on the plantations. The natural reluctance of many free villagers to return cap in hand for full-time estate work, growing competition of the Indians, over whom the planters had the satisfaction of holding the sanctions of the indenture system, combined with the heart-breaking difficulties of the terrain for poor men without the knowledge or the skills to curb the waters — a lack which later held back the development of peasant cane-farming and rice cultivation — all these factors help to explain a more uneasy and resentful atmosphere than ever existed in Trinidad._

My family grew rice, but they had been primarily cattle people for nearly a century in British Guiana. I took this for granted. It was many years later, in the early 1980s, when I became deeply involved in my father’s cattle business, that I started to explore this family obsession with cattle. I turned to the National Archives in Georgetown, to the Ships’ Registers of Indian indentured labourers to British Guiana.

As far as I could ascertain, my first ancestor in the colony was Sohun (Sohan), my mother’s paternal grandfather, who went there as a ‘bound coolie’ in the ship, ‘Rohilla’, which left Calcutta on 11 February 1875. He was 22 years old and originated in Doobaree Village, Azamgahr District, in Eastern United Provinces (U.P.). He was indentured to Plantation Rose Hall. Some years later, he bought land at Palmyra Village where he started to raise cattle; common pasturage abounded, before the introduction of rice. However, Sohan continued to work as head cattle-minder at neighbouring Prospect, a cattle estate owned by a Mr. Gill, a Scotsman. Sohan was an Ahir — the celebrated cattle-herding caste in the United Provinces and Bihar. His son, Latchman Sohan (1908-1989), my mother’s father, also, was a cattle-herder.
My mother's maternal grandfather, Jagarnath (1888-1958), went to British Guiana in the ship 'Ganges', which arrived there from Calcutta in late 1908. He, also, was indentured to Rose Hall. He was 20 years of age and, like Sohan, was an Ahir. Jagarnath was allowed to keep a few head of cattle on the sugar plantation, and when his only child, Ramdularie (1916-1985), my maternal grandmother, was married to Latchman Sohan in 1930, age 14, he bought land next door to the latter's family, at Palmyra, and moved his cattle there.

The Ahir's ancient love for cattle had survived the crossing. Jagarnath, also, was from Azamgahr District in Eastern U.P., his village was called Azampur. Kaila (1889-1956), his wife was not from this caste of cattle-herders; she was a Pasi, a low Shudra caste of tarimakers and watchmen. She had gone to British Guiana in September 1909, in the ship 'Ganges', from Bhagwanpur Village, Gonda District, Eastern U.P.; she went to British Guiana alone, aged 20: no relatives, man or woman, accompanied her.

I remember Kaila vaguely; but those memories are inviolable. A very dark, little woman, she was extremely industrious, and retained, to the end, a consuming devotion to her daughter and grandchildren. She was adept at the myriad, intricate tasks in rice-growing, as she was in growing vegetables; she was also meticulous in house-keeping, although she worked full-time in sugar-cane fields. Kaila and Jagarnath continued to live in the old 'logies' (ranges) at Rose Hall, although they had witnessed the fatal shooting of fourteen of their compatriots in March 1913 and, later, had acquired a substantial property for their daughter, away from the estate. Many of their jahajies (ship-mates) resided at Rose Hall. But on Saturday afternoons, freighted with fruits and sweet-meats, they would walk the five or six miles to visit their daughter at Palmyra. Frugal to the bone, it would have been painful to pay the fare to travel, whatever the weather; but no sacrifice was too great for the family. This passed on to my maternal grandmother, a woman of immense self-assurance and continuity of purpose: no patriarchy could
cripple her. 6

On my father’s side, his maternal grandfather, Sewnath (1881-1956), like Sohan and Jagarnath, was an Ahir. He came from Kharaura Village, Ghazipur District, Eastern U.P., and embarked at Calcutta on 8 October 1892, aged 11. He travelled in the ‘Avon’, and was accompanied by his sister, Sonborsi, aged 22, and her husband, Raghu, aged 30. Raghu, also, was an Ahir. It is interesting that the ship’s Register records that Sewnauth came with his parents. This, obviously, was a ruse to evade scrutiny of his case, in Calcutta.

The trio were indentured to Plantation Albion, Corentyne — an estate owned by Jock Campbell’s family. Sewnath acquired a formidable reputation as a shovelman on the estate. His earnings were better than most field-workers; and his astounding frugality enabled him to buy several properties at Palmyra and neighbouring Sea Well, at the junction of the East Canje and Corentyne districts. He was a keen cattle farmer, but he continued to work on the sugar plantation.

Sometime during the First World War, Sewnath had moved from Albion to Plantation Rose Hall, where he continued to work as a shovelman. An organised man, he had a reverence for time and apprehended, quickly, any suggestion of a chance for material gain: he combined estate labour with cattle-rearing, rice cultivation, and the growing of ground provisions. The idea of a holiday or a slack period was alien to him and his wife, Etwarie: on Sundays, they would both go to their farm at Blendal, on the west bank of the Canje River. They toiled until the solid darkness descended; then, as they crept the weary miles back to Palmyra in their donkey-cart laden with plaintains, cassava, bananas, etc., they never forgot to deposit some for their married daughters.

Etwarie, my father’s maternal grandmother, was born in British Guiana. She had been a Muslim but, apparently, had changed her name when she married Sewnath, sometime around 1898. She was industrious, energetic, and thrifty. For many years
she was a weeder in the sugar-cane fields at Rose Hall; she was also considered by many as the fastest rice planter in the area. Both Etwarie and Sewnath were impelled by a consuming passion to uplift their eight children: boys and girls received equal treatment. They gave one of their properties to their eldest child, Sukhia (1899-1969), my paternal grandmother, and her husband, Jagmohan (1891-1938), whom she married in 1913, aged 14. Their second daughter was married to Jagmohan’s brother, Mangal, who owned the best shop in the village from the early 1920s.

The background of Jagmohan is most intriguing. The tale is told of a man name Harpaul (1846-1934), an Ahir who had returned to India with his eldest son, Balgobin, around 1888. He left his wife in British Guiana, having counselled her that if he did not return to the colony by a designated jahaj (ship), she should feel free to take another husband. He did not return by that ship, and his wife, a Brahman born in the colony, my father’s paternal grandmother, invited a Brahman man, Ramsarran, to live with her. In early 1891, unannounced, Harpaul (with his son) returned from India and went to his old home at Warren (East Coast Berbice), where he met the wife he had left behind, pregnant by Ramsarran.

Harpaul had an amicable discussion with the latter whom he implored to return to his home. Ramsarran pointed to the potential difficulties raised by the pregnancy; but Harpaul assured him that he would bring up the child as if it were his own. That settled the matter. This child, Jagmohan, my paternal grandfather, was born on 15 August 1891; became a cattle-herder; fathered 14 children; and died prematurely, of pneumonia, on 17 September 1938, aged 47. He grew up at No. 7 Village (East Coast Berbice), and worked on his adopted father’s cattle farm. Ramsarran had returned to India around 1898.7

It was only after I had collected these stories that the contours of my family’s efforts and achievements started to cohere. But the Indian background of these people from the eastern
districts of the United Provinces remained a void. That was enmeshed in fragmentary, elusive tales centred on shadowy *arkatis*, the infamous recruiters — morose accounts of deception and separation which still claim local Indian emotions. Inquiry ceased; and an India of the imagination, a tendentious construct, became entrenched: its ingredients included mythical, idyllic images from Hindu classics, especially the *Ramayana*, the triumphalism and pathos of Bombay movies since the late 1930s, and the heroic exploits of India’s cricketers, commencing, in the 1890s, with the legendary Prince Ranjitsinhji.8

This became the solid, real India. Most saw no need to visit India, even if they could afford to. The India of the imagination could enthrall and inspire — a beacon by which to steer; besides, it was sanitised, largely insulated from the bigotry of caste and the shame of want. It endures.

Towards the end of the 1980s, I endeavoured to recover the real India of these North Indian ‘bound coolies’ in British Guiana. A fount of rare illumination presented itself with my encounter of Brij Lal’s *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians.*9 Here, in a refreshingly lucid and dispassionate way, the unexamined dogma of deception and kidnapping, is scrutinised and largely debunked. Lal had unearthed compelling socio-economic reasons for their leaving; and one feels coaxed into adopting these, to see their role in shaping the temperament of the indentured labourers and their descendants in the sugar colonies.

*Girmitiyas*, also, had a seminal influence on my way of seeing; the resilience of the Indians in Guyana; their thrift and ambition for their family — their achievements, are rendered more intelligible because we now have an authentic overview of real eastern UP and western Bihar, from the latter half of the nineteenth century. We do not have to perpetuate the India of the imagination as the point of departure.

Fear of Black reprisal rooted in the scars of slavery and the undercutting of their bargaining strength from the mid-1840s
by Indian indentureds, in conjunction with an exaggerated African perception of Indian ascendancy especially since the 1920s, have fed an instinct among Indian Caribbean people to get double-billing in the historiography of oppression: to see in Indian indentureship 'a new system of slavery'; to promote the notion of involuntary migration rooted in deception and kidnapping in India — consciously or unconsciously to assuage African sensibilities. This, however, has not lessened the undercurrent of Black-Indian antipathy and mutual insecurity in Guyana. One could argue, also, that a compelling explanation for the dense undergrowth of Marxist rhetoric in post-war politics there, springs from the deep-seated character of racial perceptions, and a fear of confronting its dangerous implications; to address it obliquely or not at all — to strangle it with dogmas; to wish it away.

I believe that only mutual security could create the basis for the evolution of a Guyanese national identity; and that this identity could not be monolithic. It must accommodate diversity for the foreseeable future. Papering over the racial chasm with the myth of democratic politics, even if rooted in free and fair elections, will not suffice. I argued, recently, that racial prejudice has lodged in most Guyanese, and I suggested that writers should address this issue personally — to comprehend the 'archaeology' of their flawed vision. This could be done in tandem with a historiography which assesses the peculiar contribution of each group and the context of their respective achievements. It is essential to comprehend the differences if we are to minimise their potentially destructive properties; to minimise them in the historical reconstruction is to feed incomprehension — to bottle up the antipathy; to cultivate another explosion.

