

Una Marson—

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A true trail-blazer

Arts profile

By R. L. C. Aarons

Last years

PERHAPS it was because she was so versatile, so intense, that she burnt herself out so quickly — and was just as quickly forgotten. For she never stood still. Like the true trail-blazer she was always venturing into some new field of endeavour and



UNA MARSON

then moving on. This is why it is difficult in so short a profile as this to give more than a bare outline of the life and work of the human dynamo we knew as Una Marson.

Poet, journalist, editor, broadcaster, social worker, feminist. She was all these things and more. She wrote plays and produced them. She lectured and travelled. In the early '30's and during the war years of the '40's her name was a household word not only in her native Jamaica, but throughout the entire English-speaking Caribbean. During those anxious days, thousands listened expectantly for her voice 'Calling the West Indies' from the BBC in London bringing news of their fellow West Indians in Britain.

When she returned to Jamaica in 1946 after the war she was feted on the mainland and in all the larger islands of the region as though she was a visiting head of state. The private and public hospitality she received was overwhelming. Yet today, barely nine years after her death in May 1965 in a Kingston hospital she is remembered only by a handful of friends and relatives who knew her intimately and who appreciated her for what she was and for all the things she tried to do for her country.

Why is this?

The writer of the Gleaner editorial commenting on her death implied that even in her last years Una Marson found herself isolated and unable to establish contact with the younger group of intellectuals. The editorial writer attributes this to the fact that her long absence in the United Kingdom during World War 2 put her out of touch with events in Jamaica and particularly so with this group who had come into prominence during her absence abroad.

The facts, in my opinion, hardly bear out this view; for although Una Marson was a product of her time and upbringing — she was a parson's daughter and schooled at Hampton — her thinking in many respects was far in advance of many of her contemporaries. It was others, she felt, who were put of step with the times. She was, for instance, an active feminist long before Germaine Greer was ever heard of and although never a racist, she, along with Dr. Harold Moody were fighting the cause of coloured people in South London long before such a thing as a Race Relations Board was ever thought of.

Born in Santa Cruz, St. Elizabeth, Una Marson was the youngest daughter of Solomon I. Marson, Baptist pastor and his wife Ada, nee Mullings. She held many secretarial posts after leaving school and was for some time attached to the editorial staff of the Gleaner and the Jamaica Standard.

In the late '20's she branched out on her own into the field of publishing and brought out a monthly magazine, 'The Cosmopolitan'. It ran for about two years and although never a financial success it broke new ground. It was the first magazine to be edited and published in Jamaica by a Jamaican woman.

Journalist

This journalistic effort was merely the first of many such pioneering efforts Una Marson was to undertake in the years to come.

Migrating to England she soon identified herself with Dr. Harold Moody (a member of the well known Jamaican family of that name) and his League for Coloured People. She also identified herself with the feminist movement in that country and in 1935 was chosen to be a delegate to the 12th Congress, International Alliance of Women held in Istanbul, Turkey.

The present writer will always remember the splendid reception hosted in her honour on her return to London from that Conference and presided over by the wife of the then British Foreign Secretary, at which he was one of the three other Jamaicans present.

Always closely associated with and committed to the ideals of the League of Nations, she was on the staff of the Ethiopian Legation in London at the time of the Italo-Ethiopian war and accompanied the Emperor to the League of Nations in Geneva where, in that assembly he sought in vain to arouse the conscience of the world against the Italian rape of his country.

Disillusioned with that body, with their talk-and-do-nothing speeches, Una Marson returned to Jamaica and at once resumed her literary work. She founded the Readers and Writers Club, the Jamaica Drama League and became a frequent contributor to Public Opinion. But her activities were not confined to literary work only. As the Gleaner editorial put it, '... she aroused the conscience of the country about its children and was to all intents and purposes the founder of the Jamaica Save the Children Fund.'

Travelling

But as ever, Una Marson was always moving, never remaining for long at any one job. Returning to England in 1938 she worked with the BBC, first as a script writer, and then during the war as the producer of the popular West Indian programme, 'Calling the West Indies'.

Those were the years, perhaps, when she made her greatest impact on the imagination of her countrymen. The familiar voice brought comfort and cheer to thousands of West Indians waiting by their radios for news of what was happening abroad.

Back in Jamaica once again after the war, she went to work with the Gleaner Company as Organising Secretary and General Editor of the Pioneer Press, a publishing venture of that paper.

But long before this, and between her various peregrinations to and from the United Kingdom, she had found time to publish four volumes of poetry, TROPICAL REVERIES (1930), HEIGHTS AND DEPTHS (1931) THE MOTH AND THE STAR (1937) and TOWARDS THE STAR (1945). She also wrote and staged three plays; AT WHAT A PRICE (1937), LONDON CALLING (1937) and POCOMANIA (1938). She was also awarded the Silver Musgrave Medal by the Institute of Jamaica for her literary work.

Leaving Jamaica once again she resided for many years in Washington DC where she continued writing. But as usual, the call of home was strong and she returned to Jamaica and resumed her duties with the Jamaica Save the Children Fund.

Death

But not for long. Early 1964 she accepted an invitation from the Israeli Government to go to Israel to attend a seminar at the Mount Carmel International Training Centre for Community Service at

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Haifa. She also attended a Woman's Peace Conference held in Jerusalem.

She went to England to spend the Christmas and New Year holidays with friends. While there she was invited to return to Haifa to work for three months. She took up his assignment in January. In March she was awarded a British Council Research grant and paid another visit to London to make arrangements in connection with this. She returned to Haifa to complete her assignment and there fell ill.

Deciding to come home for a brief rest before returning she entered St. Joseph's Hospital.

Her condition, however, grew worse and she died on May 5, burial taking place on 10th May at the Halfway Tree Parish Church Cemetery.

In this brief profile there is hardly space for an assessment of her considerable literary output. It was of varied quality.

Surprisingly, nothing written by her was included in the Independence Anthology of Jamaica Literature.

Una Marson was a colourful, vibrant personality who, in spite of the ill-health that had plagued her for most of her adult life, dared and accomplished much. She was a pioneer in many fields.

For this, if for nothing else, she deserves to be remembered, especially at a time when the cause of women's right is the headlines.

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