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Abstract

The Winter 1960 issue of the Tamarack Review, devoted to West Indian writing, opened with Sam Selvon's poem 'Sun' followed soon after by his story 'Come Back to Grenada'. I bought a copy at Sangsters in Harbour Street, Kingston, Jamaica, early in 1961; I'd already borrowed *Ways of Sunlight* published in 1957, from the Trelawny Public Library in Falmouth, near the school where I was teaching. Lines of the poem 'Sun' charged me then as they do today:

ANNE WALMSLEY

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Knuckle
 Of fire in my eye, yellow glaze in air spinning
 Over these green islands to attract people from the north.
 Knowing as we turn earth how viciously we whisper
 Comforting words to our neighbours to keep their chins up
 Though their knees buckle at the nothingness of things.

The story 'The Village Washer' in particular intrigued and excited the 13 and 14 years old Jamaican girls in my English classes. I included it in a selection of West Indian writing for a proposed school anthology shown to Longmans the following year - and it was the main reason for the book's rejection; the Jamaican Ministry of Education was against texts containing 'dialect'. In London, in the mid 1960s, I offered the selection to Longmans again, including the same Selvon story - and with a Selvon book title, *Caribbean Cascadura*, from that Trinidad legend cited in the first story of *Ways of Sunlight*: 'those who eat the cascadura will end their days in the island no matter where they wander.' Longmans now accepted the anthology, but not the title. My next suggestion, *The Sun's Eye*, from an A.J. Seymour poem, echoed Selvon's 'Sun'.

Selvon agreed to the inclusion of his story, with the sensible and farsighted proviso that a repeat fee be paid on each reprint of the anthology. His autobiographical note was printed exactly as he typed it: 'When I went to school in Trinidad, where I was born, we didn't have text-books like this one in those days...I didn't complete my education because things were brown and I had to hustle a work.' Then in the late 1960s, he rang me at Longmans where I was now Caribbean editor: might we be interested in republishing some of his early books? The enquiry was on Andrew Salkey's recommendation; Sam Selvon and I had not yet met, despite the Caribbean Artists Movement, of which he

was, as he later explained, 'very much on the sidelines'. So it was that in 1971, 1972 and 1973 *A Brighter Sun*, *The Lonely Londoners* and *Ways of Sunlight* reappeared in their first Longman editions and began to reach an ever-growing new readership, in the Caribbean and in Britain. What a gift these books were to a publisher! Minimal risk and editorial overheads, with continuing rights to republish - to Longman's great benefit and not, I suspect, to the appropriate cumulative benefit of the author. And, as I now see, what untold gifts they brought to me! For those three reprints grounded our friendship and, inexplicably and undeservedly, Sam expressed generous thanks for them ever after. We met first at the Longman offices or in central London; most memorably, I went at least twice to the Selvons' home in Streatham - 36 Woodside Avenue - for one of Sam's fragrant curries with Althea and the young Michael, Leslie and Debra. All this could have been lost when Sam and his family emigrated to Canada in 1978 and I left Longmans. Amazingly, and thanks to Sam's letter-writing, the friendship deepened. His letters always gave me detailed family news: his delight, in 1984, that at last they had a family home in Calgary; his joy in 1985 at being able to take the whole family to Trinidad, joined there by his sister, Elsie, from London, for his Honorary Doctorate from UWI, when they all stayed with Ken Ramchand; his satisfaction at being writer-in-residence at Winnipeg University, tempered by its distance from home; and how a similar appointment at Calgary brought 'great relief and comfort to be so near the family.' His letters shared hopes and disappointments over his published books, and over his current writing. And Sam's letters always responded to my news, with concerned enquiries for my welfare. They acknowledged and nurtured our friendship: 'it's made me happy to write to you', 'you have warmed my morning with your letter - it is really strengthening to be assured of friendship.'

Sam Selvon's last letter to me was in July 1992, after he had taken part in Salkey's Score - the symposium and celebration around the work of Andrew Salkey. He wrote of 'the privilege to be in London to share the wonderful revival of a period of time in our history which marked the beginning of our *FUTURE*'. My book on the Caribbean Artists Movement had come out at the same time. 'What a painstaking and *loving* book you have written, stamping our literary and cultural history indelibly on the sands of time! Are you sure there are not a few drops of Caribbean blood running in your veins?' Sam, who had so little involvement in CAM, wrote the most precious letter about it, thanks to his generosity and his gift for friendship. When I last saw Sam - like so many of us in London - at the South Bank in late October 1993, he was just off to Trinidad, and I to Guyana. We shared each other's delight in the prospect of being back. While I mourn Sam Selvon's loss, I rejoice that he ended his days on the island, warmed by the presence of his family and strengthened by his friends. All the words he gave us - as a writer, as a friend, sing on and on.