

W. Adolphe Roberts

AND JAMAICA

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1962, just five weeks after Jamaica became an independent nation, the writer W. Adolphe Roberts died in London. At the moment of independence he was a well-known figure in the island's cultural life, the former president of many organisations including the Jamaica Historical Society and the Poetry League of Jamaica, as well as the current chairman of the Board of Governors to the Institute of Jamaica. Just the year before Roberts's death, the literary critic G. R. Coulthard had recognised two twentieth-century West Indian writers of stature: Claude McKay and Adolphe Roberts.¹

Six pages of Roberts's recently completed autobiography, dealing with the onset of World War I, appeared in *The Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature*.² Then, after his death, Roberts's reputation quickly faded. He had been a versatile writer—poet, novelist, journalist, historian, travel writer; perhaps too versatile for an age of growing specialism.³ The new nation certainly wanted literary heroes, but Roberts belonged to a generation and class whose time seemed to have passed. The tenth- and twentieth-year anniversaries of his death brought short appreciations, and a few of his poems remain anthologised,⁴ but otherwise his writing has been largely forgotten. All the novels are out of print, as are the works of travel writing and history. An autobiography—completed during



the years following Roberts's return to Jamaica in 1949—remains unpublished, having been rejected by the Institute of Jamaica after his death on the grounds that it was too abrupt in its judgements for the political sensibilities of the newly postcolonial state.⁵ There have been a few recent stirrings. In 2011, two journalists noted the importance of remembering Roberts, given his pioneering work for Jamaican self-government;⁶ and two authors (myself included) have published analyses⁷ of Roberts's *The Single Star*, his fine 1949 novel about the Cuban war of independence and the US invasion of the island in 1898.⁸

From the perspective of 2013, Roberts's career perhaps looks more typically Caribbean than it once did, with its youth and old age spent on

the island sandwiching a forty-five-year career in one of the world's metropolises. He left Jamaica in 1904, aged eighteen, to live in the USA, eventually settling in New York. He travelled widely and read even more widely, before returning to Jamaica in 1949, where he spent the last thirteen years of his life. Unusually, he was brought up with an interest in languages, became fluent in French when covering World War I in Paris as a journalist, and later learned Spanish during his frequent visits to Cuba. This allowed him a breadth of literary and historical reading across the whole region, one he took full advantage of in both his fiction and in his historical masterpiece *The Caribbean: the Story of Our Sea of Destiny* (1940).⁹

There are various cases that could be made out for the importance of W. Adolphe Roberts. The aspect of his career that I want to sketch here is his re-engagement with Jamaica in the 1930s, because it was then that his life's work most closely touched what has become the national story. Perhaps all lives have decisive turning points. I will look at two – one which brought Roberts closer to Jamaicans and eventually to Jamaica, the other which took him away from the possibility of a political career on the island and back to his true vocation as a writer and intellectual.

RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CARIBBEAN

By the mid-1930s it did not look as if Jamaica meant that much to Adolphe

Roberts. Born in Kingston in 1886 to a fairly impoverished white Jamaican family with roots around Mandeville, Roberts had been educated by his talented but wayward father. Taught how to write well, Roberts as an adolescent worked for the *Gleaner* and the short-lived *Leader* before in 1904 leaving like so many of his compatriots to try his luck in the USA. He soon settled in New York, and for the next forty years he would always find his way back to Greenwich Village. After a spell in Europe covering World War I for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, he started a career as a writer and editor, making a living from his pen. Over the years Roberts edited various journals, some with literary pretensions, some not. In 1921 he became a US citizen. In 1931 he published an autobiographical novel, *The Moralist*,¹⁰ which made no reference to the West Indies. To all intents and purposes it looked as though Roberts had become an American writer. But Roberts had not burned his Caribbean bridges. In the early 1930s, with his writing career launched and his finances relatively secure, he embarked on his first major historical work, a biography of Henry Morgan.¹¹ Morgan was obviously an interesting choice: a controversial figure widely regarded as a pirate. His was certainly a colourful life, and ultimately a Jamaican life, which allowed Roberts to raise issues of colonial governance and personal belonging alongside the telling of a rip-roaring story of plunder and intrigue in the seventeenth century. The biography carried four appendices, one of which—a little anachronistically—was the first version of a document Roberts would re-write again and again over the next few years: the case for Jamaican self-government.

The Morgan biography was widely and appreciatively reviewed. Even the prestigious *Times Literary Supplement* proffered some favourable words (“well worth reading for the sake of the information collected about Morgan”), even if these were couched in that quintessentially English tone of imperial condescension: “Mr Roberts believes that a buccaneer’s biography should be written brightly.



A sketch of Roberts (1917) done by his friend J.B. Yeats, father of the celebrated poet, William Butler Yeats.



and took issue with the reviewer’s blatantly racist remark: “What of it?” Roberts retorts. “The fifty-nine-sixtieths are none the less Jamaicans, and thanks to a good educational system are perfectly capable of enjoying democratic institutions. I am not afraid of political liberty for my countrymen.” Roberts was making this argument at exactly the same time as its other great proponent in the early 1930s, C.L.R. James, whose Hogarth Press pamphlet *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* appeared this same year, 1933.¹³ He also notes in this *Times Literary Supplement* letter the origin of his political views: “I started in journalism on the *Daily Gleaner*, of Kingston, Jamaica, my first assignment being to cover the Legislative Council. The farcical nature of the proceedings converted me to self-government for the island.”¹⁴

Over the next few years Roberts would make similar arguments in various fora, adapting his language skilfully for different audiences: “A profound impulse toward self-government is crystallising in the British West Indies today,” he wrote for the prestigious US journal *Current History*, speaking in the passive voice of an objective historical observer.¹⁵ After an assessment of Cipriani and Trinidad, Roberts moves closer to home, noting that Jamaica’s size would allow it to stand alone and that the issue of self-government “is not a ripening but a renaissance” because of its 1661 constitution, surrendered in 1865 in the aftermath of the Morant Bay rebellion.¹⁶ He stresses here, writing in 1934, that there is no labour movement in Jamaica and little tendency towards radicalism, judgements that would have to be sharply revised over the next few years.