The history of African Guyanese achievement must be written. This may be done best from the inside, by Black Guyanese scholars. It could address the basis of the fear of Indian domination; but it may also look at African achievement in the
humanising of the landscape; their efforts to acquire land; their role in the rise of the gold, diamond, bauxite, and lumbering industries — as pioneers of the interior; their contribution to the reshaping of Christianity and the development of education; their profound, seminal achievements in the professions, in the civil service, in local government and national politics; in journalism and pressure politics; in nursing, and myriad artisanal occupations; in works of the creative imagination, etc. 11

Such a study will certainly assess the work of an extraordinary Guyanese, Rev. E.R.O. Robertson, the first Black Methodist minister in British Guiana. His efforts to forge links between Africans and Indians in the colony, in the early 1920s, is an epic of imagination, magnanimity of spirit, and resolution. Robertson was a vigorous champion of the Indian rice farmers against the bigotry of Governor Collet at great personal cost. The Methodist Church constantly hounded him to eschew what they saw as politics, and when he persisted, they transferred him to another colony.

Robertson had three principal qualities which enabled him to be a trusted advocate of Indian rice farmers, between 1920 and 1923. He had a broader, humanistic conception of the role of the Church — saving souls was secondary to improving the life of the underdog, irrespective of race or religion. He had unimpeachable credentials as a fighter for the Africans — he did not have to look over his shoulders when he spoke for Indian farmers. Moreover, unlike many African leaders in British Guiana, Robertson saw no inherent contradiction between the rise of the rice industry, a predominantly Indian activity, and the advancement of African people. Like Joseph Ruhomon, the first Indian Guyanese intellectual, Robertson was a beacon of hope for broader loyalties: his life had no room for debilitating racial spite.

Robertson’s radical theology brought him into conflict with his White Methodist colleagues as early as August 1817. In a letter to the press, which his Superintendent in the colony, Rev. Jones,
deemed as ‘calculated to do us harm’, he defined his central prompting:

*I have always been of ...... opinion that [the] clergy are playing a losing game in not standing by the farmers and in not using their influence to have established a flourishing peasant proprietary ... As ministers of the Churches of the colony, some of us know that our preachings and our vestments are a huge farce, since they do the people no good. As a matter of fact, we are working from the wrong end, discussing to them high theological dogmas when we should urge them out into the fields...... I find it more profitable to some of our men to spend an hour with them in their cane-farms two or three times in the week, than to talk of the spiritual things which have no relation to their everyday life... Let us get a prosperous peasantry established and a good many of our problems will disappear.*

In October 1917, the General Secretary of the Wesleyan Society in London responded that Robertson was ‘one of the young colonised people who want to see their race rise’, but that he wished he could ‘get a little self-restraint and wisdom as time goes on......’ 13 Robertson, however, grew even less restrained: he was instrumental in creating a Loan Bank and promoting cane-farming among Black villagers. His superiors in the Church were antagonised; and by May 1919, they began what became a veritable crusade to exile him to another colony. Rev. Jones informed his General Secretary in London: ‘Mr Robertson, by his continued advocacy of the interests of his race and general activity in political affairs, has gradually won for himself a prominent place in the community, and his removal from the colony will certainly give rise to considerable comment......’ But he noted that Robertson was unrepentant: ‘......[he] maintains that it is his duty to look after the interests of his race, and to exercise what he terms his “wider ministry”.’ 14

It was this anchor of racial security and his conviction of this ‘wider ministry’, which he took to his representation of
Indian rice farmers on the Corentyne Coast, in the early 1920s. Robertson's fearlessness in exposing Governor Collet's dismal rice policy and his obscurantist position on drainage and irrigation, evoked renewed opposition from his colleagues in the Church. In April 1922, in the heat of his fight with the Governor, his new Superintendent wrote to London, renewing the call for his removal to another colony. He asserted: 'There is no doubt in my mind about Mr. Robertson having neglected what I regard as his proper work to help the farmers'. And he bemoaned his undiminished zeal: 'Mr Robertson maintains that this is part of his work as a minister in attempting to better their social condition'.

In June 1922, as H.N. Critchlow of the British Guiana Labour Union and other African leaders campaigned for Governor Collet's retention, for a second term, on the absurd premise that his experience of the colony equipped him best to undertake drainage and irrigation. Robertson, however, gravely pained by the Governor's ruinous rice policy for the Indians, forthrightly opposed his remaining in the colony. He countered that Collet was, in fact, "determined to oppose every effort on the part of the people... to secure efficient drainage and irrigation schemes". He was unequivocal: 'We must drive the Governor to contemplate in his retirement his mistake in driving a people to desperation and ruin... The Governor has shut the door to all this nonsense about his retention'.

Robertson fought the Indian rice farmers' cause because he saw the whole colony as beneficiaries of all manifestations of indigenous enterprise, in conjunction with a thriving sugar industry. His broader vision accommodated the security of African people as well, as he argued in February 1923:

...the negro race has suffered more than any other through the collapse of our best industries. Financially, morally, and spiritually they are feeling it. Let them insist upon the Governor at once initiating irrigation schemes, subsidising the rice and
sugar industries, instead of talking grandiloquent nonsense about hinterland development.\textsuperscript{18}

But he knew that he was losing his battle with his Church to remain in British Guiana (they transferred him to the Leeward Islands in early 1924); and in what may be seen as an epilogue to his work for African and Indian farmers, he reflected:

\textit{I have been a minister for over fifteen years and I frankly confess that the social conditions of my people [African and Indian] had a powerful effect upon my conception of the ministry. . . I cannot conceive why I should close my eyes to the distressing social conditions of my people or consider them of no account. If ever [a] man had a ‘call’ to the ministry, I had, but a ministry that took in the whole of life. . . my ‘call’ was to preach a social gospel. . .}\textsuperscript{19}

Racial intransigence runs deep in the Guyanese tradition, but this oasis of magnanimity and tolerance, also, belongs to this tradition.

\textbf{Notes}


3. Ibid., pp 6-7.

4. Ibid., p 7.

5. I consulted these after I had read Raymond T. Smith, ‘Some Social Characteristics of Indian Immigrants to British Guiana’, Population
Studies, Vol. 13, Pt 1, (1959)

6. Much of this sketch of Jagarnath and Kaila is based on my interview with Ramdularie in May 1982.

7. I have relied heavily on my father’s eldest brother, Sarran Jagmohan, for this sketch of my father’s family. I interviewed him in April 1986, in Guyana. The information is contained in three letters he sent from Toronto, Canada, dated 21 July 1994; 14 and 16 March 1995.


15. M.MS. (Box 731), no. 1937, J.B. Brindley to Amos Barnet, 25 April 1922. Earlier, on 4 April 1922, Brindley had informed Barnet that the Royal Bank of Canada was suing Robertson for $2,000: he had ‘given his name as security for loans advanced... to farmers engaged in cane and rice cultivation. Commerical depression and failure of crops prevented farmers from repaying their loans...’ But Brindley conceded: ‘The only thing I can say in his defence, I believe he was sincere in his desire to help his fellow men, anxious to see them independent as farmers on their own account, instead of labourers in the cane fields’.

16. The Daily Argosy, 25, 30 June 1922. This paper opposed the retention of Collet: ‘Crops are ruined at one time by drought and another by flood, the numbers of the stock raised are sadly depleted, the health of the people are grievously undermined, yet His Excellency remains unperturbed, a twentieth century edition of the fiddling Nero........’ ......Leader, The Daily Argosy, 2 July 1922.

17. E.R.O Robertson (Mahaica) to the Editor, [The
Daily Argosy [?], no date] The letter was dated, 30 June 1922. See M.M.S. (Box 731), no. 1946.


19. Ibid.
This salute to Austin Clarke¹ and his creative genius and social commitment has been too long deferred but I am very glad to be part of it. To put it simply, he has been a mighty social force in this city, and an inestimable gift from the Caribbean to it. I leave it to others to speak of his sterling service to black Toronto at a time when it was especially lonely and brave and unrewarding. That would be the late 1950s and the 1960s, when he was a founder of the Ebo Society for instance. He spoke out then more loudly and clearly than anyone else, memorably in a much noticed article in Maclean’s Magazine in 1963 — a remarkable year for him incidentally—an article titled “A Black Man Talks about Race Prejudice in White Canada.” And surely, to come closer to my particular subject this evening, only Austin Clarke himself can even hint at the extent of his generosity over many years to aspiring writers in this city, very many of them black. I am not among those legions of aspiring novelists myself but I have certainly experienced his warmth as well. However, this is clearly not the occasion for extended remarks on my part. We all know just whom we really came out to experience. What I think I ought to try to do is alert us in the very brief space available here to a proposition about the real eminence of the man we are gathered to honor. It is a proposition apparently not yet widely entertained in the Caribbean.

A very good case can be made that Austin Clarke is the anglophone Caribbean’s most archetypal, representative writer. By this I mean that most of the important thematic and ideological preoccupations of West Indian novelists are Clarke’s native ground and represent some of his greatest triumphs—the novel of
youthful sensibility for example, or the homage to popular culture, or the celebration of orality and aurality and performance in order to more effectively express the creativity of the black people of Barbados; also the travails and quest for personhood of the Caribbean migrant in the northern metropolis, and the vigours of the colonial experience and of its deceptive, ironic postcolonial sequel. In some of these themes and preoccupations, on postcoloniality, for instance, or the celebration of local language, he has been very much among the vanguard, a practitioner of what the theorists later codified. In every case he has been among the elite of our practitioners and commonly the finest.

But let me go further. Probably an unarguable case can be made that Austin Clarke is the region's most versatile and broadly accomplished writer of fiction. I am not saying this of course in order to belittle the achievements of other great writers born or nurtured in the region, Samuel Selvon and George Lamming and Vida Naipaul, Earl Lovelace and Paule Marshall and Wilson Harris, these are not writers widely celebrated for nothing: they have their own claims on our attention, for their pathbreaking or for their own corners of excellence where they may at times exceed Clarke's. But none has been such a prolific author of work of quality, often of distinction, over a period now in excess of thirty years; and been so prolific, and also distinguished, in so many prose forms. In the novel, the memoir, the story, the long short story, the creative essay, the play and the farce, even fable, in most of these forms there are works, or sometimes a family of works, by this great son of Barbados, rarely surpassed, at times unsurpassed, by any other writer of Caribbean heritage.

