

GAIL LOW

significant impact on the metropolitan perception of Caribbean writing. By 1970, Ken Ramchand was to observe in his seminal survey of Caribbean anglophone prose writing that “most West Indian novels have been first published in the English capital, and nearly every West Indian novelist has established himself while living there.” He concluded

publishing writing from the Commonwealth. To some extent one can understand why companies like Oxford University Press, Longmans and Heinemann, with significant English textbook markets in the newly independent colonies, chose to go down this path. Alan Hill's memoirs of the setting up of local independent branches of Heinemann Educational Books in Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean, and the promotion of their high profile *African Writers Series*, shows how much motives of commerce and altruism were intertwined. Yet what is most striking about this period is the part small(ish) independent publishers like Faber, André Deutsch, Michael Joseph, Martin Secker, Peter Owen and Hutchinson played in the dissemination of writers from the "Commonwealth." A number of questions seem obvious at the outset. These include: why were publishing houses interested in manuscripts from the non-European world when literary books were destined primarily for a small home market? Can one say something about the types of book that publishers looked for and published or reviewers reviewed? Did they solicit manuscripts from specific parts

independence. In contrast, generalist and literary publishers are oriented more towards a domestic market or a metropolitan internationalist one. Finally, because literature can never simply be “text” in the restricted sense of the word but is also “institution,” made up of a network of social, cultural and discursive relationships, an investigation into the connections between the literary establishment, writers, publishers and their agents seems crucial.

Doing the archival work for such a literary and publishing history is fraught with difficulties; attempting the research systematically is almost impossible. Postwar material is extremely hard to access because some archives are still in the process of cataloguing these files. Some of the firms that were key players in this area of writing such as Allan Wingate, and MacGibbon and Kee folded in the late 60s and their publishing archives have not surfaced. Often, the documentation that would have answered some of the key questions is missing. Strategic gaps are sometimes the result of early archival policies that were biased more towards collecting material bearing the imprint of an author’s signature than to information related to the publishing of books. This has of course changed in recent years and publishing archives are now valuable collectors’ items. Yet what is contained in them sometimes—as in the case of André Deutsch—lacks substantive written exchanges between readers, editors and company directors as to the book’s content or marketability. It may be that small independent companies were more informal in their approach to a paper bureaucracy than older firms like Faber, Heinemann or Cape. Readers’ reports, which are crucial indicators of why a company might have chosen to publish a particular author, may not be kept in any systematic fashion. Also, they may be of a more informal nature than is reflected in the publishing world today, as my exchanges with Diana Athill and Francis Wyndham (André Deutsch) over the

issue of Naipaul's first novel would seem to suggest. Readers' reports may also be

for their broad survey of the impact of

Hutchinson's attempt to promote first books of "writers who are members of the British Commonwealth." They published both Andrew Salkey's and Orlando Patterson's first novels. New Authors acted as what Sutherland has termed a fiction "nursery" and undertook to publish *only* first novels on "the basis of profit-sharing" by all authors in its portfolio. Michael Dempsey's retrospective account of the scheme in 1969 shows an underlying pattern of sales where libraries constituted the overwhelming bulk of the series' buyers.⁹ Diana Athill's written reply to my query about why Andre Deutsch published writers like V. S. Naipaul, Michael Anthony and Wole Soyinka confirms that the economic viability of new fiction was due in large measure to well-funded public libraries and the relatively stable postwar publishing climate. She writes, "in the 50s and 60s we reckoned we needed to sell 3,000 copies of a book in order to break even" and that during this time, public libraries were a "publisher's most important customer... for fiction."¹⁰

The literary marketplace was not simply insular and inward looking. Diana Athill's recent memoirs of the period, *stet*, attest to the general mood of idealism and commerce that characterised the impact of decolonisation on the publishing world. Athill

entitled “Fresh minds at work: Reflections on the Practice of Letters among the younger generation at home and overseas.” In the month of August 1955, the magazine had a forty-eight-page supplement entitled “Writing Abroad: Being An Appreciation of the Literature published in many countries of Both Hemispheres.” In August 1962 there was another substantive collection of essays on literature entitled “A Language in Common” (10 August 1962), investigating the “widespread use of English as a common language.” In 1965, the year of the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Britain, there was a rush of specific issues on Commonwealth writing including the *New Statesman* (29 January), *English* (Autumn) and the *London Magazine* (September). The latter did not of course need special issues on Commonwealth writers, for writers from these parts already formed an integral part of the magazine’s literary output.

