Now in her 70th year, Janet Jagan’s well-known dark tresses (which sometimes used to be pulled back in a pony-tail) have given way to a short, fluffy halo of silky off-white hair which immensely adds to her mature, more melllow appearance, and which can indeed be tenured a metaphor for her more receptive, less confrontational demeanor these last few years. It is difficult to find a point — a specific moment in her life — at which to begin a story on this woman, so checked, so eventful, so influential has been her life on the stage of Guyana’s politics.

One could begin with her feminist/political work in the late 1940s when she was demanding, among other things, that domestic servants be paid tatives elected under universal adult suffrage. Another records that the women — the Three Js — Jessie Burnham, Jane Phillips Guy and Janet Jagan, wore white skins, red blouses and red accessories and when her party was in opposition in the 60s, 70s and 80s, never ceased campaigning in the National Assembly for adequate pensions for the old, for free education for all, and for legislation for neglected children and the disfranchised of the Guyana society.

This high-voltage lady is also a sensitive poet and children’s short story writer. Her works have been published in prestigious anthologies such as CREATION FIRE edited by Rambai Espinet.

Now that the People’s Progressive Party is in power, Mrs Jagan, like her husband Cheddi, tells acquaintances that she feels no way different than the way she was before October 3, 1992. In an interview with her at Freedom House last Monday, I told her of a recent print media picture story of her, notebook and pen in hand, covering the President’s visit to the USA. She was referred to as First Lady, since she had also accompanied her husband in an official capacity.

"Was that so?" she asked in amazement, and then burst into a pleasant little peal of laughter.

"I love journalism," she explained, toyng with a paperweight on her desk, "My husband wants me to take up a managerial job, but I want to do. He has even promised me a position where I could be called on to represent him or the government at international conferences. There would be no payment involved and I would keep on with my duties as editor of the MIRROR. I promised him to think about it, but I am not very interested. I have a lot of roles and I think that I should not take a personal chance. I say I am in the present job. Of course I work, I see hundreds of people each month. I suppose I am a bit full on in what I am doing. But I want to spend my career in Guyana. Besides, this First Lady thing, I think, is a lot of work."

Then a long and brilliant career on the stage of Guyanese politics First Lady Janet Jagan now war to watch from the wings.

The three ‘J’s’ in 1953

Jesse Burnham, Jane Phillips Gay and Janet Jagan.
interested. I have held ministerial positions in the past and I think that I should give a young person a chance. I just love my present job. Of course I do party work. I see hundreds of people each month. I support my husband fully in whatever he is doing. But I want to continue with my career in journalism. Besides, this First Lady business I think is a lot of fluff.

"When I attended a UNICEF Workshop on the Rights of the Child in Barbados, recently I noticed people observing me. I realised it just could not be coincidental. It was some sort of security watch on me. But I had travelled alone without any escort. Every morning and evening I would take a swim. This happens when I attend meetings abroad. I attend all the sittings, but early in the mornings and late in the evenings I must have an hour in the water. Even then I noticed someone looking at me. I did not bother with him. He was doing his job." It and was then that she gave me a glimpse of the Janet Jagan of whom little is known.

AS A HOUSEWIFE

"You know as a teenager girl growing up in Chicago, in the United States of America, I was very athletic. I used to win prizes for swimming. I was also good at high jumping, ice-skating and archery. Few people knew about that part of my life. But as a youth, I thoroughly enjoyed athletic activities. I was not much good at track races, but I participated in all the events that were there. So whenever I get the opportunity I swim for an hour or two each day."

"I do my own housework. I have been doing this for the last 20 years. I would not say with that kind of professionalism."

ON THE PPP VICTORY

"We have succeeded after all these years and we have a massive job ahead of us. I trust that the people immediately will achieve the monumental task of bringing prosperity to this land. We have been so many resources can achieve a poor economic situation. There is a lot of work ahead for the nation of Guyana."

ABOUT HER OWN MISSION

"I have to admit that I am greatly concerned about the scourge of poverty and the terrible ways in which it affects the lives of our young children. As I said when I addressed a recent UNICEF Workshop on the Rights of the Child in Barbados, we could go on forever making laws and regulations as to what rights children should have. But we in this part of the world already have legislation to protect the child. We have legislation that makes the right to education a must for children in our society. But who checks when children do not attend school because they have no uniforms or shoes? Some of these children have to fetch water from long distances for their households. Some mothers send the children to sell and to earn so that some money could be there for food."

"We have to place our emphasis on implementation of those rights that are already in our constitution. Then there are the terrible cases of physical and sexual abuses meted out to children. We have to work with our social workers, and parents and guardians to see in what ways we can alleviate these abuses."

"Of course, I know that the bottomline is poverty. Unless we can eradicate or in some way reduce poverty in this nation, we will continue to have the homeless, street children, the destitute all suffering. I have made a vow to myself to work for some improvement in the lives of poor children. If I can make my contribution there and some results, I will have accomplished something."