While he was in Jamaica later

OPPOSITE PAGE Portrait of Roberts in 1949. (W. Adolphe Roberts papers, National Library of Jamaica)

ABOVE FROM TOP Sketch of Roberts in New York in 1917 by John Butler Yeats. (W. Adolphe Roberts papers, National Library of Jamaica)

A cover from Ainslie’s magazine, edited by Roberts from 1918 to 1921.

Roberts in front of the statue to Garibaldi in Washington Square, New York, in 1925. (Photograph in private collection)

that year, shortly after this article had appeared, Roberts bumped into his old friend Herbert de Lisser, editor of the *Daily Gleaner*, in the stacks of the Institute of Jamaica library.¹⁷ De Lisser enquired what Roberts was looking for: “Material to buttress an argument favouring a new political movement in Jamaica, I replied, and added that the awakening autonomist sentiment was overdue.”¹⁸ De Lisser was unimpressed and would spend much time over the next ten years sniping in a good-natured way at Roberts from the pages of the *Gleaner*.

THE EXAMPLE OF PUERTO RICO

Meanwhile, one of Roberts’s old friends from New York, the American poet Muna Lee, who had married the Puerto Rican politician (and later governor) Luis Muñoz Marín, and moved to San Juan where she was working for the University of Puerto Rico as Director of Communications, invited Roberts to Río Piedras to give a talk. Although labour disputes had been bubbling away in the other anglophone islands during the early 1930s, they were as yet small beer compared with the upheavals in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Cuba had seen the overthrow of the dictator Gerardo Machado in August 1933 and, after the short-lived government of Ramón Grau, the first appearance on the political stage of Fulgencio Batista, who cracked down hard on the general strike of February/March 1935. In Puerto Rico, against a background of economic depression, mass unemployment and wildcat strikes, the movement for independence had been boosted by a changing of the guard in the 1932 elections, which saw Muñoz Marín and Pedro Albizu Campos emerge as national figures. A massive student protest was increased when university administrators associated with the Liberal Party (including Muna Lee) were threatened with the sack. At the same time, Albizu Campos started to prepare for the paramilitary route, training combat units and using the crypto-fascist language of the time. Then, on 24 October 1935, four nationalists were shot in their car by policemen near the



university, an incident quickly called “La matanza de Río Piedras”. There was no investigation and the policemen involved were promoted. Albizu Campos spoke at the graveside. Four months later, the San Juan police chief, Col. Francis E. Riggs, was assassinated. His two killers were taken to the police station and summarily executed.¹⁹ With these kinds of events as background, it is clear that Roberts, arriving in Puerto Rico in April 1936, was absolutely galvanised by the strength of nationalist feeling he encountered among the students and this – he says – made him realise that he needed to tap into a wider Jamaican audience if his ideas about self-government were ever going to gain traction.²⁰ There were, of course, thousands of Jamaicans in New York, but most of them were living a world away from the bohemian climes of Greenwich Village. While Marcus Garvey and his ideas had held sway, Roberts had felt alienated from this world – “What had I to do with his dreams of a black African empire?” – but now, as the political climate changed, “I realised that I must look for support among the thousands of the islanders living in Harlem”.²¹ So Roberts’s way back to Jamaica led through historiography – his book on Morgan; through the nationalist students of Río Piedras; and most importantly through the Jamaican community in the black area of Manhattan.

A PARTY IN HARLEM

It seems that Roberts’s one relevant contact in Harlem – probably via the worlds of journalism and publishing – was with Wendell Malliet, then writing for the *New York Amsterdam News*.²² Through Malliet Roberts was invited to a party in early July 1936 at the rather grand home of James S. Watson²³ at 117 West 120th Street in the heart of Harlem. This is the scene of the first turning point, shifting the direction

ABOVE FROM TOP 117 West 20th Street in Harlem, where Roberts first met Wilfred A. Domingó. (Photograph: Peter Hulme)

Wilfred A. Domingó. (Photograph: *Gleaner*)

Egbert Ethelred Brown. (Photograph: *Gleaner*)

of Roberts's life. Watson had left Jamaica early in the century, become a successful lawyer in New York, and had recently been elected as the first black judge in New York State. He was also an amateur poet who acted as patron to writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Claude McKay. McKay was at this party, but Roberts's key encounter there was with Wilfred Adolphus Domingo, with whose name he may already have been familiar.²⁴

Before leaving Jamaica in 1910, W. A. Domingo (1889–1968) had worked in Kingston as an apprentice tailor and joined the newly-formed National Club, through which he met Marcus Garvey: Garvey was the club's first assistant secretary, Domingo its second.²⁵ In New York Domingo was one of the editors of Garvey's newspaper, *Negro World*. Meanwhile, however, Domingo had developed strong political ties with other black socialists which led to his split with Garvey. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Domingo prospered in business as an importer of West Indian foods while remaining an active presence in organisations such as the British Jamaicans Benevolent Association, which he had helped found in 1917. And in 1925 his essay "The Black Tropics in New York" had appeared in the March edition of *Survey Graphic*, now considered the founding document of the Harlem Renaissance.²⁶

