



READINGS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

CRITICS ON



*Caribbean
Literature*



EDITED BY EDWARD BAUGH

GEORGE ALLEN AND UNWIN LTD

Readings in Literary Criticism 19

CRITICS ON CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Readings in Literary Criticism

1. CRITICS ON KEATS
2. CRITICS ON CHARLOTTE AND
EMILY BRONTE
3. CRITICS ON POPE
4. CRITICS ON MARLOWE
5. CRITICS ON JANE AUSTEN
6. CRITICS ON CHAUCER
7. CRITICS ON BLAKE
8. CRITICS ON VIRGINIA WOOLF
9. CRITICS ON D. H. LAWRENCE
10. CRITICS ON YEATS
11. CRITICS ON MATTHEW ARNOLD
12. CRITICS ON WORDSWORTH
13. CRITICS ON GEORGE ELIOT
14. CRITICS ON T. S. ELIOT
15. CRITICS ON DRYDEN

16. CRITICS ON SHAKESPEARE
17. CRITICS ON ROBERT LOWELL
18. CRITICS ON HENRY JAMES
19. CRITICS ON CARIBBEAN
LITERATURE

Edited by Judith O'Neill

Edited by Sheila Sullivan
Edited by Judith O'Neill
Edited by Jacqueline Latham
Edited by W. T. Andrews
Edited by Raymond Cowell
Edited by Jacqueline Latham
Edited by Raymond Cowell
Edited by William Baker
Edited by Sheila Sullivan
Edited by Robert McHenry
and David G. Lougee
Edited by W. T. Andrews
Edited by Jonathan Price
Edited by J. Don Vann
Edited by Edward Baugh

CRITICS ON CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Readings in Literary Criticism

Edited by Edward Baugh

Department of English, University of the West Indies

London

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN

Boston

Sydney

First published in 1978

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention. All rights are reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1956, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, electrical, chemical, mechanical, optical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be addressed to the publishers.

© George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd, 1978

ISBN 0 04 801018 9

Printed in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford, Surrey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the following for permission to use copyright material from the works whose titles follow in brackets:

Southern Review and Kenneth Ramchand (Kenneth Ramchand's 'Claude McKay and *Banana Bottom*', *Southern Review*, vol. 4, 1970); University of the West Indies (Lloyd W. Brown's 'Dreamers and Slaves: the Ethos of Revolution in Walcott and LeRoi Jones', *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 17, September-December 1971); *Bim* (Edward Brathwaite's 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel', *Bim*, no. 45, July-December 1967; Gerald Moore's 'Use Men Language', *Bim*, no. 57, March 1974); Evans Brothers Ltd (John Figueroa's 'Our Complex Language Situation', *Caribbean Voices*, vol. 2, 1970); Institute of Caribbean Studies (Gordon Rohlehr's 'Islands', *Caribbean Studies* 10, no. 4, January 1971, pp. 173-202 (reprinted by permission of the Author and the Institute of Caribbean Studies; copyright 1971); Institute of Jamaica (Mervyn Morris's 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously', *Jamaica Journal*, vol. 1, December 1967); Kenyon College (Karl Miller's 'V. S. Naipaul and the New Order', *Kenyon Review*, vol. 29, November 1967); George Lamming (George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, 1960); New Beacon Publications (Wilson Harris's 'Tradition and the West Indian Novel', *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, 1967); Heinemann Educational Books Ltd (R. B. Le Page's 'Dialect in West Indian Literature', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, no. 7, July 1969; Joyce Adler's 'Tumatumari and the Imagination of Wilson Harris', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, no. 7, July 1969; George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Homecoming*, 1972); Gordon Rohlehr (Gordon Rohlehr's 'The Folk in Caribbean Literature', *Tapia*, December 1972); Derek Walcott (Derek Walcott's 'The Muse of History', *Is Massa Day Dead?*, 1974); Institute of Jamaica and Sylvia Wynter (Sylvia Wynter's 'Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism', part I, *Jamaica Journal*, II, December 1968); University of Texas Press (David Ormerod's 'Theme and Image in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, VIII, 1967).