Most readers familiar with Clarke's prose will associate him with the novel and the short story. And most of his gifts will indeed be visible in his best work in these genres. In this body of work, we encounter some of his strongest claims to pre-eminence among writers of fiction of the region, that is, his technical range and extraordinary creative and social reach as well as his command of his nation's language and the readiness of his comic genius and
bittersweet humor. In the last two areas (nation language and comic genius), Clarke is approached only by his late good friend, Sam Selvon. His verbal and visual recall of social custom and gesture is exceptional and perhaps also not quite matched by any other artist in the region. His grasp of a certain type of female character, the experienced and voluble Bajan semi-peasant woman or the working class white Canadian, is keen and impressive and unusual. There are other qualities I shall come back to shortly. But I should note at this point one particular aspect of Austin Clarke’s corpus. Solely in terms of his ability to credibly deploy a variety of characters of non-West Indian provenance in their own social settings, Austin Clarke appears to stand above any rivals in the Caribbean. One notes, for example, that some of his stories are distinguished by American settings, both black and white America, both the American South and the American North. Some of these stories also desert the more familiar urban formulas which others inhabit, of lonely despair, of faltering old age and a dissolving grasp of reality, formulas which characterize many of his notable pieces on Toronto. As in America, Clarke effectively addresses in his more numerous Toronto stories both white lives and black. I shall resort to one authority to help us evaluate the importance of Clarke’s unusually broad readiness and ability to depict alien social terrain. I quote from the canonical Norton Anthology of American Literature on the great American writer James Baldwin. Baldwin is praised in encompassing terms which, it turns out, apply very deeply to Austin Clarke. “There has surely been no black writer,” says the Norton Anthology, “better able to imagine white experience, to speak in various tones of different kinds and behaviors of people or places other than his own.” Among West Indian writers actually born in the Caribbean, Clarke is most able, when he chooses, to liberate himself in his fiction from the sensibilities of the region.

Clarke also appears to have no peer in the Caribbean in his mastery of the evocative memoir. One such work better known in his native Barbados than formerly, since recently dramatized
there, is *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*. *His Harrison College and Me* may also be fairly well known, since it was a distinguished and typically powerful piece in the very fine *New World Quarterly* Barbados Independence Issue of 1966. Some of Clarke's most powerful stories, I ought to say here, are not conventional narratives but really heightened snatches of memory, of meditative temper but unsettling intent, stories embodying the modernist and postmodernist sensibilities and written with a remarkable consistency of control and vigour and technical skill. It is a narrative approach that marks much of the longer prose work as well as many of the shorter pieces. The larger point here is that Austin Clarke possesses not simply enormous social reach but very great and very broad technical command. His command of modern prose narrative techniques is unmistakable and no other West Indian writer has so exploited the interior monologue and the modern conceits of metafiction so consistently and to such brilliant effect. Questions of skill aside, an interest in literary technique is to be expected in any modern novelist, of course, but such an interest is also a natural legacy of Clarke's career as a professor of literature at Yale and other distinguished universities.

Austin Clarke does not consider himself a playwright. And little in his discursive writings suggests it commands much of his attention. Yet clearly, much of his genius is for drama. Few readers of Clarke's novels or of many of his short stories will fail to notice the attributes of the playwright in much of his work. His comic gifts, as we saw, are indisputable. But his great skill with Bajan dialogue, for example, will also not escape readers, nor his notice of gesture. His ready ability to confect a plot of genuine interest despite his small commitment to this aspect of composition is an obvious asset. The complex motivation of his characters, their smarts and cunning, the constant and unsettling moodshifts and distrust and wary interpersonal transactions, these are all transfixing ingredients of his prose. It is therefore not altogether a surprise that even a throwaway piece such as *Berries Going Fall*,
a comic one-act play of 1980, is evidently quite as entertaining as any of the body of Trinidad plays of the forties and fifties that are still treasured and remembered. And *Children in Exile*, a play produced in 1963 in Toronto, a treatment of the problems of West Indian domestics here (problems incidentally of apparently no great general interest to Clarke’s fellow West Indian students of the 1950s) is, in the gravity and social relevance of its theme and the discernments of the writing, one of the achievements of West Indian theatre.

Finally, it must be added that Clarke has wielded a restless polemical pen simultaneously with his career as a writer of fiction and that a great deal of his thought and even of his art is to be found outside the works of pure fiction. That is to say, he has worked at more than one formal memoir, and he has been for long a practitioner of creative journalism and the nonfiction novella, prose forms, in his case, of distinctively urgent character, the product of an aroused, insistent, disquieting temper and an irrepressibly literary mind. There are inevitably fine moments in some of these works but most of it has remained unpublished. Also, in Austin Clarke’s hands, scores of his friends and acquaintances will testify, the letter becomes something much more delightful and engaging than mere communication. Let us pray that the West Indian community and Toronto will be blessed with many more productive years from Austin Ardinel Chesterfield Clarke. Our very best wishes!

Footnotes

1. This appreciation is an essentially unaltered script of a tribute delivered at an occasion honoring Austin Clarke in Toronto on July 6, 1995.

2. A word for the reader new to Austin Clarke. Clarke’s list of published works is lengthy. Most relate to North America, to West Indian diaspora society in North America most often. But others
are closely attentive portraits of Barbadian life. Of booklength works, the memoir, *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*, and the first two novels, *Survivors of the Crossing* and *Amongst Thistles and Thorns*, are rich tapestries, woven with both affection and bitterness but always with immediate meaning for West Indian lives lived without experience of the North Atlantic. In the third novel, *The Prime Minister*, on elements of postcolonial Barbados's social and public life, the portrait is no less arresting but it is intentionally less dense in its texture than early novels, and its tone is one of disappointed expectation and of growing bewilderment and menace.
John Figueroa, Anthologist and Poet: A Perspective through his 'Windows'.

John has published four collections of poetry between 1945 when he published *Blue Mountain Peaks* and 1991 when *The Chase* was published. He has edited another four collections of poetry and prose among which is the highly regarded anthology of Caribbean poetry, *Caribbean Voices*. Behind the scenes he has contributed to the work of the major poets of the Caribbean more profoundly than many realise.

The problem for any reviewer of his work who wishes his comments to rise above the banal, superficial or repetitive, is to locate from his wide range of work a focus that touches the central areas of his concern and to illustrate how this focus has been developed.

I am also mindful of his advice to the critic, offered some 24 years ago in the introduction of Volume II of *Caribbean Voices*, when he stated:

> Writing in any connected way about an expanse of poetry is....like trying to encompass in a few sentences, the vast variety of the ocean. It has always seemed to me wiser not to make general statements about so called 'subject matter' of poems, or about 'trends'; much safer to consider the way in which the poems are constructed — to look at their language, their structure, their concerns; and perhaps at the attitude, shown through the poems, of the authors to their work as poets. (Figueroa, 1970, p.4. Vol.2.)

Perhaps no other Caribbean anthology of poetry offers such decisive and conscious shaping to guide the reader through the burgeoning work of poetry emanating from the Caribbean. Although the collection itself was primarily retrospective, the analytical framework which he, as editor, recommended to help locate the writing, that is, 'consolidation', 'continuation' and
‘innovation’ remain sharp and useful critical categories with as much relevance as any alternative boundaries that have been devised for locating this body of literature. The value of using these categories, he suggests, is that:

one is forced to read more closely and sensitively, is forced to come to grips with the essentials of literature — structure, concern, language rather than with autobiographical, psychological or sociological substitutes for literature. One is also helped to place poems in relation to the whole tradition from which they come. (Figueroa, 1970, p.17. Vol.2.)

While to some extent the guiding principles for my analysis were thus quickly available, I never-the-less believe that diverse traditions can provide useful insights to creative works of literature. However, the dilemma, of where to enter the poetry as a reviewer, remained.

I have resolved this by choosing to offer an analysis of one of John’s more recent poems, Windows, subtitled, Chartres: Outer and Inner Space — A Consort of Six Variations. Superficially, the poem appears to return to many of the concerns with which John has long been associated. But it is also considerably more. Reviewers of his earlier work have noted his instinct to ‘preserve and revere’, (Forde, 1963. p.63). His concern to locate places often associated with strong personal and religious convictions, his lyricism and disciplined style, for example in Ignoring Hurts, have also not gone un-remarked. (Hall, 1977.) I could add other notable features of his work especially his concern for strong visual images and a contemplative style often influenced by the effect of places visited.

Windows contains many of these themes but, I suspect, is also on a different plane to these concerns. It is a poem of some 143 lines which was begun in 1982 and completed in 1989. The outcome of this seven year gestation is a dense and tightly constructed poem with powerful images. The poet here takes up a challenge that I suspect few contemporary poets would dare consider. At its baldest, the poet’s goal is a description of what is ultimately
indescribable, that is, the soul’s union with the divine essence. Put more prosaically, the poet, by the end of the poem conveys the reader through a sense of ‘liminality’ to offer a glimpse of heaven, the hereafter, nirvana.

Such an endeavor to communicate this vision, of course, must fail. For each of us, our understanding and way to such a notion will differ. For many people the idea will be simply unthinkable. The poet may well realise these shortcomings but is convinced that the effort, energy and time are worth expanding in the attempt to communicate his vision. The poem is dedicated “ad maiorem Dei gloriam.”

Let us start with that glimpse of heaven the poet offers. Then I will attempt to illustrate aspects of the poet’s craft at work in approaching this vision. I do this, firstly, through a discussion of the structure of the poem, secondly by locating the concern of the poem in the context of other work of this nature from the Caribbean and by an examination of the significance of ritual in the poem, and, thirdly, by discussing some aspects of the poet’s use of language.

Towards the end of the poem the poet offers the following vision of heaven:

“And Chartres holds the glass
up like a wafer, glowing us
to another world.

A wafer melts
upon the tongue: and windows on
the eyes: we arise to
a world of silence and
images tuning in to stillness,
and still in place until they whirl
us through the vortex where we spin
by tiniest cracks
into illumination:
where we kick
the gassy earth away and find
our inner galaxies
through the whirling of the wheel
the spinning of these windows till
they seem not to move
like the stillness
in painting, as
they gather up their breath
to dance away
and with delicate rim
spark off from distant branches a burst
of leaves,

of Autumn leaves;
From the inner dark a blaze of blossoms.

A still exploding wheel of stars.”

The Structure

The poem involves six variations on the contemplative theme of attaining grace. They vary in the way they are composed, their length and intended effect. Two additional features are important to the total structure of the poem: how the journey is prepared for and how it is undertaken. Preparation involves a calming process which makes us barely conscious even of elemental fears — ‘blood’, ‘furnaces’ and ‘molten rage’ are identified in the first variation. The poem also holds a balance or tension between a sense of movement, perturbation and cragginess and their counterparts of stillness, peace and curviture which is carried through in the different variations.

As we move from stanza 2 to stanzas 3 and 4 in the first variation, one of the dominant notions informing the poem, that of ‘space’ also changes. The tangible material focus of stanza 2
suggests movement in space associated with ‘things’ — ‘roots’, ‘clay’, ‘blood’, ‘furnaces’. In stanza 3 the movement is inwards, the ‘space’ involved, perhaps, is the inner movement of the soul. One window looks out and the other inwards. The inner movement is associated with the Holy Sacrament. In the final variation both types of focus come together and grace is offered. It is then that the glimpse of heaven is afforded, and, in the poet’s words, ‘we kick the gassy earth away.’

