

## **GAIL LOW**

### **Publishing Commonwealth: The Case of West Indian Writing, 1950-65<sup>1</sup>**

In 1958, the well-known critic and editor Francis Wyndham asked somewhat rhetorically where new examples of “fine writing”—described variously as “a dash of sensibility, an attempt at experiment in the choice and order of words... a treat” —were to be found. His answer was a slap in the face for an English Literature preoccupied with not only its Bloomsbury legacy but also in the throes of a modernist backlash. Fine writing, Wyndham remarks, was likely to be located in the colonial margins of old Empires and, in the case of anglophone writing, in the West Indies. Wyndham writes, “For just as more and more of the good novels published recently in France come from North Africa, so in England during the 1950s a handful of West Indian writers are producing fresh and interesting books, unusual both in content and style.”<sup>2</sup> Wyndham’s remarks are borne out by the contemporary interest in publishing fiction not only from the Caribbean, but also from Africa and India. Furthermore, the arrival of Caribbean novelists and poets in Britain such as John Figueroa, Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Edgar Mittelholzer, Jan Carew, Michael Anthony, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris and Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite facilitated their careers and made their literary arrival more dramatic. Others like Derek Walcott, who did not migrate to Britain, also had a

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 somewhat ruefully that London “was indisputably the West Indian literary capital.”<sup>3</sup>

This essay is part of a larger project that aims at writing an institutional history of the rise of literatures in English in the UK, tracing the connections between publishing, cultural, educational and literary institutions and individuals who were instrumental in promoting new literatures in English in the early years, and also the moulding of those texts into what later became “Commonwealth Literature.” Here, I shall focus on publishing history; the study of postwar publishing is especially important because it shows up clearly the global commercial and institutional networks that have been shaped by the colonial, neo-colonial and transnational axes of power, trade and communication in a postcolonial world. Yet what is also interesting about this period is the mixture of ideological, aesthetic and commercial interests that prompted the dissemination and promotion of writers identified with the term “Commonwealth.” Until 1964, this is a term used more in the reception of these writers than in any publishing documentation. Such changes that did occur were gradual and tied to the emergence of Commonwealth Literature and Commonwealth Studies as areas of study in the higher educational and school curriculum. During the two postwar decades, there was no readily established academic “niche” market for these Commonwealth writers which publishers could sell to. Also, publishing first novels from unknown novelists was not, in the main, lucrative. But many publishing houses like Longmans and Heinemann with their vast educational markets were

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 of the newly independent ex-colonies? Did companies have certain ideological agendas? Were publishers predisposed towards certain types of writing? In particular, following Graham Huggan's recent interventions, how much were publishers governed by the "exoticism" of different cultures and literatures?<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, to speak simply of "publishers" and "publishing" homogenises a very varied field. Might it be more productive to draw distinctions between educational presses, generalist or literary publishers? Taking into account the functional specificity of houses may lead to very different reasons being put forward for their participation in any metropolitan publishing history. To take an obvious example, it may be more logical for educational presses to promote new literatures in English if such opportunistic participation gave them a commercial edge in a nationalistic textbook market that followed from political

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 deemed irrelevant and thus be destroyed because the decision to publish the book had already been taken. They may also be dispensed with once the writer gains a literary reputation. A ruling about confidentiality may cover readers' reports. Archives like Oxford University Press's operate a time-release on authors' files on a par with copyright regulations, while Faber's is closed to public inquiry. Hence, at this stage, there are necessarily more questions than answers; yet this kind of materialist reconstruction is vital in explaining the tremendous changes in our conception of literary studies. My essay is offered as a partial history, essentially fragmentary and speculative, based in part on a more generalised appreciation of the literary culture, the contemporary reception of writers and some passing observations on the network of connections between key players in this area. I want to focus on Caribbean writers of the Windrush generation, and from there make more generalised observations about publishing writing from the Commonwealth.

