

By Louis E A Moyston

In 1935, a commanding Jamaican woman made her presence felt at a feminist international meeting. She was the only Black participant attending the International Women's Conference in Istanbul, Turkey.

Out of relative obscurity, she emerged as a powerful literary nationalist of Jamaica, and a leading feminist figure in the diasporic world. Despite her great strides as a leading Black woman of her day, she is virtually a stranger to many in her homeland and to the wider diasporic world. Today, no monuments stand to immortalise her work. Efforts have been made by a few writers to examine her great legacy.

For example, Kamau Braithwaite, a leading literary figure and Lucille Mair, a significant scholar, produced "The Caribbean Woman" in the magazine Savacou. This particular edition of Savacou (13), was dedicated to the life and times of Una Marson.

Before her time

Erika Smilowtz in the Jamaica Journal, dedicated the article, "Una Marson: A Woman Before Her Time", to the memory of this great woman. Both works are most instructive in providing more information concerning the character and capabilities of Una Marson.

Una Marson was born in St Elizabeth, Jamaica, West Indies. Her parents, the Reverend Solomon I Marson and his wife, Ada Mullings, were staunch Christians.

Their daughter Una won a scholarship to Hampton High School for Girls. Her parents died while she was attending high school. She graduated and went ahead in life to become a great thinker and feminist activist.

Like many of her rural counterparts, she migrated to the urban centre of Kingston where she worked as a secretary and a reporter to *The Gleaner*. She migrated to Kingston during the 1920s when the struggle for independence and freedom was on the advance on many fronts. Una emerged as a major participant in the budding nationalist literary circle.

The literary nationalist

In 1928 at the age of 23, Una Marson became the first woman in Jamaica to own and edit a magazine, *The Cosmopolitan*. She gathered the leading luminaries in literature in the 1930s and formed the Writers Club, The Kingston Drama Club and the Poetry League. She was instrumental in the formation of the Pioneer Press.

By 1930, she produced her

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first volume of poetry, "Tropic Reveries". In the same year she was awarded the Musgrave Silver Medal for literature. She completed a second volume of poetry, "Heights and Depths" and on her return from England in 1936 she wrote a third volume of poetry, "The Moth and the Morning Star". A fourth book of poems, "Towards the Stars" was completed in 1945. Migrating to England in 1931 she continued to be active in politics and literature.

When Una Marson returned home for the first time in the mid-1930s, Jamaica was on fire with the glowing flames for freedom and independence. The period was characterised by the loud outbursts of the urban and rural sectors. She was prompted to assume her role as a vanguard in the artistic renaissance, so incorporating

International Forum

When Una Marson migrated to England in 1931 where she became a driving force in the International Women's Movement, the West Indian immigrant community in London; she was also a secretary to his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie during his exile in England.

As a member of the League of Colored Peoples, she edited the magazine *The Keys*.

Rooted in her native language and stories, she wrote her first play "What A Price". It was the first play written performed and staged by Black immigrants in London.

Her literary works in London reflected her experience of the immigrant's life. In addition to her quest to develop a West Indian culture in the heart of the colonial metropole,

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many of the leading literary figures of the period, she formed groups to develop and promote Jamaican language and literature.

In addition to the formation of the Drama and Writer's Societies she was instrumental in the formation of the Jamaica Publishing House: a body with the main objective of publishing in the Jamaican language. She wrote and produced two plays, "London Calling" and "Pocomania". Like her other works, these plays were rooted in the Jamaican experience and language.

Her conditions to the literary development in the building of this new nation was not divorced from her social concerns. Although not a mother, in 1938 she founded "The Jamaica Save the Children Fund". This institution was "dedicated to the economic development of children and families."

Indeed, this theme can be found as a central issue in Hillary Clinton's book, *It Takes A Village* (1996). As in the experience of the returned immigrant Marcus Garvey, she was unable to find fertile ground for her seeds in Jamaica. Prior to the second World War, she returned to England and made great strides in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

her works reflected her experiences with racism. Her poem "Nigger", sharply reflected her confrontation with racism in England:

They call me "Nigger",
Those little white urchins,
They laugh along the
street.
They fling at me,
"Nigger!" "Nigger!"
"Nigger!"
What made me keep my
fingers
From choking the words
in
Their throats?

In her quest to advance the idea of West Indian culture, she engaged her services with the BBC. She developed the programme, "Calling the West Indies", that blossomed into a significant literary show; one that would have a profound impact on the development of new writings and writers from the British West Indies.

Her popularity at the BBC and her strong presence in the literary circles of London attracted leading literary figures, the likes of T S Eliot and George Orwell to name a few.

Politics

Despite her literary engagements, she was most active in international politics. Her attending the International Women's Conference in

Istanbul, Turkey was of special importance. Of equal recognition were her services to Haile Selassie I.

During the 1930s, the Italians invaded Ethiopia; this brutal conquest led to the exiling of Ethiopia's emperor. As his private secretary, Una Marson accompanied him to Geneva where he placed his country's case to the League of Nations.

Motivated by the broader diasporic experience, she called on the International Women's Conference of 1935, to help African Women in their daily struggles. Like another heroic West Indian woman of her time, Claudia Jones, Una's devotion and selflessness in the struggle led to a less healthy life.

In the late 1950s early 1960s, she returned to Jamaica on account of her illness. After her recuperation, she applied for a job at the newly independent government owned *Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC)*.

According to sources, despite a big success on the *BBC*, she was turned down for a job at *JBC* on the basis 'that her "voice was not good." She spent the rest of her years travelling and writing in the USA. She died in May 1965.

At her funeral it was remarked that she should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Another person called for a monument to commemorate and immortalise her contribution to literature and society. Today, no monuments stand to honour her contributions.

Una Marson belongs to a long line of Black contributors to history, whose works have been profound and yet their presence have been "neglected by history." Charles Drew and George Washington Carver come to mind as two other great participants in history that "status quo" neglectfully give their rightful place.

Sometimes we get the impression that even the great things done by Blacks are not important. It is our responsibility therefore, to rewrite history. Not just "our history", but history in general, to reflect what it truly means: the activities of human beings; the individual and the group.

Like other leading luminaries in Jamaica, such as Louise Bennett, Bob Marley and Claude McKay among others, Una Marson found no respect in her native land. Those on whose behalf she struggled, must rise to the occasion and establish her in the rightful place in history. Let us call on our fallen fighter, in the words of Bob Marley, to "rise and take her stand"; she who fights and fade away will live to fight another day.