

# PREFACE

*by*

*Ewart Thomas*

In September 2013, two months before the manuscript of this book was delivered, one of its subjects, Jessica Huntley, chatted with some urgency about the book and the main audience she hoped it would attract, namely, students in secondary schools. While she spoke about many things that afternoon, as is typical between friends of long standing, there was the predictable reticence and humility when it came to discussing her own life and work. However, a recurring theme was her concern for “the youth” – their education, self-concept, sense of right and wrong, and aspirations for work and service. At some point in the conversation, she asked, “Do you think you could take a look at it?” Given our history of working together at Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications (BLP), the publishing house Jessica and Eric Huntley founded in 1968, it is almost certain that I would have said “Yes” under any circumstances. But there was an intensity in her living-room, a sense of wonder, doubtless amplified in my memory by what happened a month later, at her relating in just a couple of hours so many anecdotes I had never heard before, that I simply could not refuse her request.

The story of the Huntleys can be told in an arc that has as its end-points Guyana (formerly British Guiana and a colony of Britain) and Britain. Margaret Andrews tells a fascinating tale by stitching together the results of painstaking research and many interviews with people who knew them. The first half of this book sets the scene of their childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, falling in love, marriage and political activism in Guyana, and then it sketches the transition from Guyana to Britain in the late 1950s. The second half follows the Huntleys as they cope with the financial and other hardships of London, reconnect with former acquaintances while developing new ones, and respond to a felt need for community action to improve the lives of Black Londoners. The two most important achievements of their community activism are presented in telling detail. The first is the founding of BLP “during a period when books by Black authors or books that were written with a sympathetic view of Black people’s history and culture were rare in the UK.” The second is the opening six years later of The Bookshop, renamed in 1980 as The Walter Rodney Bookshop, which “came to take centre-stage in the lives of the Huntley family and was an important space for Britain’s Black community, as well as for artists and intellectuals visiting the UK.”

This biography is part of a wider, mixed-media project housed at the London Metropolitan Archives containing additional materials designed for teachers and students. Excerpts from the wider project will be available on the project website. Thus the potential audience for the book is large and, in the spirit of accountability, one might reasonably ask: what impact can this book have on the lives of mostly British adolescents in this second decade of the 21st century?

Part of the answer to this question has to be a general defence of the telling of stories in which ordinary people do extraordinary things: such stories can be inspirational to people of all ages, but especially to those in the process of defining their self-identity and sense of social justice. Another, more pointed answer is that this book contains much that resonates with current analyses of the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in Britain, and of the appropriate organizational and legislative responses to diversity, especially in schools and the workplace. Dr Margaret Andrews has located the lives of Jessica and Eric Huntley in a rich historical and political context that includes commentary on (a) the anti-colonial movement and its impact on the race, class and gender politics of Guyana in the 1940s and 1950s (Chapters 1-4), (b) the dynamics of immigration from the Caribbean to the metropole in the 1950s (Chapters 5-6), and (c) the last half-century of increasing tension between whites and people of colour in Britain, the resulting violence, and the societal responses to this schism (Chapters 7-10). This leads to her concluding in the Afterword that

The story of Jessica and Eric is particularly fascinating and important because it offers us a history of the 20th and early 21st centuries through their lives, two ordinary Black people who, as left-wing radicals did extraordinary things. As self-educated individuals they shaped and influenced generations from all walks of life, both Black and White.

A couple of examples are sufficient for this conclusion. By the time we hear, in Chapter 2, the teenage Jessica tell other female workers at the Briana shirt factory that they should all go on strike, we feel not only her indignation at the unjust work practices but also the plausibility, even inevitability, of the confrontation. This is because Dr Andrews carefully sets out the family dynamics of the tenement yard in which Jessica grew up, the pride and independence inculcated by her mother, and the toxic interaction of colour and class prejudice in the factory, all of which appear to drive the courageous young women led by Jessica on the futile quest to remove the injustice. In the end, a painful lesson is learnt.

