

THE VALUE OF AN ANGRY WOMAN

(The Importance of Una Marson)

Our readers requested serialized novels, short stories and exposure of Sistren's research work... below are extracts from Honor's research on Una Marson. Una was the first Jamaican woman to edit a magazine published in Jamaica; in 1930 she published her first collection of poems; in 1932 her first play. As black middle class journalist, editor, playwright and poet she never lost her commitment to airing issues affecting women. Read on...

by Honor Ford-Smith

Sitting before an open box of Una Marson's possessions in the Institute of Jamaica, I spread before me fragments of her life: copies of her play *Pocomania*, naturopath magazines, a letter from her husband refusing her money, articles she submitted to the *Daily Gleaner* with rejection slips, yellowing now, clipped to the top. How much is NOT here I think, as the voice of a woman I tried to interview about her, echoes in my mind.

"I am very wicked. I am very miserable and I prefer to keep the information to myself... I will never share it with anybody. I am getting my revenge... this country killed her. Una died of a broken heart. The society killed her. And if all the people who want to write things about her now had recognized her then..." [Interview with "a friend"]

I feel as if I am peeping through a window at someone (unaware of my presence) who is changing their clothes. The box has a life of its own - it is as if someone has set up a writing improvisation: "From these assembled objects construct a character and a narrative." How can I make sense of the signals and trail of clues offered by the box in relation to my topic **Women's Labour and Struggle 1900-1944**? What kind of knowledge can I construct from the naturopath magazines and the other facts I have of her life? Should I focus on her "work" and what should I consider her "work" to be? Within what body of knowledge should I place it? Literature? Social-Work? History? Journalism? If I place her within one body of knowledge how would I deal with what is left out?

Una Marson (1905-1965) matters to me precisely because the judgement on her literary merit is so mixed. Many of those I



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interviewed felt that although she was a good organizer and "helped so many people", her own literary work was "just plain bad"

In spite of the "badness" of the work, the same people assessed it as a kind of benchmark in Jamaican theatre. The play *Pocomania* marked the start of a period in which consciously nationalist perspectives on Jamaican identity were represented on stage.

I am interested in this and other contradictory assessments of Marson's work because of my need as a woman educator and writer to understand the constraints on my work in the region. Why didn't the talent *Pocomania* demonstrated continue to develop afterwards? Why is *Pocomania* the high point of her writing career when she

was only 32 at the time of its production? What prevented her development?

What is most striking to me as I piece together the fragments of the box and the publications, is the contradiction between the fast-paced dynamic achievements of her life until 1945 and the quality of inner life as it is expressed in the poetry and in *Pocomania*. Here are two selves, the one public, socially engaging, courageous, assertive, pioneering, and the other private, depressed, lonely, reaching for a resolution to problems of personal autonomy and intimacy in brittle optimistic lines of poetry. What I hope to do is to understand that gap between those two selves and make some suggestions about what would be needed to close it. So in spite of the differences between she and I (she black, me apparently white; she born 1905 and I 1951), I want to explore the contents of the box as a metaphor for dialogue with another Jamaican woman dramatist about the task that we do, the obstacles that confront us, the terms of social engagement between the cultural worker and the society in which she finds herself.

Inevitably I will blot her life with my ink, I am writing through the lens of a history coloured by the nationalist movements, the neo-colonial era, and the new wave of feminism. I look back toward her work in the 20's and 30's through these events. Precisely because of this I can reconstruct her life in a way which is possible now, but was not possible then.

Since the thirties, women of all different classes, colours and cultures have rewritten the narratives of history. Would the life of a Una Marson be any easier now, any less fragmented, as a result of these things? Would the feminist movement in the region now offer support for someone grappling with the dilemmas she face?

In the next Issue read about UNA's achievement... her life.