It is worth starting with the obvious: the decades of the fifties and the sixties were marked by the anti-colonial movements, like the Mau Mau in Kenya, the nationalist uprising in Algeria, and the independence of countries like the Sudan, Ghana, Nigeria and various territories in the Caribbean. The Suez crisis of 1956 is notable for forcing Britain to confront its imperial status in the public imagination and the very real decline of its political power on the global stage. The impact of decolonisation on English in these two decades is certainly reflected in the work of Anthony Burgess, in plays such as Osborne's *The Entertainer* and John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, and in Philip Larkin's verse. Here, Alan Sinfield's *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Steven Connor's *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, and Patricia Waugh's *Harvest of the Sixties* are all useful

for their broad survey of the impact of decolonisation on the (specifically) English literary imagination.<sup>5</sup> John Sutherland's *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* characterises the period between 1946 and 1972 as a postwar boom of "steady, self-sustained expansion, supported by relatively stable prices and a smoothly functioning sales and distribution system."<sup>6</sup> The turnover in book trade multiplied near a hundred times even as the average prices of the novel increased by a small amount. There was much interest in the development of new anglophone export markets outside Europe and America. Such concern was reflected in *The Bookseller* throughout the two post-war decades in articles, letters and commentaries addressing the problems of book distribution and book selling abroad, and a heightened awareness of American competition in this area.<sup>7</sup> While domestic debates such as the net book agreement made the headlines, information on book exhibitions and the British Council's work abroad and coverage of the cheap book scheme<sup>8</sup> and world-wide tours by the publishing establishment such as Geoffrey Faber and Alan Hill were also carried as staple news items. There was certainly a steady expansion outward. After 1945, the major publishing companies began to open overseas branches or representatives, some of which began to act not as mere sales outlets but also indigenous sources of publishing. This is particularly true for companies that had an educational arm; new nations formed out of old colonies were seen to be a potential new market for books, particularly academic textbooks. HEB, Longmans and OUP were among the most important educational companies in that period.

Yet while export figures rose, the home market was still crucial to the survival of publishers and sales of books. In this home market, library sales constituted the primary buyer of fiction, particularly new fiction. Libraries provided the safety net by which publishers could take literary risks; Hutchinson's New Authors series, for example, is a case in point. New Authors Ltd. was formed in 1957 as part of its parent company

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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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 remarks that a certain liberal guilt at Britain's imperial past, combined with a curiosity and interest about other countries, made the publishing, academic and literary establishment favourable to writers from newly independent nations. She records, "for a time during the fifties and early sixties it was probably easier for a black writer to get his book accepted by a London publisher, and kindly reviewed thereafter, than it was for a young white person."<sup>11</sup> Special numbers and supplements in literary magazines focused on writing from abroad in general, and from the Commonwealth in particular, attesting to the curiosity about what was emerging from these places. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, ran a special issue in the autumn of 1952 on new writing

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 writings were new because they were as yet underdeveloped. For example, in a special 1952 issue on young postwar writers at home and abroad in the *TLS*, Alan Pryce-Jones’s opposition—the New World versus the Old World—is not always to the advantage of the new, for literary vitality lay precisely “in those parts of the world which have *finally* grown up in the last half-century [emphasis added].”<sup>12</sup> Colonial tropes utilised in Pryce’s essay are also brought into play in other reviews of the time. Francis Wyndham, in his review of Selvon’s *Ways of Sunlight*, rewrites English Literature as the “Condition of England:”



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?<sup>13</sup>

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 tired culture, underpins much of the critical writing of the fifties and sixties. It becomes a characteristic way of discoursing about new writing that, on the one hand, recognises literary innovation, and on the other, disavows any departure from colonial beginnings. In this narrative, all developments must return to—and strengthen—the *parent* literary culture. The insistence is on the centrality of English, seen in the tropic emphasis on English Literature's origin, its parent or root status; it becomes a way of containing centrifugal forces in anglophone writing. To take another example, Arthur Calder Marshall's well intentioned, if somewhat patronising, remarks draw the reader's attention to the rise of the West Indian writer in Britain. In the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1952, he acknowledges that a new generation of Caribbean writers would soon be able "to compete in the British market on their own merits and not [simply] as Caribbean curiosities." These Windrush writers "may well bring to English literature fresh and vital qualities." But if, as Calder Marshall writes, "perhaps in 10, certainly in 20 years from now, West Indian and African literature in the English language should be an accepted part of our Commonwealth cultural scene," it would be only as part of "our" commonwealth of English Literature. Hence there is little irony in his pronouncements that London is "the publishing centre for the novelist from Kingston, Jamaica, as surely as for the novelist from Kingston-on-Thames."<sup>14</sup> The transnational and neo-colonial material networks that make London central lie unquestioned because the governing paradigm of the social mission of English still underpinned much thinking. Hence, in

another special number of the *TLS* in 1962 on the use and spread of the English language, a columnist follows up his praise of the cheap book scheme with the sterling role played by British publishers as missionaries to the new literatures abroad. The columnist remarks,