A second key figure, probably introduced to Roberts by Malliet or by Domingo was E. Ethelred Brown (1875–1956). Born in Falmouth, Brown had trained as a civil servant and moved to Spanish Town but lost his job in 1907. He enrolled in a Unitarian college and began his studies in the USA, being ordained in 1912. He tried working back in Jamaica in Montego Bay and Kingston, but eventually relocated to New York in 1920, founding a community church in Harlem. Plagued by financial problems, he took other jobs, including as an elevator operator for nearly six years. In Jamaica he had helped organise the Negro Progressive Association and the Liberal Association, both of which were geared toward civil and economic rights for blacks. Brown's Harlem church was very much

a forum for political debate: he chaired and encouraged heated discussions. Additionally, Brown was chairman of the British Jamaicans Benevolent Association and vice president of the Federation of Jamaican Organizations. So between them, Domingo and Brown had a wonderful array of connections throughout the Jamaican community in Harlem, exactly the sorts of connections Roberts needed. Just as important, Domingo and Brown were already committed nationalists who welcomed their association with this fellow Jamaican who arrived in Harlem as a fully-fledged writer and historian.

Probably through Brown, Roberts was invited to speak to the British Jamaicans Benevolent Association on 15 July 1936, where he seems to have impressed the membership.²⁷ Roberts and Domingo arranged to meet again more formally, which they did on 3 August 1936 at the Harlem office of Dr Lucien Brown, a close friend of Judge Watson's.²⁸ The Jamaica Progressive League (JPL) was then formally established on 1 September 1936 with Roberts as president, Domingo as vice president, and Brown as secretary.²⁹ Public meetings were regularly held in Harlem over the next few years.

The founding declaration of the JPL, adopted on 1 September 1936, is fundamentally nationalist: "Firmly believing that any people that has seen its generations come and go on the same soil for centuries is in fact a nation, we pledge ourselves to work for the attainment of self-government for Jamaica, so that the country may take its rightful place as a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations." Those words of Roberts's form a touchstone to his nationalism. The six principles also articulated in that declaration included universal adult suffrage, economic and social reform, and an encouragement of the study of the history, geography and literature of Jamaica. Based on two of his early talks to these meetings, Roberts produced a 16-page pamphlet *Self-government in Jamaica*, published in New York, which served as the most important articulation of the movement's aims.³⁰ The pamphlet

starts by simply describing Jamaica's system of government, then reviews the island's political history before looking briefly at other colonies and quoting some expert opinion. It says that the moment has come for Jamaicans to realise that if they are to develop politically, "they must set about the shaping of their own future . . . [t]hey must begin to act as a people". They *are* in fact a people, Roberts argues, rehearsing the definition to which he would always adhere: "For national entity is a gift of God to every society that has seen its generations come and go on the same soil for centuries. The awakening of a consciousness of nationality is what is needed today." He offers some final recommendations. These are the immediate founding of a political party in Jamaica pledged to work for self-government; and the waging by Jamaicans in Jamaica of a campaign of cultural development. The stated ideal is a *national* one: national sentiment and national consciousness, created through political action and artistic fruitfulness.³¹

BACK TO JAMAICA

The earliest inkling of Roberts's views on self-government in Jamaica itself came with a flying visit he made at the end of January 1934 while on a lecturing cruise through the Caribbean. Under the headline "AN ADVOCATE OF SELF GOVT. FOR JAMAICA: Mr W. Adolphe Roberts, Jamaican Author and Novelist Speaks Fearlessly", the *Gleaner* reporter elicited Roberts's ideas about his native island: the day had passed for Crown Colony government; Jamaica lagged behind neighbouring islands in the development of a national spirit; and the younger generation should be taught more about Jamaica's history (*Gleaner*, 30 January 1934, 6). This proved only a brief foretaste. Later that year, when Roberts developed the views first outlined in the appendix to his Morgan book into the article for *Current History*, the *Gleaner*—presumably on de Lisser's say-so—reprinted it in its entirety under the headline: "BRITISH WEST INDIAN ASPIRATIONS: ARTICLE BY MR. W. ADOLPHE ROBERTS IN 'CURRENT HISTORY': 'Profound

Impulse Towards Self-government Is Crystallising' in the Islands" (*Gleaner*, 24 August 1934, 18).

After the successful launch of the JPL in New York, Roberts, Domingo and Brown all realised that the next stage in the process was to take their message to Jamaica: they knew perfectly well that any political party pushing for self-government needed Jamaican roots. Some of the groundwork was prepared by two local enthusiasts, Rupert E. Meikle and Walter G. McFarlane. In December 1935—and so even prior to the founding of the JPL—Meikle had already written to the *Gleaner* asking it to reproduce Roberts's appendix from *Sir Henry Morgan*—which it did—and underlining that in Jamaica "there is a group of young people who like myself feel that we cannot possibly go on being satisfied with this pseudo-Crown Colony Government and keep our self-respect as a people". He noted a move afoot among the Citizens' Associations for a wider constitution and for full representative government (*Gleaner*, 16 December 1935). A year later, in another letter to the *Gleaner*, Meikle took advantage of a passing mention of the road to self-government for several British colonies made by a British diplomat, to refer to Roberts's pamphlet, *Self-government for Jamaica* and to quote extensively from its recommendations (*Gleaner*, 21 December 1936, 12).³² Things now started—finally—to move with some speed. Two months later Ethelred Brown announced that the JPL would be seeking to establish itself on the island (*Gleaner*, 15 February 1937, 12), and *Public Opinion* was launched as a weekly newspaper on 20 February 1937 by a group of political activists who would later help create the People's National Party (PNP).

