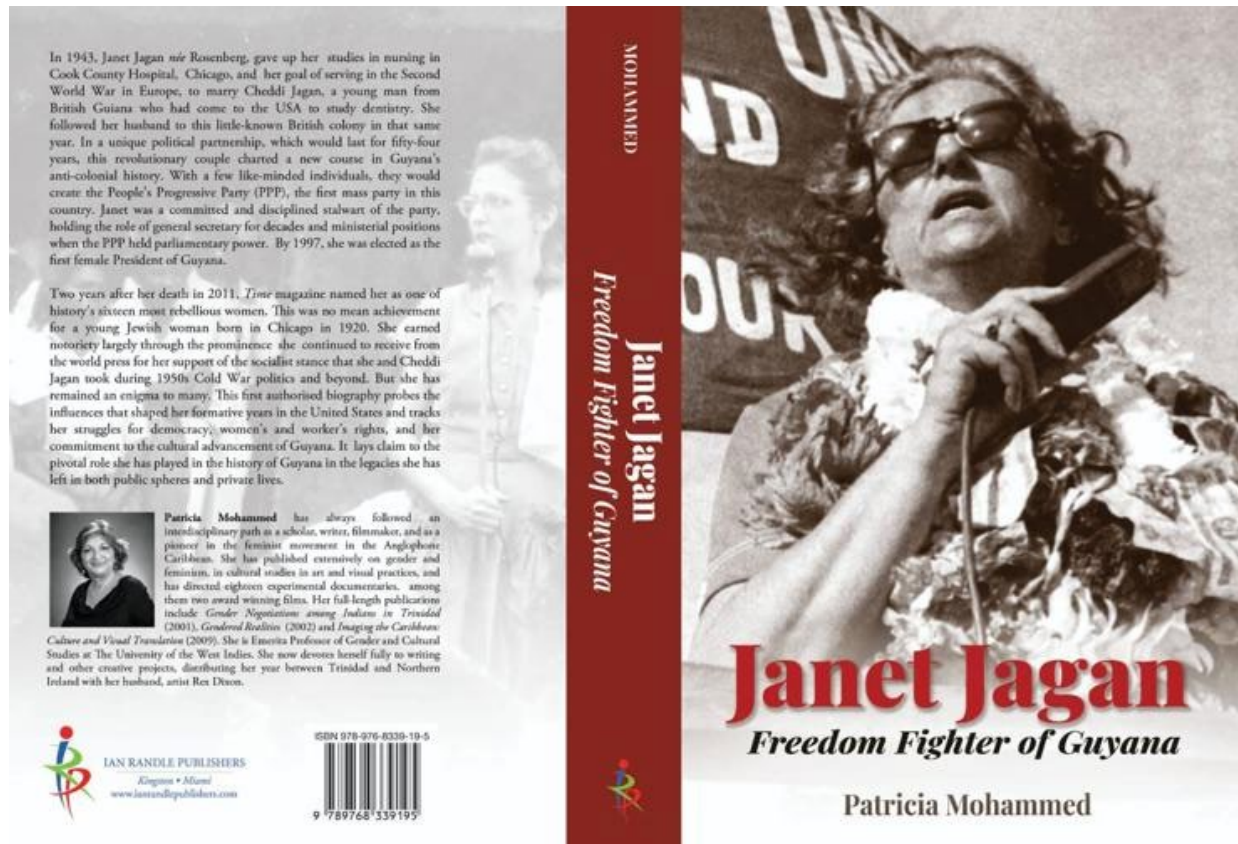


# Freedom Fighter and Blue-Eyed Bhowgie of Guyana

By Bridget Brereton (Dec 22, 2024)



The first full-length biography of Janet Jagan, by my long-time UWI colleague Patricia Mohammed, has just been published by Ian Randle Publishers. She was born and grew up in Chicago, and first came to the then British Guiana in 1943, in her early twenties, as the new bride of Cheddi Jagan. What followed was a lifetime of deep and significant involvement in Guyana's political, social and cultural life, right up to her death in 2009 at the age of 86.