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	page 7
INTRODUCTION	11
<i>Part I Contexts for Criticism: General Approaches to the Literature</i>	17
SYLVIA WYNTER 'The Necessary Background'	19
GEORGE LAMMING The Peasant Roots of the West Indian Novel	24
GORDON ROHLEHR The Folk in Caribbean Literature	27
WILSON HARRIS Tradition and the West Indian Novel	31
DEREK WALCOTT The Muse of History	38
<i>Part II From Colonialism to Independence</i>	45
NGUGI WA THIONG'O George Lamming's <i>In the Castle of My Skin</i>	47
LLOYD W. BROWN The Revolutionary Dream of Walcott's Makak	58
GORDON ROHLEHR Blues and Rebellion: Edward Brathwaite's <i>Rights of Passage</i>	63
KARL MILLER V. S. Naipaul and the New Order: A View of <i>The Mimic Men</i>	75
<i>Part III Relationships: Individual, Community, Mankind</i>	85
DAVID ORMEROD 'Unaccommodated Man': Naipaul's B. Wordsworth and Biswas	87
KENNETH RAMCHAND The Vision of a 'Sustaining Community' in Claude McKay's <i>Banana Bottom</i>	93
EDWARD BRATHWAITE Roger Mais's <i>Brother Man</i> as Jazz Novel	103
JOYCE ADLER Wilson Harris's <i>Tumatumari</i> and the Family of Man	113

<i>Part IV A Language of One's Own</i>	<i>page</i> 121
R. B. LE PAGE	
Dialect in West Indian Literature	123
GERALD MOORE	
The Language of West Indian Poetry	130
MERVYN MORRIS	
The Dialect Poetry of Louise Bennett	137
JOHN FIGUEROA	
Derek Walcott's 'Poopa, Da' Was a Fête!' and Evan Jones's 'Lament of the Banana Man'	149
GORDON ROHLEHR	
Samuel Selvon and the Language of the People	153
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	162

INTRODUCTION

This anthology brings together pieces of previously published criticism on the literature of the English-speaking Caribbean, otherwise referred to as West Indian literature. The fact that no other anthology of such material exists up to now, and that there is only one other anthology of criticism of West Indian literature by 'divers hands' (Louis James's *The Islands In Between*, London, 1968), is itself indicative not only of the need for more such anthologies, but also of the state of criticism of West Indian literature. As that literature becomes more and more an object of serious and systematic study, the need for critical material, and for greater accessibility of such material as exists, is being sharply felt.

The problem of accessibility is increased by the problem of audience which faces the West Indian critic of West Indian literature at the moment. Imbued, as he is likely to be, with a sense of the importance of literature in the shaping of a people, he has to choose between, on the one hand, publishing his essay in an international scholarly journal, with the kind of acclaim such publication might bring, and also with the satisfaction of knowing that what he wrote will appear as he wrote it, and, on the other hand, publishing his work in some local, more or less 'popular' West Indian journal or newspaper, where he will get the satisfaction of feeling that he is reaching the audience that matters most to him, but where at the same time he might have to suffer from the incompetence of printing and editing. And ironically, to the West Indian student who wants to seek out that essay, it might even be better preserved and easier to come by if published in the international scholarly journal, since the West Indian publication is also likely to suffer from an inadequate and haphazard distribution even within the region. The problem also affects the bibliographer, who cannot approach his task with any confidence in the traditional guidelines as to what kind of publication is likely to contain lightweight literary criticism. At least one of the most astute and influential West Indian critics seems to have made his choice and struck out a path by not seeking too actively after publication outside the region. I refer to Gordon Rohlehr, who has consistently committed most of his major pieces to the Trinidadian political newspaper *Tapia*.

