

# W. Adolphe Roberts—the poet as nationalist

**A DAPPER FIGURE**, attired invariably in white and sporting a well trimmed Van Dyke beard. Such in appearance was Walter Adolphe Roberts, the subject of this week's profile. No one meeting him for the first time would have regarded him as 'Jamaican'; there was always something 'foreign' about him. French or Latin American. Hardly surprising for these were the two great influences



W. ADOLPHE ROBERTS

in his life and it was from these cultures that Roberts drew his deepest inspiration. Paradoxically it was his cosmopolitanism, his deep and

abiding interest in these two cultures that helped to make in the nationalist he was to become.

As the Gleaner editorial commenting on his death put it:

'His wider vision made him see Jamaica in its context. He was obsessed by the Caribbean, the theatre of the great conflicts of world power and rival cultures for three hundred years. He saw Jamaica not as a petty colony with a provincial culture, but as a central point in the mighty struggles and

journalistic career.

IN THE UNITED STATES he held many important editorial posts and served as a war correspondent in Europe, from 1914 to 1916 for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

An important turning point in his life occurred in 1936, when he met the Jamaican, W. A. Domingo, in New York. The outcome of this meeting was the formation of the Jamaica Progressive League, an association of Jamaicans living in the United States dedicated to achieving self-government for Jamaica. Roberts became

about this time, set out in clear terms the need for a new political direction and it is interesting to compare this document with the probably more widely known 'Jamaica Letter' of Simon Bolivar written in 1815.

ROBERTS RETURNED TO his homeland in 1951, then 65 years old to take up permanent residence and at an age when most men think of retiring or resting on their laurels, he embarked on a round of cultural and literary activities that would have taxed the energies of a much younger man.

On the departure of Una Marson from the island, Roberts was appointed General Editor of the Pioneer Press. He founded the Bolivarian Society of Jamaica and remained its president until his death. He was president of the Jamaica Historical Society, the Jamaica Library Association, the Poetry League of Jamaica, the Natural History Society of Jamaica and the Jamaica Centre of the International P.E.N. Club. At the time of his death he was chairman of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Jamaica.

In 1950 in recognition of his documentation of Cuban history, he was made an Officer of the Order of Merit, Carlos Manuel de Cespedes and in 1954, was awarded the Gold Musgrave Medal of the Institute of Jamaica for his outstanding achievement as a writer and historian. He was honoured by the City of Kingston in 1955 by being given the "Freedom of the City" and the symbolic Key. He was also honoured by the Queen with the award of the O.B.E.

Roberts acquired enough honours and acclaim during his life time to satisfy any man. But what of the writer and historian?

ROBERTS'S PUBLISHED WORK included novels, poetry, biographies, travel books and histories. In addition he wrote essays and articles on a wide range of subjects. He was also much in demand as a lecturer in the Extra Mural Department of the then University College of the West Indies. In this capacity he made West Indian History come alive, probably for the first time, for hundreds of his fellow Jamaicans. For although Roberts was essentially a poet, it was history, the history of the Caribbean region in particular and its romantic characters that fascinated him and engaged his interest most.

## ARTS PROFILE

By R. L. C. A.

rivalries of the past. He saw her claimed by destiny to play an even more important part in the coming days, amid the new turmoil of the Americas.'

Born in Kingston on October 15, 1886, W. Adolphe Roberts, like Tom Redcam before him, was the son of an Anglican clergyman. He spent his boyhood in Manchester, near Mandeville, which he always regarded as 'home'. At sixteen, he took his first job as a reporter on the Gleaner and at eighteen left for the United States to pursue a

its first president and returned to Jamaica in the following year, and in Domingo's words, 'sowed the seeds of his liberal ideas on Jamaica which soon developed into the mighty tree that became the Dominion of Jamaica on August 6, 1962'.

Roberts took his stand for self-government on the unsailable ground that 'any people that has seen its generations come and go on the same soil for generations, is in fact a nation.'

His pamphlet, 'Self government for Jamaica,' written at

He could talk for hours on the subject of Simon Bolivar, whom he regarded as beyond comparison the greatest man produced by any Caribbean country, followed only to a lesser degree by Jose Marti, apostle of Cuban Independence. His 'The Caribbean, the Story of our sea of Destiny' (Dedicated to N.W. Manley and Edna Manley), is considered by many to be his most important historical work. No one reading carefully this comprehensive survey can fail to be struck by the fact that, in essence, it is a long, sustained call for and celebration of the overthrow of colonial domination in the region. Indeed when the present writer mentioned this to Roberts, he responded with an appreciative twinkle of the eyes, delighted that his message had been made so abundantly clear.

But it was as political pamphleteer and essayist, rather

(Continued on PAGE 26)

than as novelist that he more successfully interpreted the Jamaican scene. Nor can there be any doubt of the genuineness of the emotion, the exile's longing for home that runs through the little poem he calls ISLAND OF DREAMS.

*Passionate light of the South,  
Flushing and fading to-day:*

*Here at the harbour-mouth,  
Will it vanish in darkness for aye?*

*Nay! though I wander apart,*

*And bitter the long night seems,*

*I shall hide it deep down in my heart*

*O my Island of dreams!*

*Rosy, the light of the South*

*Flushed ere it faded again.*

*And I sat at the harbour-mouth,*

*Vowed in a passion of pain:*

*"Dear land, though my wanderer's way*

*Should flame with a splendour that gleams,*

*I shall love thee forever and aye,*

*O my Island of dream!*

ROBERTS LIVED LONG enough to see his beloved 'Island of Dreams' achieve independence in August 1962. He died in his sleep in London on September 14, 1962, and, like Tom Redcan before him, his ashes, after cremation, were brought back to Jamaica for burial, this time in the Mandeville Church yard.

Wyllffe Bennett, commenting on THE MAN AND THE POET in the Sunday Gleaner on September 30, 1962, credits Roberts with introducing the French villanelle form into the Caribbean, where in the hands of Vivian Virtue, Clare McFarlane and himself it has received its most distinguished treatment in the English tongue. His "Villanelle of the living Pan" was included in an Anthology of American Verse.

The New York Times in its long obituary notice of Roberts had this to say of him:

"The achievement of independence of Jamaica this summer was a source of pride to him and perhaps represented his great contribution to his time."

Walter Adolphe Roberts, poet, historian and nationalist may truly be regarded as one of the truly 'Great Jamaicans' of his day.