This is a long (533 pages) and deeply researched biography. Mohammed notes that the accessible sources for writing Janet's life are plentiful, with a huge cache of material at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre in Georgetown (partly due to the diligent archival work of her daughter Nadira). Mohammed values oral sources and conducted many interviews, as well as using interviews conducted by others, notably Guyanese/Canadian academic Frank Birbalsingh. Both Cheddi and Janet wrote hundreds of articles, and some of her diaries are accessible. In addition, many publications about Janet, in books, newspapers and magazines—local, regional and international—are available.

Mohammed acknowledges the challenges in writing about a person “still much alive in the minds of those who knew her personally, and who are committed to preserving her legacy”. Her aim was “to represent the multi-dimensional aspects of a complex character that emerges from different sources”. In this she certainly succeeds—though I did think it could have been more sharply focused in some places (and a bit shorter!)

Some of the 15 chapters narrate Janet’s life on a chronological sequence, the conventional form for a biography, while others focus on particular themes in her work and character. The first two explore Janet’s childhood, education and young adulthood in Chicago and Detroit from 1920, the year of her birth, to 1943, when she left to join her new husband. Mohammed probes the significance of her American Jewish ethnicity; her family was completely secular, and organised religion was never significant to Janet (or to Cheddi, though his family was Hindu). In 1943, she met Cheddi, who in his seven years in the US had acquired both a BSc and a DDS (Doctor of Dental Surgery). They soon got married, and she abandoned her nursing training to join him in British Guiana at the end of the same year.

Chapter 5 offers a probing and sympathetic analysis of the creation of a unique political partnership between the husband and wife. Mohammed admits that it is nearly impossible to separate Cheddi and Janet’s work and impact, but aims to give her the centre of the stage, though she never sought out leading, public roles in the organisations they founded and led.

She rejects the common idea that Janet pushed Cheddi into a dogmatic kind of Marxism, which demonised her and undermined his “masculinity” as a man under his wife’s thumb. Both were deeply attracted to left-wing ideas as young, idealistic persons growing up in the 1930s and early 1940s; they shared political views from the start of their life together. What Janet contributed, as everyone seems to agree, was an iron discipline and brilliant organisational skills necessary to build their political movement. They supported each other and needed each other’s strengths; but Janet always preferred Cheddi to be the one in the public eye and never sought the limelight for herself.

Several chapters (6, 7, 9, 14 and 15) narrate the story of Janet’s role in the founding of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) in 1950, her election to the legislature in 1953 as one of the first three Guyanese women to achieve this, the British suspension of the constitution in that year, Janet’s time in jail for calling a meeting illegally, and her work in the PPP government of 1957 to 1964—including during the tragic strikes, riots and racial mayhem (1962-64) instigated by the CIA to destabilise the PPP and remove Cheddi from power.

After the PPP was defeated at the end of 1964, the party endured 28 years in opposition. The sources agree that Janet was crucial in keeping it together, continuing its work and propaganda, and avoiding the kinds of splits so common in left-wing parties. The last two chapters chronicle the PPP’s return to power in 1992, with Cheddi as President, his death in 1997, and then Janet’s reluctant (and ill advised?) agreement to stand as President when the PPP won the election in that year. She became the first female President of Guyana and served for 20 months, resigning in August 1999 because of ill health.

In between the narrative chapters are ones which deal with particular themes. Chapter 8 examines Janet’s important role as an activist for women’s rights and welfare, though she never described herself as a feminist. She co-founded the Women’s Political and Economic Organisation in 1946, an important body which began the organised movement for women’s rights and full political participation in Guyana.

Perhaps sadly, it soon faded, and morphed into the Women's Progressive Organisation as the female arm of the PPP, losing its independence. But for all her life, Janet worked to empower women and girls, especially rural ones, and to bring them into the party.

Three chapters (11, 12 and 13) pick up other aspects of Janet's life, for she was far from being a one-dimensional political person. Her character, family life and interaction with her adopted country are examined in 11, titled 'The blue-eyed Bhowgie of Guyana'—the affectionate but respectful title she won as Cheddi's wife. And 12 and 13 show how writing, journalism, and reading were central to Janet's life. She wrote hundreds of articles for the PPP's journals and edited them for long periods; she mentored journalists; she wrote poetry and children's stories; and she was a noted patron of the arts and literature in Guyana.

A multi-dimensional character who lived a remarkable life, Janet Jagan has been well served in this long but absorbing biography