

W. Adolphe Roberts

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THE MAN & THE POET

by Wycliffe Bennett

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The news came to Jamaica on Thursday, September 13, 1962 that Walter Adolphe Roberts had died in London. He was 76.

I remember distinctly when I first had the honour of meeting him. It was at the Myrtle Bank Hotel during the summer of 1946. Within half an hour no fewer than six other people had dropped in to see him. I recall that among them were the now late Noel Nethersole, lawyer and politician; the poet Vivian Virtue; W. G. Ogilvie, the novelist; and T. Newton Willoughby, the lawyer. I myself had called, as Secretary of the Poetry League of Jamaica, to ask if as our Vice President, who had been away in America for so many years, he would be our guest at a luncheon which we wanted to organise in his honour.

He numbered many distinguished personalities among his friends. He used to speak to me of William Butler Yeats and his father, whom he knew quite well, and of James Joyce and Stephen Vincent Benet. He was a close friend of Edna St. Vincent Millay for the greater part of her life. It was his publication of some of her poems in nineteen consecutive issues of *Ainslee's*, a literary magazine he edited in New York between 1918 and 1921, that attracted early attention to this remarkable woman, who was to become one of the great woman poets in the English tongue.....

Mr. Roberts' publications include eight novels, three volumes of verse, four biographies, two travel books and three histories. He also wrote innumerable short stories and essays, and did a number of translations. His pamphlet "Self Government for Jamaica", published during the years when he was very active as founder-president of the Jamaica Progressive League in New York, is one of the seminal documents of Jamaican nationalism. He had more information to offer on a wide range of subjects than most other people. His encyclopaedic knowledge would have made a lesser man pedant. But he was forthright without being dogmatic. He had definite ideas about most things,

and would give his opinion uncompromisingly, if you asked him. But in spite of all this, you could not but appreciate the innate humility which was part of his personal charm; his anxiety always to get the other man's opinion; and his readiness always to withdraw a remark, if in the face of reasonable argument to the contrary, he found his own point of view untenable.

Born in Kingston in 1886, the son of an Anglican clergyman and a lady of French extraction, Mr. Roberts would readily strike most Jamaicans as a foreigner. I often pictured him, sword to his side, a bright red sash around his waist and a broad turned-up rim hat stepping off one of Sir Henry Morgan's ships. And when he spoke of Sir Henry Morgan and the Buccaneers, or told a story from Caribbean history, it was as though he was recounting a tale in which he himself had played a part. His poem "Morgan" had this quality:

*"Gorgeous Sir Henry! Egad, it is the same man!
Governor of Jamaica in a br adered coat,
Swearing loud and hearty to show he's not
a tame man,*

And pouring kill-devil down his thirsty throat.

Many authorities regard as his most important work, "The Caribbean...Our Sea of Destiny". This is perhaps because for a long time he was one of the very few historians with a Caribbean point of view.

His prose style has a rather strange and unusual quality. If you did not know the facts you would conclude that he learnt the language as a foreigner, and in his case as a Frenchman. The result is that some people complain that they find his prose work a bit tedious.

What his prose loses by reason of this personal and rather un-English quality, his poetry gains. A striking illustration of this is the concentration of the whole of that first chapter of his novel "Royal Street", a tale of old New Orleans, into one sonnet... his "Vieux Carre"

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W. Adolphe Roberts

(Contd.)

His inspiration is French or Celtic, due probably to the early influence of his mother. He read and absorbed English poetry, and ranked Keats after Shakespeare as the greatest poet in the English language with Swinburne not very far behind. On Swinburne he was an authority, and collected every book he could find on this poet. Yet he was probably as widely read in French poetry as he was in English poetry, and his own work owes more to French than to English influence. He is the most un-English of West Indian poets. It was he who introduced the French villanelle form into the Caribbean, where in the hands of Vivian Virtue, J.E. Clare McFarlane and himself it has received its most distinguished treatment in the English tongue. His "Villanelle of the Living Pan" is a gem!

In his poetry, Mr. Roberts is a patrician. He sets down his ideals in verse, but teacher-historian that he is, he is no escapist from the facts of the past or from the realities of the present. In his vision of life there is a brooding, if sometimes militant presence of the past. This is the essential force behind his sonnet "On a Monument to Marti".

Walter Adolphe Roberts occupies a distinguished and unique position in Caribbean letters. In comparison with the rest of his work, his output of verse is slender. Few other West Indian writers, however, have written as many memorable poems. One has only to think of such pieces as his much anthologised "Peacocks" and "The Cat"

A brilliant marriage of form and content characterises these poems. He is the parnassian par excellence, and it is in this respect that he has made perhaps his finest contribution to West Indian writing.

One critic describes parnassian as the dialect of the great poet when he lacks the divine, authentic inspiration. Certainly in Mr. Robert's passion for order, harmony, organisation and clarity of idea, the Caribbean lands united by English speech have not yet produced his peer.

Already, the world-wide movement of symbolism, which has defied the artist, and cut him off for so long from his society, is giving way to a new type of expression, in an effort to re-establish contact with the common man.

Now that West Indian poets have been abandoning the cult of the ineffable, and the urge to communicate is again becoming the over-riding obsession, they might find in Walter Adolphe Roberts an uncompromising exemplar:

*Let not the enemies of Beauty take
Unction of soul that he can rise no more
Pan is not dead but sleeping in the brake
Ah, flute to him beloved, he will wake.*