



# An early Jamaican feminist writer

## The life of Una Marson

1905-1965

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Review by Margaret Bishop

In these days of instant communication and the global village, there seem to be few barriers to achievement, all other things being equal, but Jamaican Una Marson was perhaps a most unlikely candidate for becoming in the 1930s an actor on the international stage, a writer, and a feminist.

The sixth and youngest child of the Reverend Solomon Isaac Marson and his wife Ada, she was the odd one out. Physically unlike her fairer sisters and her mother, and more like her father, she was his daughter-

son, and early became aware of the limitations of Rev Marson's social standing and of her own lack of self-esteem. Leaving the "snob centre" of Hampton high school in the summer of 1922 with her Oxford and Cambridge lower certificate, "further education was never an option". Una was already a loner.

She worked for a while with the Salvation Army in Kingston, at the YWCA and then at the *Jamaica Critic*, a socio-political monthly journal, where she was to become Jamaica's first woman editor-publisher. She later founded her own monthly magazine, *The Cosmopolitan*, in which she promoted the works of Jamaican poets and short-story writers, "men and women well versed in Shakespeare, Swinburne and Kipling" in "lofty-sounding moralising and patriotic verses". In 1929 she parodied Hamlet's speech in her poem "To wed or not to wed..." and attempted another based on Kipling's "If..."

From Jamaica, Marson went in 1930 to England where she soon got her first taste of British street racism. In one of her poems she wrote: "I am black/ And so I must be/ More clever than white folk/ More wise than white folk/ More discreet than white folk/ More courageous than white folk". Her first play "At what a price", dealing with man-woman relations rather than class or colour, had been

well enough received as "a delightful Jamaican comedy".

Turning now towards Africa, she was beginning to accept invitations to represent coloured people in far-off lands. By age 30, she was a much sought-after speaker on issues to do with women and coloured people and was growing used to being the centre of attention. During this period she came into contact with many famous black people on both sides of the Atlantic, among them Paul Robeson.

At the end of 1935 she left London to take up a post at the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva. She was delighted to be in this hub of diplomatic negotiations, but just as her first posting was ending, the conflict brewing between the Italian dictator Mussolini and Abyssinia came to a head and she was asked to return to work with Dr Charles Martin in what would today be considered the Abyssinian consulate, in Kensington, England. And Abyssinia took over Una's life.

On the advice of her doctor who saw her "heading for a nervous breakdown", she returned home to Jamaica in September 1936.

Her former activities had prepared her well for the activist politics in which she began to indulge in Jamaica when, after a long rest in the country she went to share a house with her sister Etty. It was not long before she began to see that the attitude of Kingston's upper crust to her was determined by a considerable class prejudice, in a country which did not officially admit that colour prejudice existed. "Una, who counted two kings amongst her intimates, was being summoned like a parlour-maid because she was expected to be pleased to rub shoulders with the elites". She began to strike sparks off Lady Denham, wife of the then governor, Lord Edward Denham, as she worked with Amy Bailey, the champion of the underprivileged, especially of women.

In that second Kingston period she was as much involved in cane-cutters strikes and the Save the Children Fund, as she was in getting her plays staged and her poems published.

But by 1938 she was once more in London and working with the BBC as presenter of its "Calling the West Indies" programme.

Jarrett-Macauley, while being a sympathetic chronicler, does not neglect the less attractive sides of her subject's character. Marson was found to apply, for her own purposes, funds that were not hers to use. Some did not care for Marson's methods, found "her flighty and unreliable, given to embarking on projects she later abandoned".

It would have been difficult not to indulge in speculation about her relationships with men, in whose company she spent so much of her time and some most interesting names appear. "... (T)here was nothing to suggest they were anything but platonic relationships... (but) male prejudice against brilliant women was rife". But it seems that on at least two occasions, a seriously contemplated marriage came to nought. When, at 55, she finally married a black American widower, it was a disaster.

Still active in independent Jamaica, she was delighted, in mid-October 1964, to accept an invitation from Golda Meir, then Israeli foreign minister, to participate in a seminar and conference on the Role of Women in the Struggle for Peace and Development, in Haifa. Revisiting London on the way back, Marson found a new generation of Caribbean artists and writers.

When she became ill, she had to be persuaded to return to Jamaica and went reluctantly to hospital. She had earlier, in her 30s, written her own epitaph in *Confessions of a Troubled Soul*: "Why should I/ sorrowing go?/ Have I not lived?"