She realised that fighting for others, even when it is for a just cause, is not always appreciated. But she did not let it deter her in the future from challenging those who abused their power, nor from speaking out when others were being exploited. ... Jessica's confidence in herself as an African woman, her ability to stand up for what she

believed was right and to courageously face the consequences of her actions, were all qualities that her mother Hectorine nurtured as she was growing up.

In a similar vein, Chapters 4 and 5 offer compelling details about some early sources of the important work Eric was to perform decades later in London as activist, writer and publisher. It appears that Eric's political education had an ironic start, namely, his joining the Post Office Workers' Trade Union in what was then British Guiana, not because he was unhappy with working conditions for his fellow postmen but because he noticed that many other workers did not enjoy the mentorship and respect that was typical in his profession. After becoming Assistant Secretary of this Union, Eric decided to publish a bulletin. As we learn in Chapter 3:

Eric used the bulletin to keep the post-office workers and other working people of British Guiana informed of the developments taking place that affected working people nationally and internationally. The bulletin was an important source of information, and, as its author, Eric became known across the country before too long.... His introduction to the trade-union movement and politics was at a time when anti-colonial movements and Marxist ideology were on the rise. These influences had a major impact on shaping his early life, and would continue to have a profound effect on him as a grown man.

Chapters 8 and 9 sketch the history of a unique and unlikely episode in the history of publishing in the United Kingdom, namely, the formation of BLP. The production and widespread distribution of BLP's inaugural publication, *The Groundings with My Brothers* by the historian-activist Walter Rodney, is a textbook case of the power of informal networks - in this case, a network of "capital" that spanned the Caribbean, Africa and the migrant communities in Britain and the USA. Early links in this network, such as the introduction of Eric to John and Irma La Rose in Trinidad that was set up by Cheddi and Janet Jagan (each destined to become President of an independent Guyana more than 35 years later), the first meeting between Rodney and the Huntleys that took place in the La Roses' London home (Chapter 5), and the meeting of minds at the West Indian Students' Centre in Earls Court (Chapter 6) were the seeds that facilitated BLP's access to manuscripts, legal and institutional savvy, micro-financing, and scores of volunteers. Further, BLP had the full support of the two major Black-led publishing ventures existing in London at the time, New Beacon Press, founded in 1966 by John La Rose and Sarah White, and Allison & Busby, co-founded in 1967 by Margaret Busby (editor of the present volume). However, its reach soon expanded beyond that usually associated with a publishing house. Perhaps because of its grassroots formation, BLP and the associated Bookshop became a magnet for various causes that were frankly political, while filling a literary, educational and cultural void (Chapters 8 and 9). Much remains to be analysed, as the author notes. Why, for example, did The Bookshop become a major community hearth when older and more established institutions did not?

Or, how can the tension between the profit motive and the imperative to educate the community be managed by the publisher-cum-seller so as to sustain both functions in the long term? I hope that future students will be inspired to revisit this period that is historically significant, not just for Black publishing, but more generally for the development of the Black community in London.

This book, then, is presented as the first installment in a series of projects that, the author hopes, will allow us “to fully appreciate the risks Jessica and Eric took throughout their lives, standing up against the injustices of colonialism, campaigning for a living wage for low-paid workers and challenging discriminatory state policies and the criminal justice system.”

Jessica and I had our most meaningful collaborations during the early days of BLP, but our conversation that afternoon in September 2013 ranged over events in her life to a degree that I had not experienced before. She even shared, albeit with customary reluctance, a brief report on her deteriorating health as we walked to and from the doctor’s office near her home. But walk she did! So it was a shock when, a month later, I learnt that an unanticipated medical condition struck suddenly and robbed us of her vital presence. It is possible that the timing of these events has caused me to exaggerate the urgency she felt at having her and Eric’s story told in ways that would inspire “the youth”. However, I do believe that she would have been pleased with Dr Margaret Andrews’ outstanding work and excited at the prospects for the wider project. I feel honoured to have been invited to write this Preface.

Stanford University, CA, USA

December 2013