The Wider Caribbean Context and the Importance of Ritual

This poem can be located in the tradition of Caribbean religious poetry which has a considerable heritage. In a series of articles, written as early as 1952, Keane demonstrated the importance of this stream of concern to a number of Caribbean poets. He showed how writers such as Campbell, Seymour, McFarlane, Smith and Walcott all found this Spiritual Muse central to their writing. (Keane, 1952.) Poets borrowed ritual prayers and wove poems around them, others showed preoccupation with love and charity. It is also in this context that the much maligned concern with ‘nature’ is identifiable, many poets choosing to depict ‘nature’ as a way to God.

Forty two years have now passed since Keane wrote his essays on this theme. In that time secularised poetry has come to dominate the attention of both poets and critics. Religious contemplative poetry now appears to hold no special place, even in the more overtly religious Caribbean, and has to fight for a right to publication like any other theme. However, a concern with religion in the broad sense, as a pondering about the way to God, remains a rich but less commonly examined seam of the major poets of the region. This concern has remained an abiding interest to Walcott, for example, who, in Omeros, obtains the following remark from his dead father:

\[ o \textit{thou my Zero, is an impossible prayer}, \]
utter extinction is still a doubtful conceit.
Though we pray to nothing, nothing cannot be there”
(Walcott, 1990, p.75)

More directly, the meditative theme of *Windows* perhaps comes nearest to Smith’s poem *Testament*, which also attempts to celebrate the truth and glories of Christian belief. Smith, like John in this poem, was concerned to find what one reviewer has described as ‘a way to achieve the gift of unison’ (Docherty, 1957,). Both poems involve a conviction about a realm of religious experience and mystical contemplation rarely found today. John’s poem differs in many respects from Smith’s because while Smith’s journey of the soul approaches the Divine Essence through the Dionysian notion of ‘divine darkness’, John appears, from the extract cited above, to be drawn less through images of darkness and more through images of light. These images are expressed with strong primary colours; also in the last variation all the following are combined, the idea of ‘painting’, ‘illumination’, and “a burst/of leaves, of Autumn leaves; .... A still exploding wheel of stars”.

My argument here is that the poem *Windows* joins a particular tributary of a well explored, but less recognised, stream of Caribbean poetry, an abiding concern of which is to find the way to God.

*Windows*, however, offers a distinct contemplative route through the use of ritual. Turner, the social anthropologist, has identified the powerful yet paradoxical nature of ritual, in particular the way it combines two poles. One is associated with social and moral rules, the other, he suggests, is sensory, associated with expressive needs. Partaking of the Holy Sacrament captures the former pole, whereas the sensory is identifiable through incantation. In variation IV there is the refrain:

“Christ is so green, Christ so red
raise me up from the dead”
An abiding concern of the poet is the attainment of God's Grace, that is, the supernatural assistance of God bestowed on a rational being with a view to freedom from sin. For the poet, self abasement and especially the acceptance of the Holy Sacrament, appear to offer the route to such Grace. In an earlier poem he identified "grace, melting through/ the body as a wafer on the tongue!" (Silence and the Word undated). In Windows, a similar sentence, "The wafer melts upon the tongue" is returned to a number of times. Ritual, in this poem, signified through the sacrament, incantation as well as certain forms of imagery, notably Da Vinci's St. Ann and Virgin and Child, ultimately convey a state of 'liminality'. The term implies pure, sacred and unmediated 'communitas'. In this state, Turner argues, symbolically, everything is possible, there exists an extatic oneness with humanity in the abstract. Auden, in his poem 'Archaeology' expressed the notion in the following way:

"Only in rites
   can we renounce our oddities
   and be truly entired" (Auden. 'Archaeology')

Turner argues that ritual brings together moral rules and natural process taking the participant to a threshold between clear social identities, a position which involves an absence of structure and weak classification. (Turner, 1969.) Martin, the sociologist, has described the state as 'a paradoxical combination, a taste of transcendence and an expression of belonging at the same time.' (Martin, 1981).

Figueroa, the poet, expresses the experience in the following way in his variation I:

"The wafer melts upon the tongue,
   the glass upon the eyes,
   and through the blood and brain
   collects us to a wheel that moving stays
and staying spins us out
to inner space
across the threshold
to a steady centre:"

and in the sixth variation the wheel has turned and come back around. The experience, combining circular movement through repetition and ritual is described as follows:

“A wafer melts
upon the tongue: and windows on
the eyes; we arise to
a world of silence and
images tuning into stillness,
and still in place until they whirl
us through the vortex where we spin
by tiniest cracks
into illumination;”

I suggest that it is ultimately this attempt, through the structure of ritual and form, to express an all encompassing notion beyond such cares, that gives the poem its distinctive and most innovative feature in its focus of concern.

An important issue which the poet appears to leave unresolved is whether the state of liminality achieved in the poem is fleeting or is hoped/expected to be continuous. It is likely that ‘true’ liminality among mortals can only be a fleeting moment before one is returned to day to day structures and concerns. (Both Turner and Martin’s analyses hold this view.) Figueroa, however, appears towards the end of the poem to hold the view that the continuity of this state is likely or at least possible. The last line of poem, for example, refers to:

“A still exploding wheel of stars.”
The Language

A variety of images from intense whirring, hardship and spectacular comet-like dazzle and light are all conveyed with an economy of language. The language conveying meditation and preparation for the journey at the start is gently alliterative. This is captured by the soft ‘s’es in the first variation.

The impact of the two short variations III and IV are particularly noteworthy. The third variation, although only nine lines long, each line with three words, none the less is made difficult to utter. This is enforced by the choice and juxtaposition of clashing words which, when pronounced, grind against each other.

“Round curved green
Flat red square
Breast grey smooth”

The point that the poet seems to make here is that the journey is, to say the least, difficult.

Variation V conveys succinctly both the notion of threshold and entry. The location of ‘hang’, at the end of the line, contrasts with the gentle ‘tumblings into visionary grace’ three lines further on.

Finally, how is the effect of ‘heaven’ achieved? Its presence is built up by three dominant images of the poem, the tension between whirling and stillness of the wheel, an association with painting and contrasts of colours, of Autumn and the promise of Spring. These are all dominated by a form of grand catherine wheel.

These images seem to be drawn from the world of painting and it appears that, like Mable Rawls, the poet believes: “heaven is (...) the place where painters go, . . .”

And there they return to do work that is God’s.
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Forde A N (1963) Book review of ‘Love Leaps Here’, Bim, Vol. 10, no. 37, (pp. 63 - 64)


Eusi Kwayana

*Cosmic Dance* (by Harischandra Khemraj)

To tell this life-like, probable once-in-a-lifetime combination of chances, Harischandra Khemraj adopts the identity of Vayu Sampat, GMO at Urgben hospital in a make-believe country, Aritia, which soon reveals itself as ours truly. It is not his vocation, but his friendship with Ramphal, that brings him into the thick of the events which follow the rape of a young girl in the presence of her father. Our senses anticipate the dance as this father accepts an immediate promotion from his boss, the offender, and thus raises suspicions of complicity.

The offence is also a cross-racial crime and an extreme form of juvenile abuse. The offender is Vernon Ashby, the big one at a state-owned coconut estate, with armed assassins at his disposal.

Ramphal learns of Mala’s violation from her brother, Baljit, his promising English student who has recently become absent and distracted. Baljit is later coaxed into confiding in Ramphal who brings his friend, Vayu, into the picture. Vayu is mostly offended at the offender’s race. This is not unnatural as that kind of rape can leave a permanent, visible record which can become a curse within any narrow community. Two people see it at once as a capital offence pure and simple – Ramphal, who has long been waging war against racial stereotypes and Indranee, a young lawyer who is later woven into the tense, intricate, plot. She says with authority to Vayu, “It is more a man-woman thing than a racial thing.”

There are persons in the story who grow with the plot. Because they are so feelingly conceived they ring like real persons and not characters – and there are those who do not grow. Ramphal and Indranee separately insist that there is good in the
worst of us. Vernon Ashby, the villain extraordinary, grows worse and worse. He receives Ramphal who conceives the idea that he can reason with Ashby and play on his vanity and reputation as a good family man to keep him from destroying the living evidence of his crime, Mala, and her confidantes. Ashby appears compliant but in reality sees a rival strategist in Ramphal and moves with lightning speed to kill Ramphal, his child victim and even Vayu, who survives a firearm attack. The primary target, the victim, Mala, is dispatched by other means — hanging — so that she can be accused of her own homicide. On appeal from Indranee, who has let him take her to government receptions now and then, Ravi Bissessar, junior Minister and thug-in-good-standing, calls off Ashby’s dogs through his army links. Under this do-gooder’s duress, Indranee yields her body, though not herself — at the risk of a precious association with Vayu, who she knows will not understand. These developments deepen Vayu’s puzzlement at the fateful, erratic dance of life and face him with his greatest challenge.

Vayu, as the child of a struggling fisherman, then still poor, had had a best friend, an Afro-Guyanese age-mate. His friend’s mother ordered him out of her son’s life with accompanying racial abuse, but really because of his low-class status. Years later as a university student, he sees a first-class railway compartment full of African passengers jointly avert their gaze while a black conductor berates a feeble old woman who has strayed without enough money into the rarified zone. Not only that; the man who assumed to himself the right to speak for all the passengers, on perceiving that Vayu was about to come to the woman’s rescue, served on him a visual injunction to keep out of black people’s business. These experiences serve to justify the weight and authority of the narrow tradition of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Khemraj sets a standard in his first novel with his sensitivity about delicate issues. In the opening scene, as Dr. Vayu Sampat, he is wrestling with the effect of gun-shot wounds in a hospital bed at his workplace. Thus, we find ourselves at one of the
story’s climaxes within an ascending scale of them. And when climaxes of episode peter out, there are those of the psyche left to be experienced in the cosmic dance choreographed out of human drama in Aritia. The mood of the cosmic dance is of comings and goings, conjoinings and severings, rape, death and other extremes of existence that seem inexplicable and driven by forces beyond human control. Those who appear to be in firm control find themselves suddenly being drawn into the orbit, while others calmly wrench themselves from the mindless currents and strike out on their own to make their own sense of things.

The very process of relating the story seems to be dogged with cosmic will. “Where to begin? At the beginning of course, but there are many beginnings, and my choice among them will inevitably shape what follows – that’s assuming I do have a choice ... To narrate is to distort, but hopefully to clarify too”. With this high sense of responsible non-responsibility, Vayu presents many imperilled lives, including his own, and does his best to clarify them, in their complex yet logical and still surprising turns and twists.