Over the course of Roberts's next two visits to Jamaica—a short one in 1937–38 and a much longer one in 1939—his views were repeatedly commented on in the editorial page of the *Gleaner* by de Lisser, the paper's long-time editor and Roberts's long-term friend. The relationship seems to have kept its genuine warmth

despite their political disagreements, though Roberts would have needed the patience of a saint not to have been exasperated by the tone of some of de Lisser's comments, which usually managed to conceal a barb underneath their honeyed tone, as with this remark which greeted Roberts's arrival in December 1937:

We know Mr Adolphe Roberts well, we like him immensely, and there can be no doubt about his ability and the single-mindedness of his public aims. But he has the romanticism of a minor poet and this naturally affects all his thinking. (*Gleaner*, 17 December 1937, 12)

This struck one of de Lisser's keynotes over the next three years—



Roberts as a romantic idealist. Another would be that Roberts was really a writer, with no political savvy. And yet another would be that as an American citizen out of touch with Jamaica Roberts had no right to interfere in Jamaican politics, which was de Lisser's thrust a few days after Roberts's arrival (*Gleaner*, 9 December 1937, 12).³³

With Roberts on the island but initially keeping a fairly low profile, McFarlane (who had seen news of the JPL meetings in New York and had already written to ask whether he could start a Jamaican branch) and six others founded the Kingston branch

of the JPL on 6 December 1937, after an earlier meeting had been broken up by political opponents.³⁴ Roberts first addressed the group on 15 December at the Metropolitan Hall, reading the JPL's Declaration and its objectives and stressing its commitment to self-government as a dominion. He then spoke at a big public meeting in Kingston at the Ward Theatre on 21 December under the joint auspices of the National Reform Association – founded earlier that year by Ken Hill -- and the Federation of Citizens' Associations. In his autobiography Roberts recalls the moment: "I told them that it was undesirable, if not impracticable, for a nationalist movement to be permanently directed from abroad. They must regard their organisation as the nucleus of a political party, the activities of which should soon take precedence over anything we could do in New York." Roberts also particularly recalls a meeting in the old schoolhouse at Linstead where he criticised the Jamaican nominated members in the legislature who always supported the governor, but then received an unusually hostile question: "An oldish lean fellow, Arnold Lecesne, descendant of French refugees from the slave insurrection in Saint Domingue, inquired why I stopped short at preaching self-government within the Empire. As he saw it, Jamaica should be a republic. I had found an extremist. He had always been one, but the general stirring of national consciousness had brought him out."³⁵ Roberts was enough of a politician to welcome the voicing of a view more extreme than his own—one whose time is, indeed, perhaps finally about to come.³⁶

He then spoke at various other meetings, including an address to the Jamaica Union of Teachers where he made much of what would become a standard postcolonial theme—the need to recognise the geographical specificity of the place: "Jamaica is not a part of England," he said. "She is not a European country. She is an entity in the Caribbean region of the North American continent and the curriculum of the schools should be based on that unalterable fact" (*Gleaner*, 7 January

1938, 7).

A PERMANENT HABITATION?

[IMAGE: Norman Manley.
(Photograph: *Gleaner*)

The success of this brief visit to Jamaica encouraged Roberts to make plans to return permanently. In August 1938, de Lisser wrote of Roberts expecting, “according to the latest note we had from him, to be in Jamaica during the coming winter; he contemplates setting up a permanent habitation here and then beginning his work towards self-government” (*Gleaner*, 22 August 1938, 12). In a ‘private’ letter to de Lisser (though since many of them ended up being quoted in the *Gleaner*, Roberts was probably not naive enough to regard them as private) Roberts wrote that he anticipated de Lisser’s opposition and “I’m sure we’ll both enjoy making the feathers fly” (*Gleaner*, 1 November 1938, 12).

Meanwhile, of course, other things had been happening on the island. An incident at Frome Estate in May 1938 had ended with a group of labourers being charged with rioting. The lawyer Norman Manley and the labour leader Alexander Bustamante had risen to prominence. And the PNP had been founded in September 1938, with considerable input from local members of the JPL, including Walter McFarlane.³⁷ The New York JPL was prominent in protests against the violent British reaction to the Frome ‘riots’—one of the few times Judge James S. Watson put his head above the political parapet—and raised £100 to defend the protestors, engaging E.R.D. Evans after Manley, at least according to McFarlane, backed out.³⁸

Roberts returned to Jamaica on 1 January 1939 and would stay for eight turbulent months. Ethelred Brown had gone back in November 1938 and Wilfred Domingo arrived at about the same time as Roberts. In August 1938 the JPL (New York) had presented “A Social and Economic Programme for Jamaica” advocating, amongst other measures, civil liberties, a minimum wage, pensions for all, unemployment insurance, compulsory elementary education, establishment

of a University of Jamaica, and forest protection, positioning itself therefore as something much more than a one-issue pressure group.³⁹ Domingo had prepared the way with a long letter to the *Gleaner* in December 1938, recapping the brief history of the JPL and associating it with Manley and the PNP (*Gleaner*, 8 December 1938, 15). This note was also struck in Roberts’s first interview after his arrival: the differences between the JPL and the PNP over self-government were a matter of timing, not substance, he said, and the JPL “feels itself affiliated with the PNP and will support it”. And he himself would, he said, after a short return to New York later in 1939, settle permanently in Jamaica and eventually qualify for election as member for one of the parishes on the Legislative Council (*Gleaner*, 3 January



1939, 11). This was a very public statement of Roberts’s intent. The *Gleaner* certainly gave full coverage to Roberts’s activities, as did its new, more sensationalist rival, the *Jamaica Standard*, edited by the English journalist, F.J. Makin, who would write a forthright book about his short Jamaican experience.⁴⁰

The local JPL had a welcome meeting at which Norman Manley spoke alongside Roberts and Domingo (*Gleaner*, 6 January 1939, 22), setting the tone for the months to come. In this speech Manley gave his fullest acknowledgement of what he (and

therefore the PNP) owed to Roberts. He noted that he did not claim to have originated the idea of a national Jamaica nor that of self-government—“which was the logical and inevitable corollary of the progress they had made”, only to have recognised, and that in a tardy fashion, the value of the ideas that Roberts had outlined to him in his chambers a year earlier. The ultimate aims and ambitions of the JPL and the PNP were now identical, Manley concluded.