As has been suggested elsewhere in this article, too little is known in Britain about the steady, unobtrusive and ably directed build up of British publishing in Africa and Asia throughout our generation....Yet it is undertaken by some of the ablest men in the publishing trade, who are motivated as much by idealism as by the search for profit. Outstanding are two houses—the Oxford University Press and Longmans to whom this country is greatly indebted for their part in the world-wide extension of British cultural influence during the past 250 years, particularly during the period since 1945.<sup>15</sup>

It comes as no surprise that praise is also heaped on the British Council for their work in promoting English culture and books abroad; if such activities are necessary in order that Britain is not sidelined in the new world order, all the better.

At this juncture, I want to narrow my focus to look specifically at West Indian writing in the United Kingdom and to address it in three ways.<sup>16</sup> First, I want to sketch something of the network of connections based in London that was crucial to the emergence of West Indian Literature. Secondly, I would like to discuss the reception of West Indian writing and lastly, turn my attention to publishers involved in issuing these works. The worlds of literary editors, publishers, reviewers and publishers' readers were intimately linked and any account of publishing history must take into account their mutual imbrications. This is particularly true for the London scene.<sup>17</sup> London, with its network of cultural and social connections formed through the BBC radio broadcast, *Caribbean Voices*, the West Indian Students' Centre, the Caribbean Artists' Movement and *The London Magazine*, held a special place for Caribbean writers in the fifties and sixties. The contribution of the BBC *Caribbean Voices* programmes in helping to establish the circle of Caribbean writers in the fifties cannot be

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 published material from the Caribbean. When Henry Swanzy took over in 1946, he looked for original and unpublished material. The series became especially important for the development of regional creative writing. *Caribbean Voices* was a transnational institution in the modern sense of the word because (predominantly) original material was collected and collated by the BBC agent in Trinidad, Mrs Gladys Lindo, and edited and selected for broadcast in London. Under the editorship of Henry Swanzy and later V. S. Naipaul, the BBC paid writers, initiated reviews and literary criticism of Caribbean writing, and employed resident West Indians to read work in its London studios. Published writing also came from literary magazines like *Bim* which, in turn, printed work read over the airwaves. The editor of *Bim*, Frank Collymore, became a close friend of Swanzy as their exchange of letters attests.<sup>18</sup> This tied the literary world of the Caribbean to that of London. *Caribbean Voices* not only canvassed, paid for and broadcast new material, but also generated contacts and interest among writers in the region and in so doing contributed to the nurturing of a literary culture in the islands. As Phillip Nanton has argued, the programme was crucial to the shaping of Caribbean literature precisely

because it functioned like a publishing house.<sup>19</sup> Cedric Lindo remarked in a PEN lecture, that *Caribbean Voices* represented the most significant and “the most profitable writing outlet for young writers:” “those interested in West Indian Literature...will have noticed the exodus of many of our best young writers to England and the fact that one of the first ports of call is Mr Swanzy’s office at 200 Oxford Street is proof of this fact.”<sup>20</sup>

Equally significant, Swanzy, during his editorship, acted as mentor to the circle of diasporic writers he took under his wing. His bringing together of such an informal circle of writers was vital to the nurturing of the migrant community of Caribbean artists in Britain. Letters from Collymore to Swanzy bore information about writers and sought help in getting them work. Writers like Selvon wrote to Swanzy not only about literary matters but about the job situation in the UK prior to his arrival in London. Other writers turned up at the BBC offices bearing letters of introduction from Gladys Lindo. Occasionally, when Swanzy liked the work submitted to his radio programme, he would try and interest London-based publishers in the manuscript. Collymore also wrote to Swanzy with regard to getting writers into print including, of course, a very young Derek Walcott. Swanzy, in turn, took some pains to write to promising new writers and sometimes produced extended critiques of their early work. Acting as an informal literary mentor, he was friendly and obliging; he found work for some new arrivals as readers on the BBC programme, advised writers on whom to approach, and often sent their work to various magazines, publishers and agents. Occasionally, the contact established between critics and new writers gave some young writers a much-deserved boost to their publishing careers. George Lamming, for example, met Calder Marshall through *Caribbean Voices* and sought his advice about getting published. Enthusiastic about the three or four

