
There has been a blossoming of interest over the past decade in the intellectual traditions of the Caribbean, viewed not only through various lenses of race, gender and nation but also, more holistically, paying attention to the determining contexts of specific cultures and locales while looking beyond the artificial boundaries of the region.

Professor of Africana Studies at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, Selwyn Cudjoe’s own contribution to the intellectual history of the Caribbean has been considerable. One of the earliest and more influential scholars to pay serious attention to the Caribbean literature of resistance, he has gone on to champion Caribbean women’s writing both in print and through his courses at Wellesley, expanding the parameters of Caribbean cultural studies with books devoted to Eric Williams (1993), C.L.R. James (1994), the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition of Trinidad and Tobago (2003) and – now – a critical biography of Albert Raymond Forbes Webber (1880-1932), all-but-forgotten scholar, statesman and author.

The focus on the heroic individual is a commonplace of western biography, particularly of great men, and Caribbean endeavours in the field have not been immune to the tendency. But Cudjoe’s scholarship has always been concerned with social movements and collectivities, and he uses his biography of Webber to build an intellectual history of Guyana in its relation to the broader Caribbean and African-American thought.

Webber was not born in British Guiana, as it was then called, rather in Tobago, but rose to prominence in his adoptive homeland as a champion of improved labour conditions for the working class through his association with the British Guiana Labour Union, and as an advocate of racial integration, urging Africans and East Indians to ‘unite in common struggle’ against colonialism. He was one of the architects of the Guyanese constitution, and he was the key player in the formation of the West Indian Press Association. In 1919 he became editor of the *Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown), a position which Cudjoe notes allowed him to combine his literary talents, his economic interests, his business knowledge, and his understanding of the aspirations of the common person. In 1921 he was elected to the Guyanese Legislative Council (or the Combined Court), on which he served until his untimely death just over ten years later. In that time, though, he had become a thorough menace to the colonial establishment, speaking out on a whole host of social and economic issues; and British Guiana had become a political issue as well known in the British parliament as Kenya.

Cudjoe places the formation of the Popular Party in Guyana in 1926 – the first political party in the West Indies – as preparing the ground for the mass political movements that soon swept across the entire Caribbean. Almost half of the party’s elected candidates were disqualified by the colonial authorities, and Webber was found guilty of contempt for his editorial about this ‘judicial scandal . . . perpetrated against the people.’ Cudjoe connects this to Marcus Garvey, two years later, being
denied his seat in the Jamaica Legislative Council, and jailed by the authorities. But Webber paid his fine, and avoided jail.

Webber was not an economist; but seeing the grinding poverty and misery of unemployment that the Great Depression precipitated in the West Indies, he styled himself against the orthodox faith of cuts to government spending as an Economic Heretic, urging instead increased spending to stimulate the economy. Cudjoe presents him as an intuitive anticipator of Keynesian economics, a Fabian socialist but also an anti-colonialist, who managed to avoid the trap of reducing everything to economics. Commenting on his sociological insights into the changing nature of the ‘colour problem’ in New York, which he visited during the Harlem Renaissance (when ‘the Negro was in vogue’), Cudjoe again sees him as prophetic, this time as anticipating the central thesis of Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan's classic study, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City, which was one of the most influential books of the 1960s. Here is another of the temptations of writing the lives of great men, the modeling of the hero as prophet. Thus Cudjoe sees in Webber’s life also the kind of trajectory that Trinidad sociologist, Oliver Cromwell Cox, outlines in Caste, Class and Race (1942), where he argues that one cannot understand race and race relations without understanding the social dynamics of capitalism and its history within the specific nation context. Which may be true, nonetheless. Cudjoe began thinking about Webber while writing his book on V.S. Naipaul (1988), observing that Naipaul was not the first person to write about the East Indian condition in the Caribbean. Again, the honour of the forerunner, he realised, should be reserved for Webber’s novel, Those that Be In Bondage: A Tale of Indian Indentures and Sunlit Western Waters, published in 1917, the year that indentured labour from India to British Guiana was finally abolished. We have Cudjoe too to thank for tracking the out-of-print novel down in the Guyanese archives writing a new introduction and bringing it back into print, with an Afterword by Wilson Harris.

Here we come to the crux of Webber’s literary importance. Harris, whose own mother was Webber’s wife’s sister, says: ‘When one reflects on the distinguished body of writing that has come from Trinidadian-born authors, who include C. L. R. James, Alfred Mendes, Ralph de Boissiere, V. S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, Earl Lovelace, and others, one looks to the “first” in such a faculty of design for seeds of impulse both ominous and instructive with the medium of the twentieth century that spans areas of colonialism and post colonialism, empires and revolutions.’ Those that Be In Bondage, Harris says, marks perhaps ‘the first appearance of the trickster in written West Indian literature in the twentieth century.’ Cudjoe locates the novel at a point of transition between West Indian oral and written literary tradition, as pioneering the realist novel of the dawning social and political consciousness of a people.

Apart from his journalism, Webber published also a volume of poetry, Glints from an Anvil (1919), and two travel memoirs. The first of these, An Innocent’s Pilgrimage: Being Pen Pictures of a Tender-Foot who Visited London for the First Time (1927), Cudjoe astutely compares with Mark Twain’s The Innocent Abroad; Or,
the New Pilgrim's Progress (1869), noting: ‘it sought to give Guyanese readers “a taste” of England by comparing the England of their imagination with the everyday experiences of life in that country thereby giving his fellow citizens (who were subjects of the Crown) a more realistic basis upon which to measure and understand the (m)other country.’ His second travelogue, Life in New York, I have noted already. But many will judge Webber’s main literary achievement as his Centenary History and Handbook of British Guiana 1831-1931, published just before he died, still one of the most important historical accounts, and recently republished.

Cudjoe reportedly now intends filming a documentary on Webber. In the meantime, the salvage scholarship of Caribbean Visionary makes an important contribution to West Indian historiography, reminding us of the importance of biographical study to understanding the themes and issues that link the histories of freedom-fighting and nation-building from the ex-colonies of the British Empire.

Wouldst thou be great?
Then grapple to thy soul these primal truths.
Greatness is neither born of intolerance nor schism,
But 'tis a sturdy growth of open minds.

(A.R.F. Webber, ‘Guiana’)

Russell McDougall