

# Una Marson - trumpet for women

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by TERRY SMITH

IN a magazine feature published in another daily newspaper recently, and treating with what is claimed to be "Jamaica's First National Literary Competition", it was revealed that when the National Book Development Council of Jamaica (NBDC) approached the National Commercial Bank (NCB) for sponsorship, the sponsors thought the amount of the request "much too modest", in view of what was involved and thoughtfully 'upped the ante' far beyond the expectations of the petitioners.

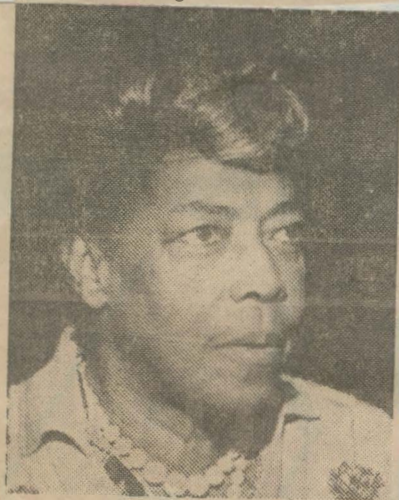
The banker, NCB's Jeffrey Cobham was himself so strong on the written word, and through it taking action, that

besides taking up other expenses, he offered attractive prizes and trophies totalling over \$210,000.

Of particular relevance to us, is that in the end NCB made possible a first prize of \$100,000 to the winner of "The Una Marson Award for Adult Literature", and a second prize of \$40,000. For accuracy and the records, there is a companion "Vic Reid Award for Children's Literature", with a first prize of \$50,000 and a second prize of \$20,000.

## What a voice!

Vic Reid is of course a formidable writer, journalist and novelist in our time, known by some of his works to the current generation of Jamaican students.



MARSON ... "cries out for recognition."

Not so Una Marson, who might well be termed "a voice from the past." But what a voice, and what a past, although perhaps unknown to the majority of Jamaicans alive, including some poets, journalists and writers. Una Marson cries out for more tangible recognition, and the undersell recalled in the article brings to mind the dilemma of pricing intellectual property, and the national habit of selling journalists and writers like Una Marson short in life, and even shorter in death.

Una Marson, who was born in Santa Cruz, St. Elizabeth in 1905, the daughter of a Baptist parson, and properly schooled at Hampton High School for Girls, became in her time one of the island's most famous literary figures as journalist, poet, playwright, broadcaster, social worker and world traveller.

In any aspect of this multi-faceted work and mission she could successfully have claimed accolades based on achievement. But given this moment in national life, when our women are not only conscious of their tremendous cultural, social and political gains, but are pressing full steam ahead regardless, we can pick up Una Marson, in mid-

career as a 32-year-old young female journalist in the very first edition of the newly launched weekly **Public Opinion** on Saturday, February 20, 1937: Her then haunting question, and headline of the article is "Should Our Women Enter Politics?" She began:

"Should our women enter politics? Should they offer themselves as candidates at our municipal and legislative elections? Should they speak at political meetings and admonish the masses from a soap box at street corners?" And you can certainly guess her answer:

"Emphatically, yes. They should do all these things with a courage born of the conviction that can only come from knowledge."

She went on to record the justification that "in the field of politics there are questions that only women can adequately bring to the notice of men. In a world in which men rule and in which laws are made by men, women can only bring the balance that is as necessary in communal life as in the home, if they avail themselves of the services they can render in public life."

In that article she put forward the proposition that "social work is the best training for a political career," and that, after regretting that in Kingston the little that was done as social work "remains in the hands of a few members of the older set, who are for the most part English people or women from

Jamaica's white social circles?"

And simultaneously, by way of challenge she asked:

"Where are the hundreds of girls who leave secondary schools annually? Where are the scholarship girls? Where are the daughters of the ministers, the doctors, the lawyers, the teachers?"

## Warning

Closing her call for the entry of women into representative politics, Una Marson warned against the attractive delusion of criticism of the male establishment without offering

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an alternative:

"We must stop saying our City Council, our Legislative Council are no good — anyone can criticise. I believe our women — if they would take the trouble — can outdo our men in politics — I throw out the challenge — who will be our first woman politician?"

In February 1937, the women who would later make political history were largely unknown and even touched by such a plea.

The question of party politics was certainly not on the public or even private agenda, and it would be well over a year before some of the movers of **Public Opinion** would sell Norman Manley the need to be founder and head the first political party in the 1938 onward modern Jamaican era, the People's National Party (PNP). From where she wrote,

## Party politics

Una Marson recalled:

"Here in Jamaica we have no party politics. There are no



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outside the new political power base and mainstream later to be the reality by the introduction of party politics in Jamaica.

In her follow-up article in **Public Opinion** the following Saturday, February 27, 1937, Una Marson spoke to the agony of the way forward for women:

"Our women have initiative and administrative ability. Here and there we see it — it must be encouraged and developed. Our schools must encourage scholars to think for themselves. Our officers must give women the same chance as men and the same pay for the same work." In other words she was an equal opportunity, equal pay advocate way back in 1937. Then to the political contributions of women:

"What can our Women Politicians do? Save the children, protect women workers — help the downtrodden and guide the wayward male!"

The modern sisters, ought to be proud, but you haven't heard anything yet.

generations of Conservatives, Liberals, Labourites, and Independence who feel restrained to support their party at all costs. That, therefore, simplifies matters for our women...."

So it seemed then. But when she declared: "I do not think it would be of any service to the community to introduce Party Politics here", she seemed destined (if she did not revise this opinion) to have put herself

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