chapters of *In the Castle of My Skin* that he read, Calder Marshall advised Lamming to send them to Michael Joseph, as one of the small independent literary houses that would be receptive to such work. Walter Allen read and liked the manuscript and, almost immediately, Lamming had a contract from Michael Joseph.<sup>21</sup> Collymore, bowled over by the precocity of a nineteen-year-old Walcott, sent some of his poems to Swanzy. Swanzy wrote to Walcott for a copy of his new self-published book and soon after that Roy Fuller was given the task of reviewing young Derek Walcott's publication. It was Fuller and Alan Ross who brought Walcott's poetry to the attention of the poetry editor at Jonathan Cape.

In a slightly later period, Andrew Salkey was to be the kind of literary mentor that Swanzy had proved to be earlier. Salkey was instrumental in setting up the initial contact between Deutsch and Naipaul. As editor of the Faber collection of Caribbean short-stories, he was also instrumental in recommending Wilson Harris's first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, for publication even after the initial rejections by Faber's readers. In an interview with Anne Walmsley, Salkey describes himself as an informal facilitator: "I love the introducer role. It's easy: you get on the phone, or you write a letter, or you grab someone at a party and you say, 'By the way, you know so and so?'" The hive of friendships and contacts that were centred in Salkey's Bayswater residence is matched by John La Rose and Sarah White's north London house. La Rose, who set up New Beacon Books and together with Sarah White ran the New Beacon Bookshop, is another towering figure at the centre of a network of intellectual and artistic exchanges. These two, together with the poet and scholar, Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, founded the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM). CAM was formed in 1966 by critics, writers and artists. In the early years, it provided a London-based forum for debates on the nature of a Caribbean aesthetic, the role of the

intellectual, problems of writing and publishing, and debates about the oral and literary traditions in Caribbean writing. CAM, again, was a transnational organisation connecting London and particularly Kingston, Port of Spain and Georgetown. CAM's members comprised not only writers, artists and critics who were concerned with the independent territories of the Caribbean, but also student activists concerned with a more assertive grassroots politics that were actively influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States. Much of the energy and exuberance of the world of exiled and migrant West Indian artists is captured by Anne Walmsley's groundbreaking study, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972*. CAM, Walmsley asserts, fostered the development of a shared Caribbean aesthetics across different artistic mediums and bridged "the transformation of Britain's West Indian community from one of exiles and immigrants to black British."<sup>22</sup>

Outside the West Indian community, there were others who contributed to rendering West Indian literature as a high profile cluster of writers. Key names appear as regular reviewers of West Indian writing. These include Arthur Calder Marshall (who also broadcast programmes on Caribbean literature for the BBC), Alan Ross (who was editor and publisher), and Francis Wyndham (who wrote readers' reports on Naipaul, "discovered" Jean Rhys for André Deutsch, and became a free-lance reader and reviewer for various publishers and literary journals). Some like Roy Fuller, James Burns Singer, Dan Jones, Anthony Rhodes and Anthony Cronin specialised in reviewing "new" novels and poetry, as the *Times Literary Supplement* describes them. What emerges even at this early stage of the research is a list of intellectuals, writers, journalists and publishers who were not only willing to promote individual writers but also to defend a body of work identified as "West Indian." Significantly, some also worked as readers for various publishing firms.

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.”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> There is a substantial body of reviews that seem repetitive and stereotypical in their responses, particularly with regard to local colour, scenery and language. Yet there were also others which seem informed, and which, despite their contradictions, take to task common misconceptions about the nature of Caribbean literature, culture and politics.