These were heady days for Roberts. Change was clearly afoot in Jamaica and he and Manley, often accompanied by Domingo, toured the island, speaking at innumerable public meetings to urge Jamaicans to join the PNP. Meanwhile, Roberts was doing research in the library of the Institute of Jamaica for his general history book on the Caribbean, for which he had a contract from his US publisher, Bobbs-Merrill. He was also active in the Poetry League during this time, and was elected vice president in March 1939. And to cap it all, in early March his sister, Ethel Rovere, arrived for an extended visit, accompanied by her son, Richard, editor of the US Communist Party journal, *The New Masses*, and by the glamorous screen and short story writer, Ella Landry, who may have been a romantic distraction for Roberts (*Gleaner*, 8 March 1939, 7).⁴¹ Ethel and Richard left at the end of May (but there was no mention of Ms Landry leaving too).

At the first annual meeting of the Jamaican branch of the JPL in Kingston at the end of February 1939, Roberts was elected president and affirmed the strategy of supporting the PNP while retaining the JPL’s own identity. But he also announced an educational and cultural campaign to “Jamaicanise Jamaica”, perhaps suggesting that the JPL was beginning to see itself as the cultural wing of the PNP rather than as an electoral force in its own right (*Gleaner*, 28 February 1939, 13).

THE RURAL RETREAT

IMAGE: Albert Huie, *Quiet Corner* (Gordon Town), (1958). The Michael Campbell Collection.

For a time Roberts juggled these various activities, but at a certain point, in March 1939, he decided he needed more peace and quiet to write and rented a house called Rawcliffe, in Gordon Town, eight miles outside Kingston (*Gleaner*, 15 March 1939, 3). This was a decisive move – the second turning point. Roberts writes of realising that he could not in the end visualise making a political career for himself on the island. He had travelled the length and breadth of Jamaica with Manley and observed the grassroots support that Manley could draw on, not to mention the personal wealth that enabled him to sustain a political career. It was at this point that de Lisser made his longest public comment about Roberts when he chose “Adolphe” as the first subject for some reminiscences which formed an occasional part of the addendum to his *Gleaner* editorials under the heading “Random Jottings”. The first sentence offered a classic ‘delisserism’: “One of my most vivid reminiscences is my first meeting with Adolphe Roberts, whose political views are so much misunderstood in this country by nearly everyone, including himself.” The portrait he offers is warm, even though he talks more about himself than his friend Adolphe, adding the detail that he had actually gone to visit him at Rawcliffe one evening. The picture is of a writer already slightly withdrawn from the daily hurly-burly of Kingston politics (*Gleaner*, 13 June 1939, 12).

There may have been contributing factors. Ken Post suggests that Domingo and another prominent member of the JPL, Jaime O’Meally, were more sympathetic to the left wing of the PNP, led by Richard Hart, than they were to the local JPL leaders.⁴² Roberts too may have been disappointed with the quality of the local support he received. Relationships between the JPL and the PNP were not in practice quite as smooth as Manley’s words suggest. In the election for the Kingston seat on the Legislative Council in 1939, E. R. Dudley Evans stood for the JPL but was opposed by Erasmus Campbell, who was strongly supported

by various PNP stalwarts such as Florizel Glasspole and by Oswald Anderson, previously considered a JPL sympathiser. Campbell won, though he shortly afterwards left the PNP.

In any case Roberts evidently decided that, when it came to the crunch, he was a writer not a politician. Domingo left for New York at the end of April, promising to act as a PNP ambassador in the USA and to return for the 1940 elections. Among the numerous speeches at his farewell banquet, Manley’s was the most interesting. He said that he had often wondered why it was that Jamaicans who had been abroad were far more appreciative of and devoted to Jamaica than those who had spent their lives at home. He ventured two answers. Those who stayed in Jamaica were often ostrich-like in their behaviour, not understanding the wider world of which Jamaica formed a part. And those who travelled and saw the real problems facing other parts of the world were able to put Jamaica and its problems into proper perspective. In this context, Manley again paid tribute to Roberts’s foresight and to the role of the JPL in developing the PNP (*Gleaner*, 24 April 1939, 21).

The move to Gordon Town was certainly not a rejection of Jamaica itself on Roberts’s part. Anything but: Roberts had committed himself to returning to live on the island of his birth. But it was a recognition that what he could best contribute was precisely the wider angles that came from research and writing—seeing Jamaica as part of a larger region with a shared geography and history. Roberts left Jamaica on 20 August 1939 for New Orleans to do work on the French and Spanish sections of his history book, intending to return at the end of the year. De Lisser saw him off in his usual fashion: “Mr Roberts is not really a politician: he is a literary man of distinction” (*Gleaner*, 17 July 1939, 12). But it was de Lisser who presided over his farewell dinner at Peggy Brown’s restaurant, attended by the great and the good of the JPL and the PNP, including H.P. Jacobs, O.T. Fairclough, Clare McFarlane, E.A.

Campbell, Ken Hill, and many others. Hinting at slurs that had been cast upon him, Roberts rebutted suggestions that he was a communist—slurs which must have amused the communists. His own self-description was a “radical liberal” (*Gleaner*, 21 August 1939, 8), which seems as good a label as any. Roberts had once belonged to the Socialist Party in the USA, but that was before the watershed of 1917: he had no sympathy with the Soviet system.