Always sensitive and ruthless with the truth of personality, he knows that he is also in the judgement seat. In this jurisdiction of the imagination, he rules that even fiction must be true. His dream people are not minions to be mocked, but spirits entitled to their dignity. His fine sense refuses to do the narrating alone. So he invites, a little clumsily, the rape victim’s brother to witness part of it, but Baljit can do so only by repeating the victim’s agonised narrative. Khemraj seems to regard this as more authentic than he could manage, even with the aid of his faithful tape recorder. The direct victims have a chance to be heard and escape benign misrepresentation.

Khemraj, who is really writing a political thriller, keeps it from being a traditional description of Aritia or a mere pamphlet while bringing out the likely effects not only of one regime but of the whole of history. With a government in control which
accommodates with ease the miscreants of the story because their side holds power, an eye is cast over the shoulder for the counterpart opposition since, in Aritira, ethnic guilt is a continuous quest and readers look for balance of treatment. This is no concern of the writer’s, mercifully. So the reader’s imagination is saved from the duel of the innocent and is free to join the adventure of people acting without their tags, discovering and sometimes celebrating one another.

Through the agency and influence of Vayu’s guru, Ramphal, the violation of the woman-child grows into a top cause, but only among the guilty and the victim’s support group. Most tellingly, no one dared report it to the police, a testimony to the power wielded by the subordinate thugs who show their masters a clean sheet and a loyal cast of spirit. As Ramphal recruits more and more people to be active in Mala’s defence, the cosmic dance quickens and taboos are cast aside for a good cause. As it must be, caution is cast to the winds and the price is paid.

The attempt to evaluate Indranee is challenging. She is a typical young professional woman in the sense of being both general and strongly individual. As an individual, she seems etched out for innovative thought and action. She has a code of public and private behaviour and is not troubled by pre-judgements about life. Many may lament that the author does not employ her as a vehicle of traditional values. They can take comfort that she is not the only model in literature. She is not located in a family situation and this gives her more of that freedom which is usually the preserve of men. In order to go to those places where she wanted to be accompanied, she allowed herself the company of Bissessar, a junior minister in the government and part of the political security arm. Perhaps, just as she is maintaining this role for his own purpose, she is humouring him for her own purposes, not clear even to her at first.

Her quiet resolution on hearing of Mala’s fate came like a chance remark, but is really one of the main impulses of the plot. Any man who rapes a child should be shot. It becomes part of
her rhythm as she moves to protect Mala from her offender who wants her silenced; she sets all other considerations aside. Weighing the balance of forces, she falls back on Bissessar. She determines to use ‘a woman’s way’, confident that the weakness of the male can be counted on. Her belief in herself does not obtrude on others. She never behaves like the one who saved the side from total loss after the exemplary Ramphal’s clumsy blundering.

The author’s other triumph is to lay bare a bloody episode and save it from becoming communal. The final ideological climax comes when he confirms to himself what he had long begun to suspect aided by his discovery at his workplace of the real Gilbert Floy: that the society is indeed one of ‘us’ and ‘them’, but that in this division, he was grouped with others regardless of race.
Its publication is an event of no little significance to the Guyanese society in particular. Its author, Narmala Shewcharan, can be considered the first female novelist to have emerged from the Indian diaspora in this former British colony. It has taken more than one hundred and fifty years for the woman of the indentured and colonised canefarming and ricefarming immigrant stock to begin to flourish creatively through the novel and to take her place in the literary arts. Shewcharan is a welcome addition to the dearth of Guyanese women writers.

This fictional work recreates an abyss of human experience. It offers glimpses of individual lives caught in the social and political convulsion of the day. The novel refrains from naming a particular society or identifying a period of time. The work mentions the United Party, the Workers' Party and its Headquarters (where the opposition struggle takes place) and the Official Party and its Secretariat (according to one of the characters, "a political jungle"), the hospital, the market, the prison cell (a virtual torture chamber – the ultimate scene of the dehumanisation of the individual) and, of course, the society itself which is a cage or "open prison". Some readers may see it as a thinly disguised work of an all too familiar, well remembered scenario. And yet this fictional work would be relevant in any society where the abuse of power leads to the victimisation and needless sacrifice of its people. If the reader can recognise himself or others around him or relate scenes and institutions around him in this work, then the work has succeeded, for one of the functions of serious art is to hold up a mirror to society wherein man can see himself. The interpretation of the work is its engagement with the reader.

The structure of Shewcharan’s novel is clever – a happy fusion of content and form. Like the complex web of human
relationships it seeks to portray, its episodes are spun and spaced with purpose like the pattern of a spider’s web, with bases held together by tenuous links, each point in the web locating and probing dichotomies of human existence and social interaction. The denouement is not an unravelling or happy clarifying of situations, but the sudden and late realisation of being caught in the web, of coming face to face with the seductive monster which none is able to touch and from which all must fall away with deep disillusionment and disappointment, often at the price of life and the fragmentation of family. This work is almost a fulfillment of Martin Carter’s worst fears contained in these now famous lines: “Like a jig/shakes the loom./ Like a web is spun the pattern/ all are involved!/ all are consumed!” (Poems of Resistance. 1954).

The helplessness of the poor, the dilemma of the idealistic, the wilfulness of those who hold power, the urge to escape a corrupt and repressive dictatorship and, more shockingly, the underbelly of politics with its inevitable intrigues, are never more starkly presented than in Shewcharan’s novel. Two men choose different paths to seek the same ideal – one abandons the workers’ cause to align himself with the party in power. Each believes that he can influence the order of things to better the lot of the suffering masses and redeem them from the demoralising morass in which the society is bogged down.

These choices have traumatic impact on their own lives and on the lives of their loved ones. Alienation, estrangement, intrigue, scapegoatism, tragedy and trauma have become the hallmark of the modern Guyanese novel. Anxieties, homelessness, painful separation and loss are narrated with sympathy. Yet it is not only the government with its corrupt morality that stands indicted in this novel. The chief engineer of the downfall of the protagonist and, consequently, of this small group of individuals, is an astute, vindictive and shadowy Iago-type character of the opposition ranks who, ironically, turns around and befriends the victims when they are down. There seems to be a worm in every rose and only the novel has the power and authority to explore aspects
of human nature and human experience with this incisive perceptiveness.

Almost all the characters in this work show resolute determination in their struggle to survive their hardened state of existence. They all, in varying degrees, suffer disillusionment and victimisation, but the female characters stand out for the great strength of purpose which they exhibit, their vision and resolve to keep the family unit intact at all cost and for their communion and solidarity with each other in the disintegrating society. There is Aunt Adee who has lost a son to the political struggle – “it was people like her who gave the lie to stories of racial unrest” – the independent woman struggling to make a living, sleeping on a stall in the market, with her dozens of plastic bags pinned about her. Then there is Kunti, the good Samaritan and comfort to those in distress. And then there is Chandini who soldiers on despite the adversities and summons strength out of her fragility and whose only purpose in life is to meet the uncertain tomorrows her five children wake up to each day.

The feminine principle is celebrated in this novel but not romanticised. Positive images of woman are drawn with realism, for example, Chandini “remembered too well her own shattered dreams because, even though her father was a headteacher, she had lived in a village where they did not believe in women wasting time on books”. Her husband, fired with idealistic zeal, relinquishes job and family to work as a voluntary “organiser” with the opposition party but Chandini never reveals her anguish.

In the end and after all his ordeal, the scapegoat Jagru seeks out Adee in the market: “She took his hand and he allowed himself to be led. He became aware that children were staring at them and giggling. Two freaks, he thought. Two more mad people to join the crowd. He began to laugh himself, almost without pause .... [H]e continued to laugh and Aunt Adee joined him, thinking that his laughter as a free man was a happy sound”. The truth is that Jagru laughs in order to keep from crying.
Tomorrow Is Another Day is an important contribution both to the West Indian and to the Guyanese literary archives. This novel is a testimony of the beliefs, the dreams and the reality that make society either functional or dysfunctional. It has clear socio-political relevance to the postcolonial societies of our region.

I'll let Jagru have the last word. Thoroughly disgusted by his experience in the prison cell, Jagru thinks (of the inmates): “They were like animals in a cage, the men across from him. How they had come to be so perverted and sadistic, so merciless in their dealings with their fellow human beings he would not speculate. Whatever, they had no right to walk with the civilised and their place was rightfully behind bars ... But at least these men did not hide what they were, unlike the men in suits and ties who sat behind their desks and inflicted suffering on the masses in order to feed their egos – and their bank balances. They were animals, too, but in disguise, predators who ripped out the guts of their fellow creatures’ dreams.” The final truth is that the author has been too sympathetic with this character – the novel should have aimed for honesty, integrity and brutal frankness.
Walk Good Guyana Boy (by Bernard Heydorn)

Bernard Heydorn felt it necessary to preface his recently published novel, *Walk Good Guyana Boy* (1994) with the following disclaimer: “These stories are a work of fiction, based on personal reminiscences . . . Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, to events or places is coincidental”. The novel is so firmly rooted in a particular historical setting, with names of places and institutions, characters and events and sociolinguistic features so imbued with an arresting social realism that it would not be difficult for anyone who has lived through the times depicted in this work to forget the author’s disclaimer and identify with this work as a realistic and distinctively Guyanese experience.

For the past three or four decades of this century writers in the Caribbean have been recreating the underside of the colonial experience but, at length and at last, a crop of novels which can speak of the traumatic experiences of what may be described as the long Stalinist night in Guyana, is finally beginning to emerge. This book has the power to appeal to our sense of nostalgia as well as to jolt the memory and conscience of a society who may easily slip into complacency with the passing of the years. A society that forgets the function of its arts brutalises its history and its cultural heritage.

Because of its strong factual base, the texture of the work is semi-journalistic, semi-fictional. Three main themes dominate this book — childhood and growing up, poverty and survival and the quest for freedom. Heydorn traces the psychosocial growth from childhood to adolescence of the protagonist, Stephen Sleighton, last son of Ozzie and Elvira Sleighton, a Portuguese couple in colonial British Guiana. Stephen’s growth and development and his bid for independence take place within the context of the struggle of the family for survival and this, again, within the context of the struggle of the country for political
freedom so that all these endeavours can be read as a symbiotic quest for individual and national freedom.

