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Sam Selvon

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Abstract

When I left Trinidad in 1950 I had been working as a journalist with the Trinidad Guardian for five years. During that time I started to write poems and short stories. The first payment I ever received for my writing was a cheque for two guineas from the BBC's Caribbean Voices programme produced by Henry Swanzy, which I treasured for months as a marvel before cashing it.

SAM SELVON

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When I left Trinidad in 1950 I had been working as a journalist with the *Trinidad Guardian* for five years. During that time I started to write poems and short stories. The first payment I ever received for my writing was a cheque for two guineas from the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme produced by Henry Swanzy, which I treasured for months as a marvel before cashing it.

I was earning enough with the newspaper job to find myself being lulled into complacency and acceptance of the carefree and apathetic life around me. And that was the main reason why I decided to go to London, very much a young man, to seek my fortune.

I wrote to Henry Swanzy, who encouraged the move, and asked him to hold on to a payment of ten guineas the BBC owed me for a short story. I was hopeful that my little writing experience would help, but I was prepared to do anything to earn a living, and stilled my qualms with the thought that I could always return if I did not get one in London.

There was also a feeling for the English countryside and landscape which had possessed me from schoolday reading of the English poets. In the hot tropical atmosphere I dreamed of green fields and rolling downs, of purling streams and daffodils and tulips, thatched cottages and quiet pubs nestling in the valleys. And I wanted to see for myself the leafless trees covered with snow as depicted on Christmas postcards.

In my first English summer I went out to various villages and hamlets and felt the deep and exhilarating satisfaction I had hoped for walking in the fields and woods, which I had dared to dream about while reciting English verse under a mango tree in the schoolyard. It was one of the first things I wrote about. What I miss most about England after living there for almost thirty years is the peace and beauty and inspiration I found in the countryside: the land did not deceive me, as the people did.

My first lodging was the Balmoral Hotel in Kensington run by the British Council as a hostel for overseas students, but it also harboured a number of immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, India, and other Commonwealth countries. It was my first experience of living among other West Indian islanders, happening in the heart of London

thousands of miles from our home territory, and I learned as much about them as I learned about the English, whose ignorance of black people shocked me. This was the country whose geography and history and literature I had been educated upon long before I knew that Port of Spain was the capital of Trinidad, so why did they ask questions like if the people lived in trees, are there many lions and tigers and elephants, and of course, their amazement that I spoke English: How well you speak our language! Where did you learn? Once I edited a series of articles by a West Indian immigrant for a national newspaper, in which he said that his white workmates followed him around in the factory, even to the lavatory, to see if he had a tail! Years after it was commonplace to see West Indians working as bus drivers and conductors, the editor of the *Sunday Times* had to travel to work by bus for the first time, and professed amazement when his ticket was punched by a black man

The stories - the actualities - are manifest, but I'll only say this: not Buckingham Palace, not the West End or the Tower of London, or the glitter of Piccadilly Circus - not even white men performing menial labor as porters or roadsweepers, nor the fact that there were so many whites who could not read or write - struck me as forcibly, or rather impressionably, as this appalling ignorance about my part of the world, when I had been led to believe that I was coming to the fountainhead of knowledge. Though I was from a small island that might be flicked off the map like a speck of dirt from a jacket, I felt ten feet tall.

My first novel was written while I was working as a clerk with the Indian Embassy. (Even here there was flack - how could I be an Indian if I did not come from India...but eventually I got the job). What I didn't write in the office I wrote in the damp basement room in Bayswater that I was living in at the time. I typed the manuscript myself, on a small portable typewriter a friend had given me before I left Trinidad. I used the most expensive paper I could buy, a kind of thick parchment quite unsuitable for this purpose, but I thought it would impress some publisher. I showed the manuscript to Maurice Richardson, an English writer and critic who had befriended me. Three weeks later he phoned that he had found a publisher. My head spun. A naive Caribbean writer, I had just sat down and written about an aspect of Trinidad life as I remembered it, with no revisions, with no hesitation, without any knowledge of what a novel was, and bam! My first attempt was successful. When the publishers had me to lunch at a French restaurant in Knightsbridge I looked at the menu and forgot all the French I had been taught in Naparima College in Trinidad, except the word 'gateau', so I said I'd have that. But my native wit made me quickly agree when they thought I meant for dessert, and I airily allowed them to order the main course.

I lived in two worlds. Hanging about with Moses and the boys, and at the same time hustling to earn something with my writing, making

contact with people in the newspaper and literary world. But more than anything else, my life in London taught me about the people from the Caribbean, and it was here that I found my manners. I was discovering a pride, a national pride, in being what I am, that I never felt at home. That was one of the things that immigration meant to me.

In 1953 I was hospitalised with pulmonary tuberculosis. When I came out the following year I decided to be a full-time writer, on the strength of a Guggenheim fellowship, which took me to America. It was while I was here that the idea of *The Lonely Londoners* came to me. When I got back to London I sat in a friend's house in Ladbrooke Grove and wrote the novel there in six months. Two of those were spent wrestling with standard English to give expression to the West Indian experience: I made little headway until I experimented with the language as it is used by Caribbean people. I found a chord, it was like music, and I sat like a passenger in a bus and let the language do the writing.

The critical acclaim when the book was published is there for those who want to see it. Suffice to say that the language and the people added another foot to my ten feet, in spite of a few (inevitable) letters earnestly beseeching me to return to Africa.

It was always a struggle to survive in London, not only because of my non-whiteness, but money. Though I established myself there as a professional writer, I could never write fast enough to keep up with basic expenses like rent and food. The idea of full-time writing was a joke: I was cleaning bars or kitchens in the small hotels around Bayswater: when *Turn Again Tiger* appeared in 1958 I was swabbing out the shithouse at a small private club owned by an affluent Irishman in Paddington who said, 'I saw your picture in *The Observer* yesterday, I didn't know you were a writer.'

By the mid-70s most of the writers of the postwar efflorescence of Caribbean Literature had left London - England. I myself was growing restless. I had spent a great slice of my life inculcating English and European literature and culture, such as eating fish and chips and reading the *News of the World* every Sunday. As a growing boy in Trinidad, from the time of silent movies I was an avid fan because my brothers worked in a cinema and I could get in free. Whatever curiosity or cultural inclination I might have been developing was also due to American films. During recess at school we played cowboys and Indians, imitated American accents: I relate my youthful years with the American music of the 30s and 40s. (There are obvious reasons that the Caribbean has always come under American influences.) It was a part of my memory that needed experience to widen my concepts, and I was not ready to return to Trinidad, or any of the islands - it had to be somewhere on the Continental mainland.

It turned out to be Canada because that was where my wife wanted to go. She had visited relatives (who had immigrated there) a few times and

glowed as she compared the standards of living.

We moved, lock stock and barrel. My native wit had thrown out a few feelers for my career as a writer; my name was not entirely unknown in Canada. But to tell the truth, it was almost like the time when I first left Trinidad, except that this was *real* immigration; selling the house, uprooting the family, turning my back on almost 30 years of life in London.

I have never thought of myself as an 'exile' - that word returned to vogue as people shuffled around the world getting settled after the war. I carried my little island with me, and far from assimilating another culture or manner I delved deeper into an understanding of my roots and myself. Immigrating did that for me, and provided the nourishment I could not find in the island to foster my creativity. I feel I do more for myself and my country by being abroad than I would have had the opportunity to do if I had stayed. I am, in a sense, still visiting abroad. But 'home is where you start from'. And should end from.