Because the present anthology had to cover a whole literature, however young and small, the question of criteria by which to select and arrange the material was much more acute than it could have been for editors of other volumes, each dealing with a single author, in the 'Readings in Literary Criticism' series. In those

volumes a chronological pattern, focusing on historical changes in critical approaches to the author, has been most convenient and preferred. But, partly because of the very youth of West Indian literature, and even more so of criticism of that literature—the earliest item in this anthology was first published in 1960 and all the others after 1966—the historical-chronological method did not seem suitable in this instance. We are still too close to most of the material to have a definitive historical perspective on it, and the material itself is still too limited in its time-span for enough substantial trends to be satisfactorily differentiated.

This is not to say that trends cannot be perceived even now. One could begin, say, with a sampling of the random, and usually very slight pieces of criticism from the period prior to 1950, from about which date one marks the significant beginning of the main body of West Indian literature. This could be followed by a look at the criticism, mainly English book reviews, which greeted the exhilarating outburst of prose fiction in the fifties. Then there would be the growing awareness among West Indians of the need for a body of criticism by West Indians, followed by the on-going debate among West Indian critics as to what should be the guiding principles of a West Indian criticism of the regional literature. Some other recent trends which can now be distinguished are the growth of interest in West Indian literature among black African critics, as well as an upsurge of critical interest in folk forms and influences. These are some of the historical movements, but to have planned the anthology in terms of them would have necessitated the inclusion of too much ephemeral material or material of purely historical interest.

It is because I feel that the priority right now is the need for more close, 'hard' criticism of West Indian writing, and that most people who take up an anthology of criticism of West Indian literature will be hoping to find it useful primarily as an introduction to the literature, as distinct from an introduction to the criticism (a difference of emphasis), that I have decided upon a collection which cheats a little in going outside its strict brief by being structured first with a view to introducing the literature, and only secondarily with a view to showing off the critics, their range and variety, though I hope that it will in effect have done the latter reasonably well.

What I have concentrated on, therefore, is selections of substantial and comparatively detailed critical analysis of individual works, selecting these to cover as many as possible of the more important authors. In keeping with the introductory aim of the anthology, and enhancing in some measure its unity, I have selected criticisms which arise out of and seek to promote an enthusiasm for the works under discussion. This, the main body of the book, is

preceded and balanced by a section which goes in a sense to the other extreme, comprising broad theoretical statements and statements of critical standpoint, or raising broad theoretical questions of general approach to West Indian literature. (But it seemed most sensible to put Le Page's statement on language in the relevant section of critiques.) These provide a context for the detailed and specific criticisms and introduce some of the most crucial areas of theory being debated by critics of West Indian literature. I have avoided as far as possible historical-survey-type essays (whether of genre of theme or author), since, in addition to existing in some sufficiency already and being easily accessible, these, with their broad generalising outlines and necessarily fleeting look at specific works, do not fit into my design.

In the first section, 'Contexts for Criticism', the preponderance of critical attention to the novel is indicative of the general situation in criticism of West Indian literature to date. This is partly because prose fiction was the first genre to see the accumulation of a sizeable body of work of reasonable stature. It is only very recently that poetry has begun to establish itself in this way; and while there has been a fair-sized body of plays for some time, they have not been sufficiently published, and consequently there has been very little literary criticism of drama.

In the main part of the anthology I have attempted to give some shape and direction to what is necessarily a heterogeneous collection by grouping the items in three very broad and arbitrary categories of what seem to be some major preoccupations of the literature and criticism. These categories are to be taken as a mere convenience and starting point, a stimulus to discussion and further exploration. There are other categories which would no doubt have served as well—'The Search for Roots', 'The Clash of Cultures', 'New Forms and Dimensions', to suggest a few. It is also important to remember that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Many of the items could have fitted equally well into any of them. The reader will see, too, that while there is no category about form as such, some of the pieces (Brathwaite on Mais, for example) are most ostensibly about form. But form is a category which may with some impunity be taken for granted, as being subsumed by all criticism, while it seemed that there was a positive benefit, a new stimulus, to be derived from grouping certain items in terms of their less obvious or explicit concerns.