Ozzie Sleighton’s tragic-comic forays into life are very reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul’s main character in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Where Ozzie is all words, energy, self-made philosopher, his wife is all simplicity and tranquility. His speech is distinctive Portuguese Creole with the “h’s” all charmingly chopped off and through him the reader gets a first hand exposure to Creole proverbs and rhythmic idioms, folk beliefs, gems of quaint and hilarious colloquialisms which comprise the mystique that is Guyana. When Ozzie plays the buffoon, Elvira calls his bluff with her “‘ush yuh mout’ maan”. Language is his metaphor for survival: Ozzie has obviously been created with mischievous delight but together, he and his wife, they form the cement and foundation for the growth of their family.

The reader is introduced to a full gallery of actors in the drama for survival which is set between Georgetown, New Amsterdam and back again in Georgetown where Ozzie is posted each time as a sanitary inspector, between the years 1945 and 1963, “doin’ duh king’s work”.

Heydron depicts a plenitude that is Guyana despite its lack of possibilities at the time and a richness in the multiracial, multicultural experiences of his characters with affection, gentleness and sympathy. The more one gets the mental picture of Ozzie, the more one is convinced that we must laugh to keep from crying.

*Walk Good Guyana Boy* is undoubtedly an important document which not only fills a void in the documenting of the emotional history of elements of our people in the pre-independent Guyana but which also relates with certainty the sociohistorical facts of the country and the cultural origins of its peoples. The primeval Guyana landscape is described in its pristine eloquence. Of Stephen’s trip up the Abary Creek, Heydorn writes: ‘Stephen and one of the men climbed into a ballyhoo, a small bush canoe, made from the bark of a purple
heart tree. The man paddled up the creek, giving Stephen a guided tour of the jungle. The place had an eerie feeling, so quiet, so still, as if they had gone back in time, back where it all began”. On the way back, Stephen “felt that he had seen a secret, a raw and forbidden place, thrilling heart of darkness . . . . Deep in his heart, he felt that he had shared a secret and a promise, known only to the winds, the trees and the Abary Creek”.

Heydorn depicts the serenity and the turmoil of Stephen’s existence with equal deftness. Back from a futile trip to England where the quest for selfhood with the R.A.F. proves elusive, Stephen is soon again on another boat, this time he is bound to Barbados. Heydorn’s eye for detail and his powers of description surpass themselves, with an echo of Edgar Allan Poe: “Suddenly, the dark sky was lit with bright flashes. The crash of thunderous roars split the night. Fork lightning, darting off the horizon like a snake’s tongue, gave way to streaks from on high, racing down to the sea. The heavens opened and the rains crashed down in gallons, washing the vessel, seeming intent on flattening it! A torrent of water, had approached swiftly. It came with a rising wind and a wail as if dozens of devils were let loose, running amok on the ocean, the devil’s dance floor! If this was a hurricane, then it had come too soon! It was only July, and it caught the heavily-laden ship and sailors by surprise”.

Stephen outgrows the heyday of boyhood pranks and the love and security of the family to the realisation that the quest for individual freedom spells alienation and a profound and unmitigated solitude, his traumatised consciousness resulting partly from the callous political intrigues of the day which consumed many lives needlessly.

In his first novel Bernard Heydorn appears to be a born story-teller. This very episodic work has the immediacy of oral story-telling. Were it not for few ribald colloquialisms, Walk Good Guyana Boy could be recommended for young secondary school students. It is a story of innocence, joy, love, escape, deep disappointment and bitter pain. Yet it is delightful, funny,
nostalgic, refreshing and reflective. Like his protagonist, Stephen Sleighton, the author Bernard Heydorn was born in British Guiana 1945, grew up in New Amsterdam and left these shores round about the same time that his protagonist was found in a life-raft in the Caribbean sea trying to escape the Guyana chaos.
Sometimes Hard is a novel for teenagers. Set in Trinidad, it tells the story of 12 year old Leroy, whose mother has been raising him single-handedly since her husband left her. Because his mother’s method of doing this is by “a word and a blow”, Leroy turns to Mrs. Simcoe, a white American married to a black Trinidadian. One concern Leroy dares not voice to his mother is his awareness that the “Reverend” at the Gospel church his mother attends is in amorous pursuit of her. Mrs. Simcoe advises Leroy to try and find his father before he leaves Trinidad to go and live as planned with his Aunt in New York. He follows the advice, and succeeds in finding his father in Port of Spain. The boy’s visit prompts a re-uniting of the parents at a grand village ball that climaxes the novel and precedes Leroy’s boarding the plane to leave Trinidad.

The story line invites comparison with Naipaul’s Miguel Street which also deals with a boy growing up in a single-parent home, and concludes with his departure from Trinidad. Leroy, though, unlike Naipaul’s narrator, develops a love for Trinidadian culture before he leaves, and is eager to find steel band wherever in North America his destiny may take him.

Unlike the ironically portrayed inhabitants of Miguel Street, the villagers in Sometimes Hard move to a point of forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation. At the ball, Indian, African and Anglo-Saxon are all welcome, and all classes mingle freely. Leroy’s father smartens up and is re-united with Martha, and the lascivious Reverend is moved to abandon his hypocritical stance, ask forgiveness and pray sincerely for the young boy’s success in his new life. A little too unrealistic for an adult, the novel nevertheless offers hope and optimism for the younger reader. Dabydeen has a plot with potential, but fails to bring it
off. We are totally unprepared for any repentance from the Reverend, and, in any case, he is oddly more concerned to apologise for calling Mrs. Simcoe a witch than for making unwelcome advances on a married woman. One would expect that when his parents are re-united, Leroy would be able to stay with them in Trinidad, but no, he is still sent off to his Aunt. While Dabydeen is politically correct in celebrating steel band in Trinidad’s culture, we learn little of its positive impact on the lives of the people. And even this political correctness is contradicted by the fact that Leroy is looking forward to achieving fame in America — fame that is not available, we are told, to even the best pan men in his village. Certainly Leroy, unlike Naipaul’s narrator, wants to return to his homeland, but it is regrettable that he must look beyond Trinidad’s shores for affirmation of his worth.

Stylistically the novel is badly flawed and in need of much more careful editing than it has evidently received. Characterisation is weak, and the plot moves too slowly — possibly as a result of the novel’s over-dependence on dialogue and a dearth of narrative. Repetition is an annoying fault. Stan Blue’s friend, Lavender, (abbreviated to “Lav”!) is given to belching, for instance, and he performs the feat nine times in six pages. Clear “sniggers” six times in three pages, and “has a hunch” six times in three pages. When the pan men appear, we have an incredible seven references to sweat in just two pages!

To its credit, however, Dabydeen’s Sometimes Hard deals with topical issues in Trinidad’s multiracial society — especially the power of the pans and the pull of North America. The experience of growing up in a single-parent home and the quest for a father are both potentially profound themes, but they are glossed over rather superficially. A useful list of topics for study appended at the end of the novel provides us thought-provoking access to the text’s sociological content. Any question, though, that attempted to direct the reader to form or style would inevitably point up this novel’s serious defects.
Stoning the Wind (by Cyril Dabydeen)

In his latest anthology of poems, Stoning the Wind (TSAR: Toronto, 1994), Cyril Dabydeen picks up again themes he has explored before—themes inspired by the insider/outsider experience of being a West Indian in Canada. Poet Laureate of Ottawa 1984-87, Cyril Dabydeen has published his work in numerous periodicals and anthologies in Canada, North America, the U.K., Europe, the Caribbean, India, Malaysia and New Zealand. Previous works include Coastland: New and Selected Poems (Mosaic Press, 1989), Dark Swirl (Peepal Tree Press, 1989), The Wizard Swami (Peepal Tree Press, 1989) and Jogging in Havana (Mosaic Press, 1992).

A keen human rights activist in public life, Dabydeen brings to his poetry an arching awareness of the hope and pain of immigrants in the cities of the First World. Vivid with the memories of his homeland, Guyana, yet vibrant with images of the natural beauty of his adopted country, Dabydeen’s poetry stands at the junction between two worlds, mediating the immigrant experience.

Dialect is the medium in “Belly Mumma”—a poem paradoxically poised between the expectant pride of bearing a child in the adopted country, and the anguish of knowing that the child will certainly grow to reject both his mother and her culture:

He go say you na gat tablemannas
dis same child who’ll play in snow.

Dabydeen captures the nostalgia of rootlessness, too:

When you go be yearning fo go back home
to de same Guyana or Jamaica
where you think you still belong (emphasis mine)
The immigrants' struggle to master the language of the adopted country is portrayed in "Grandma's Grammar":

*this same language suddenly
Seals her lips, her tongue still stretching like barbed wire,*

or again in "Officialdom" where the bank teller "grimaces...because of the foreign accents I still deliver," and a patronising official congratulates the poet on how well he reads, "considering English isn't your language". Caribbean joy, expansiveness and playfulness are celebrated in "Calypsonian". While "La Brea, Trinidad" evokes, on the other hand, dishonoured Caribs calling on their gods and, on the other, Sir Walter Raleigh and an axe falling in the Tower of London.

This collection is the richer for Dabydeen's travels: a visit to Wordsworth's Lake District, to Hugo's Paris and to Martinique with a grave reminder that Black soldiers who fought in the war and East Indians "were never allowed in the French army. Why not?" Problems of multicultural, multiracial societies are the subject of a few poems. In "Identities" a young woman exclaims, there are only two races in Canada; all the others must learn to conform.

Another poem, "The Immigrant Who Remained Forever an Immigrant" speaks for all the nameless, faceless people who merely survive in the metropolis, while "Alex's Story" sympathises with the disorientation of a Russian immigrant.

And then there are the poems that are simply snapshots of life: the couple married for fifty years who now "In silence...mesh the voices of their skin": the two youngsters in "Cock Fight" whose latent sexuality is revealed in a brief scrap; the widow must learn to "Leave/ the musk of someone / Else’s past / Far behind."

And finally there are the mixed feelings of returning to the tropics, to Guyana: "the stench, the garbage...hopes in sewers, the ramshackle hospital" or again, "the darkwatered creek / with water hyacinths" and "A nephew pot bellied in the sun."
Stoning The Wind is a kaleidoscope of vivid imagery and shifting emotions—a Caribbean man's serious attempt to come to terms with living between two worlds.
AL CREIGHTON

Resurrection at Sorrow Hill (by Wilson Harris)

Ever since the appearance of his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (Faber, 1960), Wilson Harris who was born in Guyana in 1921 but has lived in London since 1959, has attracted very special attention as one of the most original writers of contemporary fiction. Philosophy, criticism and fiction writing were unlikely occupations for Harris who was trained and qualified as a land surveyor; but it was his several work expeditions into the vast, awesome rainforest of the Guianas in the 1940s and 50s that provided base material and inspiration for many of his novels.

