

Una's achievement — Her life

by HONOR FORD-SMITH

UNA Marson achieved an enormous amount both personally and professionally between 1900 and 1944. Born in Santa Cruz, St. Elizabeth, one of three sisters, daughter of Solomon I. Marson, a black Baptist minister, and his wife Ada, nee Mullings. One of the few black scholarship winners at the time she attended Hampton High school, which had a majority of white students. As a young girl, Marson carried the heavy importance and responsibility of her singular achievement. While she was there both her parents died and she had to go to work.

She moved to Kingston and

worked as a secretary. She began visiting Edelweiss Park (the centre of Marcus Garvey's activities) and participated in elocution contests.

In May 1928 she became the first Jamaican woman to edit a magazine published in Jamaica, **The Cosmopolitan**, the official organ of the Jamaica Stenographers' Association. Black stenographers were beginning to organise themselves within the anti-colonial struggle to win the right to work in establishments dominated by white clerical staff. Marson's work in the magazine created an opening within which young voices, both male and female, could be heard.

In 1930 Marson published her first collection of poetry, **Tropical Reveries**. In 1931, **Cosmopolitan** folded due to the financial constraints of the depression. In 1932 her first play "At What A Price", was produced at the Ward Theatre in Kingston. It tells the tale of a young woman from the country who comes to the city, is seduced by a travelling sales man and returns home dejected.

Fighting racism

Later that year Marson went to England where she worked as secretary to the League of Coloured People, which aimed at fighting racism and supporting black struggle around the world. For the League she co-edited **The Keys**, a literary publication. During this first stay in London her play "London Calling" was produced. Through her connection with the League, she became secretary to Haile Selassie and accompanied him to the League of Nations to plead the cause of Ethiopia in 1936.

In 1936 she returned home abruptly and resumed her work as a journalist. She remained committed to promoting concerns affecting women and published a series of articles on women and work. It is through these accounts that we get a sense of the kinds of work open to women and the part they played in the 1938 uprising. She also remained active in organizing artists and writers. In 1937



UNA MARSON

she founded the Readers and Writers Club and the Kingston Dramatic Club to mobilize young black artists and writers.

Also in 1937 she published "The Moth and the Stars", probably her most innovative work. It is here that she begins to break with the dominant influence of the Jamaica Poetry League under a leadership which emphasized universal values and the debunking of experiments in creole and poetry of protest [Cobhan, 1982]. Marson breaks with the tradition by reintroducing the creole voice into the poetry, by experimenting with blues forms borrowed from the southern United States of America and by writing from the point of view of a black-middle class woman.

Pocomania

In 1937 she also remounted "London Calling". The following year came the significant and

pioneering "Pocomania", her most important work as a playwright. The importance of "Pocomania", lies in part, in that it presented a play which was not farce in Patwa (patois). It also publicly dramatized a conflict facing many middle-class black women. In this sense it represented a rupture with a dramatic scene dominated by an upper-class view of black working-class culture. Later that year she left with Amy Bailey for England to raise money for the Save the Children Fund which she helped found that year.

In England Marson was one of a few Jamaicans to testify before the Moyne Commission before it began work in the Caribbean. She recommended that there be some legitimizing of common-law unions and that a tax be levied on bachelors in order to provide money for the care of children neglected by their fathers. She also called for attention to the racism operating among the social service clubs of the upper-class and suggested that black women needed openings within which they could organise themselves and not be objects of white women's organizing [Moyne Commission transcript, 1939].

Marson remained in England throughout the war, becoming compere for the programme "Calling the West Indies". She used it to develop a supportive

and critical atmosphere within which Caribbean cultural expression could grow. Over 200 authors first gained exposure through Caribbean Voices, the literary segment of Calling the West Indies. In fact the programme created a space for the airing of this work across the region as well as a forum for Caribbean writers to hear and discuss their own work.

Towards the Stars

In 1945, after the publication of "Toward the Stars", a compilation of earlier poems, she suffered a serious illness and returned home. After this she never regained the vigour of her early years. There were long periods of silence in her writing followed by bursts of activity. One such effort was the founding of **The Pioneer Press**. The **Pioneer** aimed to provide booklets at low prices (6d-2/-) in the areas of Caribbean poetry for young people, autobiography, biography, children's stories, natural history and nation building. **Pioneer Press** published approximately 25 books before it closed.

Una Marson died in St. Joseph's hospital in Kingston in 1965. Sylvia Wynter, a younger Jamaican woman writer, wrote the following poem sketching the sadness and courage of her life.

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