Yet if there was curiosity and interest in what was emerging from ex-colonies, such patronage was also tempered by an anxious reinstatement of the importance of English Literature in a new literary pecking order. A neo-colonial empire of literature was drawn with Britain not only as its origin but also as its spiritual centre. This is evident in the way new literatures in English were discoursed upon in the fifties: these

Can something be made of the fact that many of the most interesting postwar French books are by North Africans, while in the English Literary scene of the Fifties West Indian writers play an increasingly prominent part? Something, perhaps, about the colonial vigour providing a necessary stimulus to decadent metropolitan culture?¹³

This representation of the relation between English Literature and her others, a relation wherein the latter enriches the former by providing new bloodlines for an exhausted and

overestimated, for *Caribbean Voices* played a formative role not only in the shaping of social and cultural connections which young Caribbean writers could access, but also became one of the most important publishers for fledgling authors. It helped to sustain and support the few outlets for publishing that existed in Barbados, Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica. *Caribbean Voices* was started by the Jamaican poet and broadcaster, Una Marson. It was modelled in part on *Voice*, a BBC poetry magazine whose aim was to encourage a greater audience for the work of young, relatively unknown writers. Marson's knowledge of her audience in the West Indies, derived from her previous work on another wartime programme, was useful. Her fifteen-minute broadcasts used p

chapters of *In the Castle of My Skin*

The emergence of “West Indian Literature” as a body of writing was tied to independence movements and, later, the promise of federation. But what is clear from the texts’ contemporary critical reception is that they were more or less treated as a distinctive cluster. This is in part to do with the number of writers who had migrated to London from various parts of the Caribbean, and the speed of their success. In my preliminary excursion into this area, I confess to being somewhat surprised at the serious attention given to a body of writers and writing identified as “West Indian.” David Dabydeen has remarked that West Indian writing was “reviewed...on an immediate and regular basis” by many of the major journals of the time and that it was the “British newspaper and magazine which brought West Indian literature to the attention of the British [reading] public.”²³ Such attention was to fade in the mid- to late-sixties, but in a slightly earlier period West Indian writing was seen to be a literary force to be reckoned with. In her article on the critical reception of post-war West Indian writing, Sarah Lawson Welsh, quoting from an earlier study, argues that while reviews were in general “benign,” they were also “patronising and simplistic.”²⁴

responses of the period is that even the more generalised essays on West Indian writing acknowledge the range, diversity and distinctiveness of the work. For example, in an article

West Indies, intones Amis.²⁷ Selvon is “pat[ted] on the head for not being experimental,” praised for his humour, and for being a “historian” of the realities of cross-cultural encounters.²⁸ Likewise, Burns Singer notes the break-up of the Standard English novel and locates Caribbean novels as part of a larger trend in twentieth-century writing away from the rule-bound book. After a longer, admirable section on the complexity and range of Caribbean writing, Burns Singer ends his essay with an attack on Mittelholzer’s abandonment of realism:

[He] is a long way from Joyce whose fault is that his words attempted to signify too much in the literal sense for it to be possible to disentangle all their meanings. But it is characteristic of the new found arrogance of West Indians that Mr Mittelholzer should soldier gaily on, even though his limitations as a poet keep his literally senseless words from acquiring any other sort of meaning. The whole scheme has a monumental impudence about it such that Mr Biswas would hang his head in shame at ever having thought of it.²⁹

Lanning is also criticised for his habit of changing narrators, and his tricks with space and time are deemed “almost equally pretentious and ineffectual” as Mittelholzer’s. As a result, despite his opening attack on British stereotypes of the Caribbean, Burns Singer ends his essay with some disappointing remarks that may reveal the extent of what were taken to be authentic versions of Caribbean writing:

that dwell on the “charm” of this new literature; reviewers loved the apparent “colour, gaiety, innocence, virility” that was felt to be missing in post-war Britain.³¹

Reviews

is really like.” It praises Sam Selvon’s “lively idiom” which “captures all the spontaneity and colour of West Indian lives; the gaiety which keeps breaking out however cramping and mean their circumstances.” André Deutsch’s advertisement for *The Suffrage of Elvira*

individuals. When I asked Athill about individual writers like Naipaul and Michael Anthony, her replies invariably related to the quality of their work. The same is true of interviews with Rosemary Goad and Frank Pike about Faber. Literary excellence is almost always given as the primary rationale for choosing a piece of writing. Indeed, Athill's written response to Brathwaite's query on behalf of CAM was to emphasise this: "I'm even against bringing West Indian-ness into consideration. It's how well the man writes that I care about: how vivid and honest his writing, how effective his construction,

history must not be restricted to a simple consideration of texts but must also be linked with a materialist cultural history of institutions and individuals. Without further archival access, and more extensive research, we will have very little understanding of the real historical changes that led to our very different conception of culture, literature and writing.

¹ The research for this paper was undertaken with the help of a grant from the British Academy and from the Leverhulme Foundation. Thanks also to the library staff of the archives in the UK and the US, especially Tara Wenger of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre; Loris Curtis of the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa Special

overview of some the literary output of the Caribbean published before the Windrush generation see Reinhard W. Sander, *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing* (London and Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978). Some the literary pioneers in the West Indies—particularly the prose writers—are also described in Stewart Brown and John Wickham, eds., *Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ See Gail Low, “A West Indian Literary Capital? Publishing West Indian writing 1950-1965,” unpublished paper presented at the conference “A Black British Canon?” hosted by the University of Dundee at Dundee on 10 November 2001. Many of Swanzy's letters when he was editor of *Caribbean Voices* are