His latest work, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993) is closely related to this background as it is to his previous books which amount to most fascinating cycle of fiction. It starts with *The Guyana Quartet*, his first four novels set in Guyana, and culminates with *The Carnival Trilogy* (Faber, 1993) being released at the same time as *Sorrow Hill*. They are products of the author's profound relationships with Guyana's interior Amazonian landscape, ancient Amerindian and European myths, the classics and prolific reading of continental philosophers. He has always enjoyed the highest critical acclaim: among his honours are a Guggenheim Award in 1972 and The Guyana Prize for Literature in 1987. Both *Sorrow Hill* and the Trilogy enhance this reputation.

*The Carnival Trilogy* brings together in one volume, the group of three novels first published separately, *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990). They are linked mainly by the employment of masks and metaphors borrowed from the theatre and carnival as well as from mythical or legendary literary figures, particularly Odysseus (Ulysses), Tiresias, Christ, Faust, Dante and Virgil. Harris's characters make Odyssean voyages backwards and forward through time and space, inhabiting the past, present
and future witnessing and re-enacting the calamitous history of mankind. They interrogate the sub-conscious, sometimes assuming sacrificial roles in an attempt to save modern civilisation from destruction brought about by man’s own deeds committed throughout history or in the present.

Despite its apparent complexity, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* is a deceptively neat packaging of concerns and devices similar to some which appeared in the Trilogy. *Sorrow Hill* which is actually the site of a cemetery in Bartica, Guyana, approximates Calvary Hill and is a microcosm for the tragic home of mankind. It is appropriately located at the very dangerous confluence of three mighty rivers in the interior of Guyana, the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni, at which Ruth, the pregnant wife of Dr. Daemon, one of the novel’s main characters, tragically drowns. The idea of resurrection arises from the fact that the plot’s frequent shifts between past, present and future often involves characters moving between life, death and rebirth.

For example, the main character, whose name is Hope, leads a perilous existence as the secret lover of Butterfly, the wife of Christopher D’eath, a jealous, trigger-happy husband who often comes precariously close to discovering them in their secret hideout. But their many narrow escapes are occasionally confused by dream sequences in which they are actually shot by D’eath only to appear resurrected afterwards. The concepts of dying and resurrection are further contained in the erotic connotations of their sexual act. In addition, as Harris’s narration (unnecessarily) explains it, there are two profiles to the name Christopher D’eath: Profile Christopher (Christ in everyman), profile D’eath (the gun extending from Death’s hand)’ (p.39). Just as D’eath’s antagonist is Hope, death has its redeeming alter ego in the Christ of the resurrection. (The fictional name is of course a contrivance from such common Guyanese names as D’Aguiar, D’Andrade …)

The most important significance in the title, however, is in the theatre run by Daemon as therapy for the inmates of his asylum.
Herein lies the most powerful dimension of the book, its delving into the past and its revealing commentary about the tragic state of man's existence in the modern world and the contributions that he made towards this in his acts of the past. After one of his narrow escapes from death, Hope suffers a nervous breakdown and goes to recuperate in the asylum where he takes part in Daemon's theatre. The inmates don masks representing personages from history or myth by whom they claim to be possessed. Through the impersonations, these 'dead' figures are resurrected, bringing the past theatre of history and myth together with the present, alive. It was a portrait of living hunger. It was a portrait such as one may come upon in Africa, or India, or South America, or Yugoslavia ... ‘Here lay the ghost technology that Leonardo sought’ (p.137).

Harris is well known for his complex but creative narrative strategies. In fact, his popularity is undermined by his reputation as an excellent but difficult, sometimes inaccessible writer. In this latest book, however, far from mystifying readers, he rather seems occasionally to include explanations in the narrative. In his attempt to trace a history that is ‘dense with the witness of centuries’, he attempts to perfect his techniques aimed at purporting to present first-hand accounts of history. In Resurrection at Sorrow Hill, the story is first narrated by Daemon's grandmother, a re-incarnation of Tiresias, the old seer of Greek legend who is androgynous, both male and female and who has witnessed the events of the world throughout its great age. But then, once more typical of Harris, the narrative shifts; first to a more conventional omniscience, then to the contents of the 'Dream Book' that Hope writes while he was in the asylum and which contains all the pictures conjured up by the theatrical impersonations and recorded there.

That it takes place in an asylum is also a factor in Harris's method and in the success and artistic thoroughness of the work. The name Doctor Daemon holds further significance because of the ancient association of insanity with demonic possession.
Stoning The Wind is a kaleidoscope of vivid imagery and shifting emotions—a Caribbean man’s serious attempt to come to terms with living between two worlds.
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and future witnessing and re-enacting the calamitous history of mankind. They interrogate the sub-conscious, sometimes assuming sacrificial roles in an attempt to save modern civilisation from destruction brought about by man’s own deeds committed throughout history or in the present.

Despite its apparent complexity, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* is a deceptively neat packaging of concerns and devices similar to some which appeared in the *Trilogy. Sorrow Hill* which is actually the site of a cemetery in Bartica, Guyana, approximates Calvary Hill and is a microcosm for the tragic home of mankind. It is appropriately located at the very dangerous confluence of three mighty rivers in the interior of Guyana, the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni, at which Ruth, the pregnant wife of Dr. Daemon, one of the novel’s main characters, tragically drowns. The idea of resurrection arises from the fact that the plot’s frequent shifts between past, present and future often involves characters moving between life, death and rebirth.

For example, the main character, whose name is Hope, leads a perilous existence as the secret lover of Butterfly, the wife of Christopher D’eath, a jealous, trigger-happy husband who often comes precariously close to discovering them in their secret hideout. But their many narrow escapes are occasionally confused by dream sequences in which they are actually shot by D’eath only to appear resurrected afterwards. The concepts of dying and resurrection are further contained in the erotic connotations of their sexual act. In addition, as Harris’s narration (unnecessarily) explains it, there are two profiles to the name Christopher D’eath: Profile Christopher (Christ in everyman), profile D’eath (the gun extending from Death’s hand)’ (p.39). Just as D’eath’s antagonist is Hope, death has its redeeming alter ego in the Christ of the resurrection. (The fictional name is of course a contrivance from such common Guyanese names as D’Aguiar, D’Andrade ...)

The most important significance in the title, however, is in the theatre run by Daemon as therapy for the inmates of his asylum.
Herein lies the most powerful dimension of the book, its delving into the past and its revealing commentary about the tragic state of man’s existence in the modern world and the contributions that he made towards this in his acts of the past. After one of his narrow escapes from death, Hope suffers a nervous breakdown and goes to recuperate in the asylum where he takes part in Daemon’s theatre. The inmates don masks representing personages from history or myth by whom they claim to be possessed. Through the impersonations, these ‘dead’ figures are resurrected, bringing the past theatre of history and myth together with the present, alive. It was a portrait of living hunger. It was a portrait such as one may come upon in Africa, or India, or South America, or Yugoslavia ... ‘Here lay the ghost technology that Leonardo sought’ (p.137).

Harris is well known for his complex but creative narrative strategies. In fact, his popularity is undermined by his reputation as an excellent but difficult, sometimes inaccessible writer. In this latest book, however, far from mystifying readers, he rather seems occasionally to include explanations in the narrative. In his attempt to trace a history that is ‘dense with the witness of centuries’, he attempts to perfect his techniques aimed at purporting to present first-hand accounts of history. In *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, the story is first narrated by Daemon’s grandmother, a re-incarnation of Tiresias, the old seer of Greek legend who is androgynous, both male and female and who has witnessed the events of the world throughout its great age. But then, once more typical of Harris, the narrative shifts; first to a more conventional omniscience, then to the contents of the ‘Dream Book’ that Hope writes while he was in the asylum and which contains all the pictures conjured up by the theatrical impersonations and recorded there.

That it takes place in an asylum is also a factor in Harris’s method and in the success and artistic thoroughness of the work. The name Doctor Daemon holds further significance because of the ancient association of insanity with demonic possession.
Moreover, the magic of the theatre with its possession experiences may be linked to some sort of Faustian alchemy. But thus allowing an insight into man’s actions.

They do not work to the same degree of effectiveness, but the more successful resurrections are astonishing in their indictments against imperialism, its crimes against the New World, the insane materialism of modern civilisation with its violence and poverty. Socrates remarks, for example, that ‘the hemlock on my lips was the beginning of a long, drawn-out, unfinished process of civilisation. Civilisation would begin to consume the humiliations it had cooked and inflicted on the weak and the powerless.’ (p.177)

The wrongs committed against Montezuma, the plunder of the Americas by Cortez and the conquistadores are linked through the spirit and art of Leonardo da Vinci to the European Renaissance and its politics; we are able to look ‘back into the past, into a studio within Renaissance Europe where strategies of the technology and politics were begin fused.’ (p.136) Also resurrected is Ruth, Daemon’s drowned wife who comes ‘upon a funeral barge’ into the twentieth century ‘like an avenging angel’ and claims to be ‘an Egyptian ... an African...a slave in the eighteenth century. I was the mistress of Gravesande ... commander of the ruined Dutch fort’ (p.187).

Like Dante travelling through the Inferno, Harris uses his own powerful devices to take us through the hells of the past and these they have created for us in the present and the future, unearthing spectres of poverty and famine, of a child whose face was ‘knuckled, it was veiled bone, it was taut flesh. It was against all the odds of the contemporary world’, Harris seems to be suggesting that it is almost a madness to hope for the survival of mankind among the plethora of wars and genocide and the haunting legacy of the past. (Hope in the story of Sorrow Hill is mad. His hope to defy yet escape D’eath is insane; hence his symbolic madness in the asylum).

Harris however, appears to be a believer in “possibilism”,
because Hope's book, written from the experience of journeys through hell, death, dream and the unconscious, triumphs. In the end, 'Hope (hope?) seized them all with ecstatic gratitude' (p.244).

'The impossible is possible despite all that is happening, is to happen, has happened. Time is not absolute. In the absurdity of the imagination lies a truth that may liberate us' (p.136)

But only madmen would have undertaken the journey.
Ian McDonald writes in his Foreword to *Estate People*, that Rooplall Monar: “has succeeded in establishing himself as a leading, perhaps the foremost, interpreter of sugar plantation life in the West Indies” (p. iv). This is high praise; and it is justified by Monar’s main writings: two volumes of stories — *Backdam People*, and *High House and Radio*; a novel *Janjhat*; and *Estate People*, his third collection of stories. These writings draw attention to the paucity of fictional studies of life on West Indian sugar plantations. Perhaps this paucity is due to the fact that most West Indian writers have little direct plantation experience. Even the two best known Indo-Caribbean writers — Selvon and Naipaul — who consider Indo-Trinidadians in their fiction, pay relatively little attention to the plantation aspects of this experience. This is what is different about Monar: he not only grew up among plantation labourers: he makes them the life and soul of his art. Consequently, his stories may be seen to re-create Indo-Caribbean plantation society more accurately, vividly, insightfully and expertly than has ever been done in fiction.