In my quick survey, I was particularly keen to look for identifiable patterns in this body of writing that might be spoken of as constituting a tradition or genre: for example, a projected regional aesthetic that may have encompassed language use, topological features or local colour identified as Caribbean. What is perhaps surprising given Lawson Welsh’s and Dabydeen’s past comments about the typical

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 for *The Spectator* on 2 May 1958, Kingsley Amis attacks what he sees as faddish literary posturing and linguistic experimentation in the post-war English novel. Addressing the different novels of Jan Carew, Sam Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, and V. S. Naipaul, Amis dismisses the singular category of Caribbean writing as “far too various for any just generalisation.”<sup>25</sup> This is echoed in a later article by James Burns Singer on West Indian literature, written as part of a series of articles published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1962 on the use of the English language. Burns Singer is critical of what he calls the “appalling critical misconceptions about West Indian writing in this country” and his countrymen’s lack of curiosity about the history and culture of the West Indies itself. He asserts that “there is an element of nonsense in talking about a West Indian school,” and that each writer’s search for form “will remain essentially personal and individual.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet what unites these two early essays on West Indian novels is a covert debate about the authenticity and “fit” of some of the novels emerging from the Caribbean. This debate polarises modernism and experimentation in language and form against what is deemed as “folk.” The latter is defended as more authentic and befitting the local colour and cultures of the West Indies. It may function as a potential straitjacket for writers seeking to get into print. Amis, after taking swipes at “oddity fanciers” and a *TLS* reviewer’s “extremist and astigmatic hankering after novelty,” encourages the reader to look for “the passionate realisation of a world in historical and topological as well as personal terms” in Mittelholzer’s novels. Behind the “stylistic flannel with jerky thought streams and antiphonally chanted dialogue” of some of his novels, we should look for the humour and the finely realised world of the



West Indies, intones Amis.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

Lamming 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:

[West Indian] writers may well turn out to be of more value than the individual achievement of any purely English modern novelist. Even if they have failed in that, they have given us insights which would otherwise have been denied us into the kinds of life that are lived in the tropics and—what has not been mentioned before because it is so obvious—many wonderful glimpses of the scenery that can be found.<sup>30</sup>

Reading such comments plunges one from the sublime to the ridiculous, for what is finally memorable about Caribbean writing is the “wonderful glimpses of scenery that can be found.” Authenticity is henceforth reduced to the banality of a tourist postcard. Dabydeen has remarked that “a lament of lost primitivism” recurs in many reviews

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.<sup>31</sup>

Reviews give us a general insight into the literary and cultural establishment of the time and provide an insight into how these writers and their work were discussed. Positioning a writer within a regional aesthetic or literary tradition may have a significant impact on a publisher’s view of a writer’s work, and the manner in which s/he is marketed. How much, then, was the exoticism and local colour of a different culture a deciding factor in getting Caribbean writers noticed by publishers thinking both about sales and advising their readers? Henry Swanzy’s stated brief on BBC *Caribbean Voices* was to broadcast writing full of “local colour,” although the complexity of what he meant by the term made his selection flexible and more sympathetic to the needs of a Caribbean audience.<sup>32</sup> William Plomer’s sympathetic and measured report on Walcott’s two early collections of poetry for Cape speaks of the appeal of his “tropical or sub-tropical or Caribbean” imagery as “not obscure and... invariably interesting, full of a pleasing sensuousness.” *The Castaway*, in particular, is praised for its use of “tropical Caribbean imagery with what looks like an instinctive, traditional command of idiomatic English and literary instinct.” In Plomer’s report on *The Gulf*, Walcott’s “Caribbean background and imagery” are said to be “freshly vivid” but also part of a sense of wider horizons.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, Caribbean writers of this period were bunched together as “West Indian,” which in the shorthand of the period refers to literature that possessed the perceived virtues of regional writing, such as “exotic, unfamiliar settings and local dialects.”<sup>34</sup> Allan Wingate’s advertisement for Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun* proclaims the book to be a recreation of “the life, speech and atmosphere of his native island,” done with “fidelity and charm.” MacGibbon and Kee’s promotion of *Ways of Sunlight* sells it as a book “which tells us from the inside what the West Indian