The first section of criticisms of individual works is 'From Colonialism to Independence', because the literature of the West Indies is, first, last and essentially, a colonial literature. 'Colonialism' is here used primarily in a descriptive rather than evaluative sense, although the latter cannot be completely avoided. The literature has been determined and produced by, just as it reflects

or expresses or attempts to come to terms with, the colonial experience of the region. The phrase 'to independence' is to be taken to indicate not so much a realised (or even, perhaps, realisable) goal, as a kind of inexhaustible potential, a symbolic point on the graph of consciousness which the imagination can trace in the colonial experience. There is a sense, then, in which the colonialism of the literature is not something to be outgrown.

In the coming to terms with colonialism, one of the leading ideas in the literature and the criticism has been what one might call the idea of community. This idea provides the conceptual basis for the section entitled 'Relationships'. That basis may be further elucidated by reference to Lamming, who argues, in his essay 'The Negro Writer and His World' (*Caribbean Quarterly*, V (February 1958), pp. 109-15), that there are three distinct yet 'deeply related' worlds to which the writer owes a responsibility: 'the world of the private and hidden self', the world of his particular society, and 'the world of men'.

Criticism has concentrated heavily on the literature as presenting images of or for West Indian society, as depicting or analysing that social fragmentation and divisiveness which has been one legacy of colonialism, or as presenting models of community, of a 'whole' society (Brathwaite on *Brother Man*, Ramchand on *Banana Bottom*). The question of the tensions between individual and society is highlighted in such criticism, and individualism becomes an explosive topic. This kind of focus was sharpened by the appearance of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), as was dramatised in the difference of opinion between Brathwaite and Ramchand as to what the book meant. Writing in *Bim*, no. 37 (July-December 1963), Brathwaite observed that 'in the world of Hanuman House, we have the first novel whose basic theme is not rootlessness and the search for social identity; in *A House for Mr. Biswas* we have at last a [West Indian] novel whose central character . . . is really trying to get *in* rather than get *out*' (p. 17). Ramchand, in *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London, 1970), takes issue with this: '*A House for Mr. Biswas* I would suggest is the West Indian novel of rootlessness *par excellence*' (p. 192).

The critical concern with images of and models for West Indian society, the sociological bias, is apparent too in one general pattern of response to Naipaul, to be seen both in the critics who stress what they regard as the necessity, accuracy and 'courage' of his image of West Indian society, and in the critics who are careful to point out what to them are the prejudices and distortions which vitiate that image. The concern is also dominant when, for example, Rohlehr says that if he had to compile 'an anthology of current West Indian writing', his first principle would be to try 'as

far as possible to determine how far that writing reflected and explored the tensions of the society' (*Bim*, no. 54 (January-June 1972), p. 81).

The concern for the idea of community resolves itself again and again into a concern for the question/problem of language. For Walcott's symbolic West Indian sea-almond trees, 'their leaves' broad dialect' was important because it was 'a coarse,/enduring sound/they shared together' (*The Castaway*, London (1965), p. 37). Gerald Moore sums up the centrality of the critical concern with the question of language when he says, 'The most important of the discoveries made over the intervening thirty years [since the first publication of *Bim*] is that the West Indies has languages of its own'. (See p. 130 below.) Lamming had put the matter differently, but with just as sharp a focus, when in *The Pleasures of Exile* he had said, with a sort of curt defiance, 'English is a West Indian language'. (See p. 25 below.) The drama enacted between Prospero and Caliban is, among other things, and as has been pointed out often enough, a conflict about language. (See, for example, Walcott's 'The Muse of History', below.) What was once a romance between the West Indian writer and the English language became a love-hate relationship. Not surprisingly, the critics are most stimulated to analysis of the language of West Indian writers when that language can be shown to be in some peculiar or essential way West Indian. In any event, the pervasiveness of the agony over language in the following selections is an acute indication of what is to me an insufficiently acknowledged idea—that literature, all literature, is ultimately *about* language.

*University of the West Indies,
Jamaica
May 1975*