In *Estate People*, as in his previous work, Monar’s subject is the manners, mores, history, philosophy and daily agenda of the Guyanese sugar plantation and its environs. The great majority of his characters are descendants of labourers who first came to the Caribbean from India under a system of indenture in 1838. It is the labour mainly of these indentured Indians that, for the last century and a half, has sustained Guyana’s sugar industry, and fostered a subculture, part Indian and part Caribbean, within an environment of harsh physical conditions, and elemental if not crude emotional and psychological relationships. Not surprisingly, harshness and crudeness are essential features of the action in the stories in *Estate People*.

In a typical story, “Money Can’t Pay”, the narrator is an
ageing Indian shovel man who recalls an incident when he and his fellow labourers are driven by resentment over their starvation wages to confront the estate administration that is responsible for their plight. Before they know it, police are called in, shots are fired, and one labourer — Nankoo — is killed. A protest is made to the British governor who promises action; but although the estate manager is put on trial, he is acquitted, and the story ends with an empty-sounding threat of defiance from the narrator: “Me been swear, if me foot been strong me woulda take policeman gun, shoot policeman, manager, overseer bladam and take brukneck in jail” (p.15). This swaggering self advertisement is futile, for at the end of the story nothing has changed, and Nankoo is the only casualty. What the narrator says earlier is more reliable:

And all-yuh know things been ruff-and gruff in estate. Manager, overseer, driver and doctor, uses to knock one head. Estate people - coolieman and blackman, uses to knock other head. (p.14)

This suggests that the sharp division of power relations on Guyanese sugar plantations does not allow for protest, accommodation or change: hence the continuing exploitation and victimization of workers.

If “Money Can’t Pay” illustrates such a grim prospect on Guyanese Sugar estates, “Big-Mouth”, surprisingly, extracts humour from this prospect. In Monar’s stories, humour is generally produced both by exposure of the personal weaknesses of characters or by illustration of the strategies that these characters (employ) to circumvent their grim circumstances. Big-Mouth, for example, is a dexterous manipulator, adept in using deviousness, connivance and obsequiousness to obtain favours and promote self-interest. As the author puts it, Big-Mouth is: “colleaguing with estate against the people” (p.19) One of Big-Mouth’s more notorious schemes is to steal estate money and dole it out to female workers from whom he can then extract sexual favours. The author’s exposure of Big Mouth’s ruthlessness is deftly expressed: “Big-Mouth is not only bully, he inside like rockstone.” (p.18)
Monar’s great success is to make Big-Mouth’s personal flaws — hypocrisy, duplicity, bullying and cowardice — and his ruthless schemes appear as equally amusing.

“Money Can’t Pay” and “Big-Mouth” contain suspenseful, expertly shaped plots and acute psychological analysis that evoke both the adverse circumstances of the characters and the humour that emerges out of their daily activities. Considering how grim are the conditions he writes about it is truly astonishing that Monar can find humour in them. He is able to do this partly because of the well tailored structure of his plots. “Big-Mouth”, for example, opens as follows:

_Estate people say, whatever bad things a man do, he bound to suffer dearly for it before he spirit leave his body. Big-Mouth, who been feel he could bribe God, was no exception._ (p.16)

Since this proverbial wisdom virtually tells us that Big-Mouth will die or somehow pay for his wicked deeds, we can laugh at his doings and treat them as misdemeanours rather than serious crimes. If his victims suffer, we still laugh because we know from the author’s opening sentence that comeuppance is in store for Big-Mouth. And when farcical elements are added, for instance, when Big-Mouth’s victims threaten him with violence and force him to flee for safety, it reinforces the humorous effect of his misdeeds as sheer high jinks, uproarious escapades rather than shameful deceit or immoral exploitation of kith and kin who are already victims of exploitation by a brutal plantation system. This pervasively humorous effect is confirmed in the end when the protagonist is afflicted by flu, bad kidneys and stomach ulcers all at once, for although the pain from his illnesses causes him to moan and groan, his distress arouses little grief: it is as comical as his mischief-making, and represents an essential stage in a fixed moral pattern, whereby wicked or immoral actions lead inevitably to retribution in Monar’s stories. Thus encased in a perfectly shaped plot, Big-Mouth’s story becomes an amusing morality or folk tale in which characters are engaged in relationships that ultimately
assert the elemental power of good over evil.

Whether it is through Big-Mouth’s wicked intrigue, Banga’s obeah-working schemes, Jamilah’s father’s desperate attempts to save her from an Hindu suitor, or Lil Boy’s life of unmitigated crime, the stories in *Estate People* portray a subculture in which, apparently out of necessity, people resort to nefarious plotting, devious exploits, crude violence and other harsh measures in the normal conduct of their lives. But the tragic import of such action is miraculously relieved by a vibrant comic sense that transforms *Estate People* from what might have been a rather solemn record of social protest into a tragi-comic extravaganza that is unique in West Indian literature. One would need to combine the comic inventions of Samuel Selvon with Roger Mais’s unsparing documentation of Jamaican urban slums to come up with a West Indian fictional text similar to *Estate People*. Even then, the largely Afro-Caribbean linguistic and urban context of Selvon and Mais would contrast sharply with Monar’s rustic Indo-Caribbean speech and milieu.

What gives Monar’s fiction its unique distinction among other texts of West Indian literature is precisely its beguiling reproduction of Indo-Guyanese speech within a rural setting. The unique flavour of this reproduction is evident in the following proverbial sayings from *Estate People*: “But don’t matter how much time you bum a dog mouth, he still can’t stop suck fowl egg” (p.20); “People not fall down from tree-top yuh know. They come from somewhere as me daddy been say.” (p.36); “one-one day bucket bottom going lef in wellpipe.” (p.48); and “smart fly does end-up in cow-behind.” (p.49) Perhaps the closest West Indian parallel to the raw quality of such speech is in Mais’s *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. But, as already mentioned, Mais’s setting is alien. If we try to fit Monar’s fiction into the mainstream tradition of modern Guyanese writing that begins with Edgar Mittelholzer and runs through Jan Carew and Wilson Harris to Roy Heath, the fit is closer, but still not exact. While Monar undoubtedly belongs to this Guyanese tradition, he more
specifically represents its Indo-Guyanese element which includes older writers like Rajkumarie Singh, Sheik Sadeek and Lauchmonen, and younger ones like Cyril Dabydeen and Sasenarine Persaud. It is among this group of writers that Monar is best placed, and it is out of this group that he emerges supreme, not only through his skill in suspenseful plot building and penetrating character study, but most triumphantly, through his magisterial reproduction of the exact nuances of meaning and timbre of sound in the speech of the characters about whom he writes.
Sidney Allicock: Macushi poet from Rupununi, Guyana.

Edward Baugh: Jamaican poet and literary critic. Professor of English at the Mona Campus, UWI.

Anna Benjamin: Historian and Editor, born in England and resident of Guyana.

Frank Birbalsingh: Born in Guyana; literary critic; senior lecturer in Caribbean Literature, York University, Canada.

Stewart Brown: Jamaican poet and lecturer at Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, UK.

Roy Brummel: Guyanese folklorist, now resident of the UK.

N.E. Cameron: Guyanese historian, teacher, dramatist and compiler of first anthology of Guyanese Poetry.

Dennis Craig: Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana; poet and chairman of the Guyana Prize committee.

Al Creighton: Born in Jamaica; literary critic; Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Guyana.

Fred D’Aguiar: Guyanese poet, resident of the UK.

Vere T. Daly: Guyanese historian and educator.

John Figueroa: Jamaican poet, critic, lecturer, broadcaster; now lives in the UK.

Ameena Gafoor: Guyanese writer and literary critic, now lives in Barbados.

Michael Gilkes: Guyanese playwright, poet and literary critic. Lecturer at the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College in St. Lucia.
Cy Grant: Guyanese musician and writer, resident of the UK.

Cecil Gray: Trinidadian poet, short-story writer, editor and lecturer; now lives in Canada.

Denise Gray-Gooden: Trinidadian poet, resident of Jamaica.

Stanley Greaves: Guyanese painter and poet, now lives in Barbados.

Nicola Griffith: Guyanese student and a prizewinner of the 1995 Commonwealth Trust Young Poets Competition.

Keith Henry: Born in Trinidad; professor in African American Studies, State University of New York & Buffalo, USA

David Jackman: Trinidadian poet and short story writer.

Keith Jardim: Trinidadian short story writer.

Joyce Jonas: Senior Lecturer, University of Guyana and literary critic. Born in England now resident of Guyana.

Harischandra Khemraj: Guyanese writer and winner of the 1994 Guyana Prize.

Eusi Kwayana: Guyanese teacher and writer; veteran activist of local political culture.

Mark McWatt: Guyanese poet and Senior Lecturer in English at the Cave Hill Campus, UWI.

Pauline Melville: Writer and actress; of Guyanese heritage now resident of the UK.

Philip Nanton: Born in St. Vincent; literary critic and lecturer at Birmingham University, UK.

Brian Pastoor: Trinidadian poet and editor.

Sasenarine Persaud: Guyanese poet, resident of Canada.
Luis Pumales: Puerto Rican poet and lecturer at the University of Puerto Rico.

Ken Ramchand: Trinidadian, distinguished literary critic, historian and editor. Professor of English at the St. Augustine Campus, UWI.

Rupert Roopnaraine: Guyanese teacher, writer, film-maker and political activist.

Andrew Salkey: Jamaican poet, novelist, editor and outstanding literary personality. Died recently in the USA.

Clem Seecharan: Guyanese writer, historian and lecturer in Caribbean Studies at the University of North London.

Elma Seymour: Guyanese anthologist and author of "A Goodly Heritage", an autobiography; wife and partner of AJ Seymour.

Jan Lo Shinebourne: Born in Guyana; novelist and cultural worker now lives in London, UK.

Kiren Shoman: poet from Belize.

Dorothy St. Aubyn: Guyanese writer, researcher and folklorist.

Anne Walmsley: British editor of works on Caribbean writers and painters.

Jacqueline de Weever: Guyanese poet; pioneer of KYK; now lives in New York.

Nigel Westmaas: Guyanese student of history, political activist; avid amateur researcher and archivist.

John Wickham: Barbadian writer and veteran editor of West Indian literary journal, BIM.