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* asks readers to “vote for Naipaul, for humour, an ironic mind and a pen dipped in rum and acid,” while Jan Carew’s *Black Midas* (Secker) is hyperbolically, “a story of a primitive, polyglot tropical world where life is all danger and men’s minds are dominated by the lust for riches, women and rum.” Anthologies of West Indian writing are often spoken of in a similar manner. The “colour and characteristic dialect” of the West Indian writers in O. R. Dathorne’s *Caribbean Narrative* is authentic proof of the “absorption in the local setting, so vividly conveyed,”<sup>35</sup> while Andrew Salkey’s *West Indian Stories* have a “colourful inarticulacy” that belies “how talented these visitors from the warm islands are.”<sup>36</sup> In a much less sympathetic and more strident objection to the ubiquity of Caribbean authors and themes, Ronald Bryden was to pronounce, “Isn’t it time we killed off V Selvon Mittelholzer [sic]? West Indian novels have been appearing for over 10 years now. Yet you could never tell from their reviews that they aren’t all the work of a composite Caribbean author writing sunnily of quaint brown lives in sugar-fields, with occasional passionate excursions into the jungle.”<sup>37</sup> Both Allis and Lawson-Welsh report that such descriptive allusions to local geography, to cultural and linguistic differences, work to emphasise the “otherness” of the writers. They perpetuate the myth of the happy-go-lucky native and occlude the real economic problems and hardships of island life.

Yet how much were these descriptions of local colour instrumental in publishers’ actual decisions to issue specific books in print? Here, I think it is even more difficult to pronounce with any accuracy without having access to individual readers’ reports and company files. It may also be worth stating the obvious—that writers were treated as

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, how moving or amusing (as the case may be) he is.... Our first aim is publishing books which we think good."<sup>38</sup> Yet Athill does concede in a retrospective aside that difference and exoticism were factors that *recommended* rather than hindered their work. In the contemporary reception of the time, especially as they relate to more "folk" and idiomatic writers like Selvon, the exoticism and difference of local colour certainly made these writers fascinating. But here the issue is not cut and dried, for Selvon was advised in a MacGibbon and Kee reader's report to tone down his long descriptive passages on Trinidad life that might be accused of being local colour.<sup>39</sup> Selvon was also advised by his, albeit American, agent, to leave out as much as possible his experimentation with dialect as these stories were much harder to sell to publishers and journals.<sup>40</sup> Plomer, while appreciative of Walcott's regionalism, also speaks of the universality of his verse. Athill's letter to Colin MacInnes of 4 July 1961 attests both to the success of Caribbean writing in the literary world (authors were known and getting reviewed) and to a growing cynicism and easy dismissal of their appeal as exotica. Deutsch's marketing of a writer like Naipaul tries hard to tread a fine line between West Indian writing and the English novel:

You put your finger exactly on my problem when you say that the book soars above "West Indian writing" in a merely regional sense, onto a splendid universal level. It is so hard to convince people of this when any description of

it has to say that it is about a man's life in Trinidad. The bare facts sound regional—and comment tends to evaporate in a haze of blurb-writers adjectives. But luckily enthusiasm can be infectious, so I hope you will be able to get our pride in this book across in spite of the problems.<sup>41</sup>

One of the trade advertisements for *A House for Mr Biswas* proclaims Naipaul as “no longer one of the best writers from the West Indies” but one of the best writers anywhere. Swanzy's exception to his general rule about the necessity of Caribbean writing being identifiably regional was of course work penned by a writer so good that s/he became universal. Such comments, of course, still beg the question of “universal for whom?” in a global situation in which metropolitan publishing dominates.

What is evident in this preliminary inquiry is that a number of contradictory forces made it particularly conducive for writers from the Caribbean to emerge in print in Britain in a way that is not unreflective of the progressive attention paid to writers from the new Commonwealth. The literary history of the fifties and sixties is a history of transnational connections in a way that reminds us that our current generation's claims to cultural cosmopolitanism are not originary. The presence on British soil—literal or otherwise—was fuelled by the break-up of empire and the promise of independence. There was certainly excitement about the new kinds of writing that were emerging, curiosity about other cultures. Political and cultural groupings, and crucially, local institutions contributed much to drawing attention to the creative forces at work in new literatures, as is clearly shown in the case of Caribbean writing in London. The same can be said of the contributions of intellectuals, literary agents, reviewers and readers; tracking this network of less formalised connections is vital to see how the ripples at the local level made such a significant impact on a global literary stage. There is much to be done by way of research into this archive of Commonwealth literature—and any attempts to write this

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.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Wyndham, "The New West Indian Writers," *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1958, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber, 1970), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London and Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 1997); Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> John Sutherland, *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* (London: University of London and The Athlone Press, 1978), xv.

<sup>7</sup> *The Bookseller*, 1950-65, National Library of Scotland.

