

# Glimpses Of Martin Carter In His Early Years

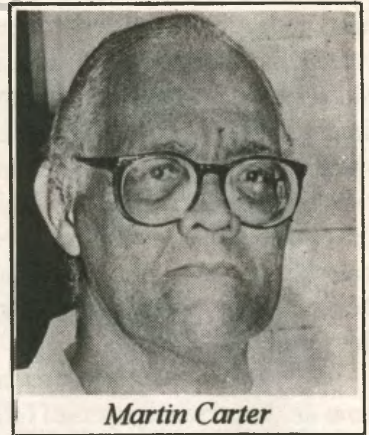
by Janet Jagan

I have not seen very much printed about Martin Carter's life. What we have are several editions of his poetry, from the pages of early *Kyk-Over-al* publications in the forties and fifties and a series of prints of local poets known as the *Miniature Poets*, which included Martin Carter's "The Hill of Fire Glows Red." I remember this edition very well because those seeking to print the series solicited donations from several quarters and I made my contribution. At one time I had the entire collection of the small, about 5 inches long, very neat books of poetry. This edition of 1951 contained some of his most magnificent poems and, I am certain, were inspired by his political involvement at that time.

Look again at his "Three Years After This", his poem to the Enmore Martyrs. "Three years after this/I walked behind a memory of flowers/a memory of flowers red and white/and yet, and yet my city has no shame/my city with a prison for a heart/city of dust and silent streets/city of street preachers." He was describing our annual commemoration at the graves of the five Enmore workers who were killed in 1948 - "three years after this."

"No! I will not still my voice;" "This is my hand for the revolution;" "Oh/wake and give to me the flames, the red flames! Oh/wake and give to me the flames, the red flames!" and his inspiring "And so/if you see me/looking at your

hands/listening when you speak/marching in your ranks/you must know/I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world." These are the poems of a young, passionate revolutionary, in-



*Martin Carter*

spired to rid the world and his own Guyana, of repression and exploitation.

Martin Carter was, in the period of the early fifties, a civil servant and thus could not take active part in political life. But he was strongly involved in the radical politics of the time and was, secretly, a member of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) led by Dr Cheddi Jagan. I was at that time General Secretary of the PPP and editor of the Party monthly journal *Thunder*. We worked out an arrangement whereby Martin would write for *Thunder*, using the name "M. Black," to protect him from violating the civil service restrictions on being involved in political life. The first recorded publication in *Thunder* was a poem "The Indian Woman" appearing in the September 1950 edition. It was a compassionate poem about the sufferings of plantation life - "He, dead beat with day's murderous toil; she wearied out with weed-



ing come/To their dim hovel and the rags/Those rags called bed of poverty.”

His next contribution was in October 1950 when he wrote about “The children of Israel” in which he discussed the bitter life on sugar estates, comparing it to the persecution by the Pharaohs of the children of Israel. He referred to the Rev. John Smith who had written: “The rigours of Negro slavery, I believe, can never be mitigated. The system must be abolished” written in 1823. M. Black observed that for believing such things, Smith died in jail in 1824.

In *Thunder* of July 1951 M. Black addressed young people, calling on them to destroy evil conditions. He referred to the slums of Georgetown and reminded his readers that the country was under a colonial administration which served the interests of those “who have made this country into a glorious plantation with dim villages and weary townships.”

During this period, we lived at 97 Laluni Street, Queenstown, Georgetown. Martin lived in Anira Street, which was one block north of Laluni and about a half block down from the cross street. Thus, we were a mere one and half blocks apart. Meetings of the Executive Committee of the PPP were kept at our house and Martin attended as a secret member. Many times he and Wilson Harris, Guyanese writer and poet, came over to our house in the evenings and read to us their latest poems. Those were unforgettable evenings.