[IMAGE: Roberts in Chicago in 1939. (Photograph by A.S. Knobble, W. Adolphe Roberts papers, National Library of Jamaica)]

OUR SEA OF DESTINY

The war then forced his hand, a “couple of months” back in the States to wind up his affairs turning into ten years. Roberts spent most of the war years in New Orleans, writing three historical novels about the city’s history and then undertaking a long-planned novel about the Cuban war of independence.⁴³ As a US citizen who had voiced strong political opinions, he would not have been allowed back into Jamaica during the war—and was indeed denied a visa in 1945 just as the war was ending, the Jamaican authorities basing themselves on the fact that Roberts was not a Jamaican.⁴⁴ His response was as follows: “I felt myself unalterably a Jamaican, and if Jamaican nationality had been a recognised legal fact I would never have given it up for any other. That I had been born a British subject was a lesser consideration, because I had not asked for the status and did not concede it the right of precedence over the impulses of my true ancestry.”⁴⁵

In 1940, with war raging in Europe and nobody quite knowing how it would affect the West Indies, Roberts published *The Caribbean: The Story of Our Sea of Destiny*; the book was dedicated to Norman and Edna Manley, with whom Roberts had become close friends during 1939. De Lisser recognised the prescience of Roberts’s book as early as August 1940, just as it was being published (*Gleaner*, 24 August 1940, 12; *Gleaner*, 3 September

1940, 12), though he also, of course, took issue with some of its conclusions (*Gleaner*, 10 September 1940, 12), provoking Norman Manley in the process. De Lisser, as was his constant wont, described Roberts's perspective as American. By 'America' he meant the USA, but Roberts was in fact an Americanist in the broader sense, which allowed him to view the Caribbean as an American place rather than as a European appendage. Offended by de Lisser's tone, Norman Manley wrote to the *Gleaner* to offer an alternative view of Roberts's book:

The Caribbean is chosen as the focal point of the narrative in order to develop the theme of the dominant part played in the history of the development of the Americas by their inland sea. The importance of the Caribbean is for the purposes of the book, and indeed for all historical and geographical considerations to be found, not in the fact that it contains a diversity of imperial vestiges, the result of its history, but in the fact that it served as matrix for the development of the Nations of the New World and that it is still just as inevitably bound up in their destiny as it was five hundred years ago. (*Gleaner*, 11 September 1940, 8)

Whereas for a conservative like de Lisser, the connection to Britain was the most important, for Roberts Jamaica's destiny was Caribbean, and the Caribbean's destiny was American. In the late 1930s and 1940s, it was the Cuban Republic that—for all its flaws—offered Roberts a model of a Caribbean nation beginning to fulfil its potential, a theme he explored in *The Caribbean* and in his novel *The Single Star*, works which brought him recognition in Cuba before he received any in his own country.⁴⁶

In her essay on "Regional Histories" in the UNESCO *General History of the Caribbean*, Bridget Brereton notes that Roberts and his Colombian contemporary, Germán Arciniegas,

were the two historians writing in the 1940s whose approach "departed significantly from the imperial tradition".⁴⁷ In other words they wrote their histories of the Caribbean from the Caribbean. Roberts was the pioneer: *The Caribbean: The Story of Our Sea of Destiny* appeared in 1940, the first historical expression of a pan-Caribbean political consciousness. Arciniegas's *Biografía del Caribe* was published in 1945, its English translation, *Caribbean: Sea of the New World*, one year later.⁴⁸ It would be a further twenty-five years before the appearance of books with a similar scope: Eric Williams's *From Columbus to Castro* and Juan Bosch's *De Cristóbal Colón a Fidel Castro*.⁴⁹ On most reckonings, Roberts's book is superior to that of Arciniegas: its coverage of the region is certainly more even and it takes its story up to 1940, while the Colombian stops at the end of the nineteenth century. But Arciniegas is an honoured figure in his homeland, so his book had a second edition in 2000 to mark the centenary of his birth, while Roberts's book remains out of print.⁵⁰

AFTER THE WAR

De Lisser's final commentary on his friend and opponent was published in March 1943. It contains a warm appreciation of Roberts's last three books and predicts that he still has an important role to play in Jamaica's future. He will continue to press for immediate self-government, de Lisser notes: "I am going to oppose him and beat him. I do not underrate my political opponents. I respect their honesty of purpose even while deprecating their political obtuseness" (*Gleaner*, 11 March 1943, 6). Roberts would doubtlessly have permitted himself a smile: de Lisser was by now quite seriously ill, but there was clearly still life in the old dog yet.

Roberts says that after he finally returned to Jamaica he was asked by many people to form a new political party to fight the general election of 1949. He had certainly been unimpressed by the growing socialist tendencies apparent in the PNP and by Manley's prevarication on the push for self-government. But he knew that

any party he led would only take votes from the PNP, allowing Bustamante an easy ride. His relationship with Manley cooled, especially when the PNP fell into line with the British push for Federation.⁵¹ Instead, Roberts threw himself into his role as a cultural nationalist, writing, for example, *Six Great Jamaicans*, biographical sketches of Edward Jordon, George William Gordon, Enos Nuttall, Robert Love, Thomas Henry MacDermot, and H.G. de Lisser, two of whom (Nuttall and Love) Roberts remembered from his childhood, and another two of whom (MacDermot and de Lisser) were lifelong friends.⁵²

In August 1962, when Jamaica finally achieved independence, Roberts sent what may have been his final written words in a note to his old colleagues at the JPL in New York, congratulating them on twenty-five years' effort and recommending—true to his perspective—that Jamaica should seek to join the Organisation of American States. Right after the independence celebrations, Roberts travelled to London on the first leg of what was to be a European trip. He had dinner with one of his oldest Jamaican friends, Lucille Parks, who had married a Tory MP called Tom Iremonger.⁵³ During dinner Roberts was taken ill and he died in his room in the White House Hotel in Earls Court Road in the early morning of 14 September 1962. His ashes were returned to Mandeville for burial. Despite living most of his life outside the island, Adolphe Roberts was a nationalist to the core and wanted his remains to lie in Manchester soil. His many contributions to his country deserve to be remembered.

