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Abstract

Long before I read the novels of Sam Selvon or even met him, his reputation as a young promising writer had reached a group of us in Guyana during the early 1950's. For this, we were grateful to Pansy Jeffrey and her late husband Jeff, who had returned to Guyana after living in London, England.

JESSICA HUNTLEY

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Long before I read the novels of Sam Selvon or even met him, his reputation as a young promising writer had reached a group of us in Guyana during the early 1950's. For this, we were grateful to Pansy Jeffrey and her late husband Jeff, who had returned to Guyana after living in London, England.

Sam, together with V.S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, George Lamming, and others, at the threshold of their career, were mainly writing short stories, plays and poetry for the Caribbean and World Service of the B.B.C.

The Jeffreys' had so stirred our interest that I looked forward to reading and meeting these writers. At that time I had no idea that I would find myself sailing for England soon to live among the very writers I so admired.

On my arrival, one of the first purchases I made was a copy of *Lonely Londoners*. I was fascinated by its humour and descriptions of living in London and wondered whether the writer had experienced some of what he was so ably describing. The copy of *Lonely Londoners* was passed around from friend to friend, read aloud to each other and took the place of a community newspaper.

Sam along with other writers gave of their time willingly and generously. The Kiskadee Cultural Centre, in North London, founded by my friend, Oscar Abrams, was the venue where they often read from their writings.

I had the opportunity of meeting Sam and his wife at a social gathering as the guest of Pat and Andrew Salkey. Sam seemed to have had the capacity of twisting the most serious discussion into something hilarious. He was, as we say, in his element, relaxed, as the humour of *Lonely Londoners* tripped off the pages onto Pat and Andrew's sitting room. During that evening Sam constantly called Andrew 'Trini'. This I found strange and could not understand. Everyone knew and accepted Andrew as Jamaican. Only years later it occurred to me that his humour consisted at times of turning things inside out. For Sam, the best compliment he was able to pay his friend and pasero was that of crediting him as being a fellow countryman.

One of the most memorable occasions was the opening of the Bogle

L'Ouverture Bookshop in 1975. Sam arrived late, in high spirits and in 'spirits'. He was anxious to read from his work and even though he stumbled over his words he nonetheless had the audience in peals of laughter. It proved difficult to get him to stop reading.

His departure from England to Canada left a void which was surely felt. Fortunately his regular visits to London, especially during the latter years, somehow made up for his absence. Not all of Sam's visits to London augured well. I recall a Forum on Caribbean Writers held at the Commonwealth Institute. While Sam was reading from one of his works he was attacked by a member of the audience who was also a worker at the Institute. The ostensible reason for the assault was the reading by Sam of one of his early pieces which was considered sexist. Everyone was dumb-founded and shocked by the attack and to my dismay no apologies were publicly made to Sam. He did not retaliate as would have been his right. Instead he showed tremendous dignity and self control.

Another visit was the occasion in 1992, celebrating the writing career of his friend and fellow writer, Andrew Salkey. Sam's contribution was both hilarious and filled with generosity and modesty. He opened his remarks by promising, that since all the previous speakers had said so many good things about his friend, 'he was tempted to make a list of all the bad and negative things about him', much to the delight of the audience.

Sam recounted that it was not his custom to show his work to anyone and ask for their opinion. The one exception was when he asked Andrew to read excerpts from his manuscript *Moses Ascending*. Sam's contribution admitted that any success which he had achieved as a writer was in part due to the encouragement he received from persons like Andrew. At the same time the celebration was to acknowledge not only the writers but many others in and around the community who provided the warmth and humanity which made it possible for the writers to succeed.

He recalled... 'the sixties and seventies were wonderful and exciting times. The success of one writer was the success of all. No one wanted to be the only writer from the Caribbean living in London...you wanted others to share in what was happening...it was a great feeling of warmth...'