<sup>8</sup> This is a scheme wherein textbooks and educational material were sold in developing nations for a fraction of their selling price at home.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Dempsey, "The New Author" in Raymond Astbury, ed., *The Writer in the Market Place* (London: Clive Bingley, 1969), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Diana Athill to Gail Low, 6 October 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Diana Athill, *stet. a memoir* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Pryce-Jones, "A Generation in Search of Itself", *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 August 1952, ii.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Wyndham, "Ways of Sunlight," *The Spectator*, 28 February 1958, 273.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Calder Marshall, "West Indian Writers," *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 May 1952, 348.

<sup>15</sup> Anon, "Books for a Commonwealth: Publishing Locally or From London," *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 August 1962, 596-7.

<sup>16</sup> The appellations "West Indian" and "Caribbean" were sometimes used interchangeably in the period but the former was more commonly employed to indicate a "cultural entity over and above its political or economic ties" and used to refer, particularly in Britain, to the anglophone Caribbean (see Wendy Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies," *American Journal of Sociology* 92.5, 1987, 1078).

<sup>17</sup> Any holistic account of publishing history should not be limited to what emanated from London. There was, of course, an active, albeit limited, literary publishing scene in the pre-war Caribbean with magazines like *Trinidad*, *The Beacon* and *The Quarterly Magazine*, and important journals like *Bim*, *The Trinidad Guardian*, *Kyk-Over-Al*, *Focus*, *Forum* and *Caribbean Quarterly* in the post-war period. For a brief

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).

<sup>18</sup> 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 collected in the Henry Swanzy Papers, housed in the University of Birmingham Special Collection.

<sup>19</sup> See Phillip Nanton, “What does Mr Swanzy Want? Shaping or Reflecting? An Assessment of Henry Swanzy's Contribution to the Development of Caribbean Literature,” *Kunapipi* 20.1, 1998, 11-20, and “Whose Programme Was It Anyway? Political Tensions and Caribbean Voices: the Swanzy Years,” unpublished paper presented at the Symposium “Henry Swanzy, Frank Collymore, and Caribbean Voices,” hosted by the University of the West Indies and the University of Birmingham at Cave Hill Campus, Bridgetown, Barbados, 9-10 July 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Nanton, *Kunapipi*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> George Lamming, *Conversations* (London: Karia Press, 1992) 65-6.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1992), xviii.

<sup>23</sup> David Dabydeen, “West Indian Writers in Britain,” in Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan, eds., *Voices of the Crossing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), 70.

<sup>24</sup> Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 262.

<sup>25</sup> Kingsley Amis, “Fresh Winds from the West,” *The Spectator*, 2 May 1958, 566.

<sup>26</sup> James Burns Singer, “The Caribbean Mixture: Variations and Fusions in Race and Style,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 August 1962, 578.

<sup>27</sup> Amis, “Fresh Winds from the West,” 565.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

<sup>29</sup> Burns Singer, “The Caribbean Mixture: Variations and Fusions in Race and Style,” 578.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> David Dabydeen, “West Indian Writers in Britain,” 75.

<sup>32</sup> See Low, “A West Indian Literary Capital?” and Nanton, “What does Mr Swanzy Want?”

<sup>33</sup> Cape readers reports file, Jonathan Cape Archives, University of Reading.

<sup>34</sup> Wyndham, “The New West Indian Writers,” 63.

<sup>35</sup> Anon, “Caribbean Imaginations,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 July 1966, 676.

<sup>36</sup> David Williams, “Collection Box,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 December 1960, 773.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Bryden, “Review,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 May 1963, 13. Cf. J. Allis, “A Case for Regional Criticism of West Indian Literature,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 28.1/2, 1-11, and S. Lawson-Welsh, “New Wine in New Bottles: the Critical Reception of West Indian Writing in Britain in the 1950s and Early 1960s,” in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson-Welsh, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), 261-267.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Walmsley, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Reader's report of *I Hear Thunder* for MacGibbon and Kee, Sam Selvon Correspondence, 3.1; Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas Austin.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Marion Saunders to Sam Selvon, 26.6.52, Sam Selvon Correspondence, 3.1; Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas Austin.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Diana Athill to Colin MacInnes, 4.7.61, File: 95a:3, André Deutsch Papers, University of Tulsa Special Collections.