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NOTES

- G.R. Coulthard, "The West Indies", in *The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth*, ed. A. L. McLeod (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), 185–202, at 189. The bibliography of W. Adolphe Roberts's writings is large and rather complicated. He wrote a great deal, much of it in ephemeral magazines: my incomplete list has 161 items, not including his book reviews and by-lined journalism, and the final count will be much higher. In addition, some of the books published under his name were not actually written by him, as notes in the copies he provided to the Institute of Jamaica library make clear.
- "How the War Came in 1914", in *The Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature*, selected A.L. Hendriks and Cedric Lindo (Kingston: Ministry of Development and Welfare, 1962), 190–95.
- Some of Roberts's publications will be referred to in the course of this article. Others include the poetry collections *Pierrot Wounded and Other Poems* (New York: Britton Publishing Co., 1919), *Pan and Peacocks* (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1928), and *Medallions* (Kingston: Arawak Society, 1950); the novel *The Pomegranate* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1941); the biography *Semmes of the Alabama* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1938); and the travel books *Lake Pontchartrain* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1946, in the American Lakes Series), *Lands of the Inner Sea: The West Indies and Bermuda* (New York: Coward McCann Inc., 1948), and *Havana: Portrait of a City* (New York: Coward McCann, 1953).
- Frank Birbalsingh, "W. Adolphe Roberts: Creole Romantic", *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (July 1973): 100–107; Wycliffe Bennett, "W. Adolphe: a Personal Recollection", *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4 (November 1983): 54–58; *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, ed. Paula Burnett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 140–42. A commemorative volume had been published of the *Bulletin of the Jamaican Historical Society* III, no. 8 (1962). Interestingly, Roberts's poem "The Maroon Girl" is a favourite of Lewis Powell, the black nationalist teacher in Michelle Cliff's novel, *Abeng* (Trumansburg NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 90–91.
- The autobiography was drawn on by John A. Aarons in an excellent outline of Roberts's achievement published in 1983: "W. Adolphe Roberts and the movement for self-government", *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4 (Nov. 1983): 59–63. I draw on it here too: W. Adolphe Roberts, "These Many Years: An Autobiography in Two Parts", unpublished manuscript, National Library of Jamaica, MS. 353, with warm thanks to the NLJ Librarian, Mrs Winsome Hudson, for facilitating my access to the manuscript.
- Ken Jones, "W. Adolphe Roberts: 'Father of the Nation'", *Gleaner*, 31 July 2011, F14; Louis Moyston, "W.A. Roberts et al. and the JPL 1936–1944", *Jamaica Observer*, 27 August 2011.
- Peter Hulme, *Cuba's Wild East: A Literary Geography of Oriente* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 260–66; Faith Smith, "Between Stephen Lloyd and Esteban Yo-eed", *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 22–38.
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *The Single Star: A Novel of Cuba in the '90s* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949; abbreviated ed., Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1956).
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *The Caribbean: The Story of Our Sea of Destiny* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1940, repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *The Moralist* (New York: Mohawk Press, 1931).
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *Sir Henry Morgan: Buccaneer and Governor* (New York: Covici Friede, 1933; abbreviated ed. Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1952).
- Edward W. O'F. Lynham, "Buccaneer and Governor", *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 1656 (26 October 1933), 723.
- C.L.R. James, *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*, Day to Day Pamphlets no. 16 (London: Hogarth Press, 1933). James's and Roberts's arguments are virtually identical, both examples of what F.S.J. Ledgister accurately calls "creole nationalism" in his work *Only West Indians: Creole Nationalism in the British West Indies* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2010).
- W. Adolphe Roberts, "Sir Henry Morgan", *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 1660 (23 November 1933), 840.
- W. Adolphe Roberts, "British West Indian Aspirations", *Current History* 40, no. 5 (1934): 552–56, at 552.
- Roberts, "British West Indian Aspirations", 554.
- Herbert George de Lisser (1878–1944) was a journalist, editor, and novelist. On his central role in Jamaican political and cultural life, see Leah Reade Rosenberg, *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 63–90.
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *Six Great Jamaicans: Biographical Sketches* (Kingston: The Pioneer Press, 1951), 110.
- See, for example, César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
- Roberts, "These Many Years", 432.
- Ibid.*, 434.
- A.M. Wendell Malliet (1896–1976) was a Jamaican-born journalist and later publisher. Active in New York-based West Indian politics, he published a number of pamphlets, including *The Destiny of the West Indies* (1927). He later represented the Jamaica Labour Party in New York.
- The Jamaican James S. Watson (1882–1952) in 1917 had married Violet May Lopez, also a Jamaican. One of their daughters, Barbara M. Watson (1918–1983), became the first woman and the first African-American to be a US under-secretary of state (for security and consular affairs in the Carter administration), and was later the US ambassador to Malaysia. One of their sons, James L. Watson (1922–2001), became a federal judge.
- On West Indians in Harlem, see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-century America* (London: Verso, 1998).
- On this period, see Glen Richards, "Race, Class and Labour Politics in Colonial Jamaica, 1900–1934", in *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage and Culture*, ed. Kathleen E.A. Monteith and Glen Richards (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 340–62.
- "Look for me all around you": *Anglophone Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005) contains examples of Domingo's writing. On Domingo, see Birte Timm, "Caribbean Leaven in the American Loaf: Wilfred A. Domingo, the Jamaica Progressive League, and the Founding of a Decolonization Movement for Jamaica", *GHI Bulletin Supplement* 5 (2008): 81–97.
- John S. Young, *Lest We Forget* (New York: Isidor Books, 1981), 31.
- Dr Lucien M. Brown (1895–1960) was on the initial steering committee of the JPL but soon took a back seat. Like Watson, Brown was a Jamaican immigrant who made a successful career for himself. He and Watson travelled back to Jamaica on holiday together in 1931 and were treated with great deference. Reporting his funeral, the *New York Amsterdam News* referred to him as a "wealthy and socially-prominent physician" (23 April 1960, 1).
- Roberts, "These Many Years", 435. Neither of the two histories of the JPL is entirely satisfactory: Young, *Lest We Forget*, and Walter G. McFarlane, *The Birth of Self Government for Jamaica and the Jamaica Progressive League 1937–1944* (Kingston: self-published, 1957; revised ed., 1974).
- W. Adolphe Roberts, *Self-government for Jamaica* (New York: Jamaica Progressive League of New York, 1936).
- Ibid.*, 14–15.
- Rupert E. Meikle had established the "Quill and Ink" literary club in Port Maria in 1932, with Roberts and Zora Neale Hurston as overseas "friends" (*Gleaner*,

