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A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

ERIC'S STORY

On 25 September 1929, one week after the New York Stock Market Crash, Eric Lindbergh Huntley was born in Kitty, Georgetown, in the colony of British Guiana. He was the youngest of ten children and, in common with Jessica, one of his siblings had died young. As a boy, Eric lived in a house his family owned in Bent Street. The US financial crisis had serious consequences for most western industrial countries, as many were dependent on the American market, but the UK was the most severely affected. As a British colony, BG felt the impact of the declining UK economy as the world faced the Great Depression, which lasted ten years. Eric thus spent his early years growing up in one of the country's most difficult periods.

When Eric was 11 or 12, his family relocated to the provincial town of New Amsterdam and he had to leave Smith Church school. This also meant leaving behind all the friends he had made, a loss he still feels. Though life was more settled for the family it still meant starting all over again.

He spent five years in New Amsterdam finishing his basic primary education. Pupils who were considered bright and academically capable of attending high school were allowed to continue their education at their primary school, being taught at a higher level than the primary-aged pupils around them. The higher-level schooling that Eric received was of a standard that enabled him to secure a job as a messenger at the New Amsterdam post office. The system of work there was structured in such a way that, through promotion and passing internal exams, a post-office messenger or other uniformed government employee could gain promotion and become a civil servant - a substantial and prestigious position.

As a young post-office worker, Eric observed the working conditions and relations within the post office and compared them to those in private companies and other government professions. The postmasters, usually older men, treated the younger postmen with respect, and seemed to take a genuine interest in their welfare and career development. Eric was aware that many workers in BG did not enjoy this type of relationship with their managers, and over time he became involved in trade-union activities, as he felt that such organisations had the power to bring

about greater equality for working people. Shortly after joining the Post Office Workers' Trade Union, he became its Assistant Secretary. Because of the lack of access to secondary education for the majority, and the ready supply of biased colonial literature, Eric decided to publish a bulletin for the post-office workers.

At the same time, early- and mid-20th-century anti-colonial and independence movements were also beginning to make an impact. India successfully gained its independence from the UK in 1947. A year later the Nationalist government came to power in South Africa and immediately began introducing apartheid laws. The African National Congress, which Nelson Mandela had joined in 1942, began its "Defiance Campaign" against the unjust and discriminatory laws. In the late 1950s Algeria and Cameroon were fighting to expel the French from their countries. Closer to home, new leaders and movements were emerging in the Caribbean region with mass support. In sum, colonised peoples were struggling not for mere representation in their colonial assemblies but for self-government, self-determination and independence. Eric used the bulletin to keep the workers in the postal service and elsewhere in British Guiana informed of developments 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.

For the most part, during the Second World War (1939–45), trade unions in British Guiana, similarly to those in the UK, cooperated with employers and the government, and did not make demands for better working conditions. Not until the late 1940s and 1950s did unions and political parties begin to agitate and assert their role in BG. Their actions accelerated after five unarmed striking workers at the Enmore sugar estate were shot dead. The strike had been supported by unions representing government workers, and workers in the sugar and other industries. Cheddi Jagan, who had helped raise funds for the striking workers and their families, emerged as a leading figure following the killing of the five workers. Dr Jagan was a member of the colonial Legislative Council that governed British Guiana and after the murders he formed the People's Progressive Party. He set out to educate people about the power of the sugar producers. He explained how the sugar producers' ownership of shares in minerals such as bauxite gave them control of the economy, and their shares in the press and radio, coupled with representation on the Legislative Council, meant that the sugar producers' interests dominated the country. This power was communicated to the working people by two letters: "BG" - the abbreviation became commonly used to stand for "Bookers Guiana" rather than "British Guiana". The British company Bookers owned most of the country's sugar estates and by 1950 they owned all but three of the plantations.

As Eric's activities with the Post Office Workers' Trade Union developed, his real education began. He learned about the appalling living and working conditions of sugar workers on the estates, and the awful conditions at foreign-owned mining and lumber companies. His trade union was affiliated to international unions, so he could make comparisons between BG workers' rights and those in other countries. It was not long before he and his union colleagues realised that, compared to other British subjects in the late 1940s, their country had a raw deal. The majority of the population had no right to vote, nor protection from police violence if they took strike action, and the economy was controlled by foreigners, who exported all the profits.

For Eric, taking a socialist position was the only option as a colonial subject, living in a resource-rich but foreign-owned country, where large numbers subsisted in poverty. Like many trade unionists, he was attracted to left-wing ideas and was influenced by Marxism, supporting the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." He believed in the fair distribution of wealth to enable everyone to fulfil their potential and contribute to society to the best of their ability.