Martin attended many political meetings, although he was not allowed to speak. This poem he gave me after a meeting at Vreed-en-Hoop in November 1951 - “Last night your voice was ringing/like a horse shoe on a cloud/ringing to me as though you were my lover. Last night/I

could not see your face above the crowd/but your voice rang for the revolution/like my own heart ringing/my own heart ringing/for fire in a world too cold for life. Last night your voice was ringing/like a bell for the revolution!/a clear bell for the revolution!”

In 1953, the PPP contested the first elections under universal adult suffrage. Martin Carter, who by that time had quit the civil service, was a candidate for the New Amsterdam seat. His was one of the few losses, as the PPP won an outstanding victory at the polls. The heady days of our 133 days in office ended on October 9, with the British government suspending the constitution and the arrival of British troops to occupy the country.

Martin and others were detained at the airport (then under US military) known then as Atkinson Field. He was heavily involved all during this time and his magnificent “Poems of Resistance” of 1954 were inspired by this period of resistance. I remember, along with his wife Phyllis, being involved in the publication of these poems.

All through the years since that time, and despite, at times, very serious political differences, we remained friends. Nothing could wash away those times we all spent together in the struggle to liberate Guyana.

In the most recent edition of Martin Carter’s selected poems he dedicated the collection “To the Memory of Dr Cheddi Jagan and the Spirit of Guyana’s Independence Movement.” His love and regard for Cheddi withstood time and events over some 47 years.

*(This article was written for Thunder by Mrs Janet Jagan before she was elected President of Guyana and before Martin’s death).*



# A Tribute To The Late Martin Carter

by Janet Jagan

It is so hard to believe that Martin Carter is dead. But he is. It is therefore, with a profound sense of sadness that one laments this fact.

In 1954, Martin Carter wrote with the insight of the great poet that he was:

“Comrade, the world is loud with songs of freedom

Mankind is breeding heroes every day.”

With the modesty that was so characteristic of him, Martin Carter would have protested if he were told that he was, even at that time, one of this country’s heroes. But, indeed, he was.

Some people have monuments raised in their honour. Martin’s monument will, forever, be his unforgettable contribution to this nation’s struggle for independence. That contribution was marked with deeds of valour and courage. But, more than that, Martin was a tremendous source of inspiration to those of us who were his colleagues and comrade-at-arms in that struggle.

We know of his sacrifices; we are ever so aware of his courage. In what he was to describe as “the dark time,” “the season of oppression, dark metal and tears,” Martin hurled his challenge to the enemy:

“Although you come in thousands from the sea  
Although you walk like locusts in the street  
Although you point your gun straight at my heart  
I clench my fist above my head; I sing my song  
of freedom.”

Neither detention, beating nor jail could deter him; nor could these things muzzle his mind or mute his pen. They simply stirred him to greater resolution, and raised him to higher levels of inspiration. As he noted, “On the Fourth Night of a Hunger Strike”:

“Today my wife brought me a letter from a comrade.

I hid it in my bosom from the soldiers.”

They could not know my heart was reading  
‘Courage’!

They could not dream my skin was toughening  
‘Struggle’!”

What Martin Carter did was for the love of country and for his countrymen and women and their posterity. He made the connection between the resistance of the indigenous people to the colonisers, the struggle for Emancipation by the slaves, and the protests against another kind of slavery by the Enmore Martyrs, and that existential struggle in which he and his compatriots were involved.

These things alone ensure Martin Carter a shining place in Guyana’s history. He will not be forgotten.

They do not die who bequeath some lasting influence on the land they love.

Martin’s influence will live on in his poetry. The ring of authenticity and truth in his poems, the universal nature of his imagination that finds expression in the concrete and specific, the lilt and cadence of his verse, will live on to inspire generations to come.

So he has moved on, as all humans must. He stands somewhere in the distance, a hero, like a beckoning truth, challenging us to rise above ourselves in the interest of this nation. And we say to him, each one of us, in his words:

“Now from the mourning vanguard moving on  
dear Comrade I salute and I say

Death will not find us thinking that we die.”

*(The eulogy, written by Mrs Janet Jagan was delivered by Mr Ian Mc Donald at Martin Carter’s funeral).*