- 22 March 1937, 5). Meikle also became a prominent member of the National Reform Association and the League of Colored Peoples, as well as remaining a stalwart JPL supporter.
33. Another JPL member in New York, Ben Burrell, contested de Lisser's point (*Gleaner*, 30 December 1937). To his credit, de Lisser did later change his view: *Gleaner*, 31 October 1938, 12.
 34. McFarlane, *Birth of Self Government*, 11. Like so many others, McFarlane had been radicalised in North America, where he had trained and worked as a land surveyor, returning to Jamaica in 1933. Later he was on the first organising committee of the PNP but fell out seriously with Norman Manley, about whom his book is vituperative. Aged ninety-six, he was still arguing that Adolphe Roberts, not Norman Manley, was the founder of the Jamaican nation (*Gleaner*, 30 July 1993, 7).
 35. Roberts, "These Many Years", 441.
 36. Lecesne also voiced this opinion in letters to the journal *Public Opinion*: see Louis Lindsay, "The Myth of Independence: Middle Class Politics and Non-mobilisation in Jamaica" (1975; Mona: Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES) Working Paper No. 6 [2005]), 100.
 37. On the labour rebellions in the British Caribbean, see O. Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934–39* (Kingston: Ian Randle / London: James Currey, 1995). On Jamaica, the study that pays most attention to the JPL is Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
 38. On Watson, see Richard B. Moore, *Caribbean Militant in Harlem: Collected Writings 1920–1972*, ed. W. Burghardt Turner and Joyce Moore Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 74–75; McFarlane, *Birth of Self Government for Jamaica*, 15–16. Note, though, that Manley said he could not appear for the strikers because of his retainer from the West Indies Sugar Company – see James Carnegie, *Some Aspects of Jamaica's Politics: 1918–1938* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1973), 108.
 39. McFarlane, *Birth of Self Government*, 57–62.
 40. F.J. Makin, *Caribbean Nights* (London: Robert Hale, 1939).
 41. Ethel Rovere was herself a published writer (in fact her story, "The Curse of God" won first prize in the *Public Opinion* short story competition in April 1939), while her son, Richard H. Rovere (1915–1979) would later become one of best-known US journalists and political writers of the 1960s and 1970s.
 42. Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 322.
 43. W. Adolphe Roberts, *Royal Street: A Novel of New Orleans* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1944); Roberts, *Brave Mardi Gras: A New Orleans Novel of the '60s* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1946); Roberts, *Creole Dusk: A New Orleans Novel of the '80s* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1948); Roberts, *The Single Star*.
 44. Domingo had tried to re-enter Jamaica in June 1941 but was arrested on board ship and placed in an internment camp, where he joined a number of Jamaican labour leaders. A lengthy campaign to secure Domingo's release from detention was launched by his associates in Jamaica and New York, with Roberts prominent among them, but Domingo was detained for twenty months and then forced to remain in Jamaica for an additional four years when the US government denied him a visa.
 45. Roberts, "These Many Years", 471–72.
 46. He was awarded the Orden Nacional de Mérito: Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in 1950.
 47. Bridget Brereton, "Regional histories", in *General History of the Caribbean: Vol. VI: Methodology and Historiography of the Caribbean*, ed. B.W. Higman (London: UNESCO Publishing / Macmillan Education, 2000), 315.
 48. Germán Arciniegas, *Biografía del Caribe* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1945); *Caribbean: Sea of the New World*, trans. Harriet de Onis (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946).
 49. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean* (London: André Deutsch, 1970); Juan Bosch, *De Cristóbal Colón a Fidel Castro: El Caribe, Frontera Imperial* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1970).
 50. Ironically, in 2004, Jamaica saw the reprinting of the English translation of Arciniegas's book: *Caribbean: Sea of the New World*, trans. Harriet de Onis (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004). It had also been reprinted in 2003 (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener).
 51. Roberts, "These Many Years", 512–21. Even the JPL (NY) came out in favour of Federation: see letter from Fred L. Reid to the *Gleaner*, 2 September 1961, 4.
 52. Roberts also produced *The Capitals of Jamaica: Spanish Town, Kingston, Port Royal* (Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1955); *Jamaica: The Portrait of an Island* (New York: Coward McCann, 1955); *Old King's House – Spanish Town* (Kingston: Old King's House Restoration Committee, 1959).
 53. Lucille Iremonger (née Parks) (1919–89) was the author of several novels and biographies and a memoir called *Yes, My Darling Daughter* (1964).