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WRITE ON!

THE STORY OF BOGLE-L'OUVERTURE PUBLISHING

Jessica and Eric became publishers in 1968 after their friend Walter Rodney was banned from re-entering Jamaica by the Hugh Shearer government. The Huntleys met Walter when he was a PhD student of African History at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and they were living with the La Roses. The Huntleys enjoyed his company, and were fascinated by the contrast between his talent as a serious political theorist of Black Nationalism and his passion for dancing and going to parties. Walter became a regular visitor to their home at Windermere Road in South Ealing, where they had moved in 1965. His wife Pat and their eldest child, Shaka, as well as his younger brother Donald, had all stayed with the Huntleys.

Jessica and Ewart sought advice about publishing Walter's manuscript from John La Rose, who had published his first book of poems in 1966. They discussed layout, typeface and John suggested using a professional printer, the Villiers Press owned by John Sankey, whom La Rose had used. Jessica was convinced that this was a better option for the publication that would avoid the messiness and amateur production of the Gestetner. She and Ewart went to see John Sankey, who was concerned about how he would be paid, wary of the ability of a political group with no publishing or business experience to raise the printing cost (which would have been between £300 and £500). Jessica was confident about being able to get the required amount and Sankey agreed to print 1000 copies of *Groundings*, though asked for advance payment before the stock was released.

Jessica announced the plan to print the book at a meeting of the "editorial group", which also included Errol Lloyd, Chris Le Maitre, Fitzroy Griffith, Dale Saunders, Barbara Joseph and Earl Greenwood. It was an ad hoc group that had come together spontaneously, without formal structure. This collection of individuals were simply working together to produce the book but had not considered the matter of where they would get the money to print. As Jessica explained:

I said, "I will ask my friend, what about you asking your friend?" And everybody said their friends were not going to give any money, their friends didn't have any money to give and everybody, one and all, and right there I took up the phone and start ringing people. And people promised a, b, c, d pounds And in those days that's a lot of money. [Interview with Harry Goulbourne, 22 October 1992]

Eric, who was also there, recalls that when Jessica suggested raising money by asking friends, she meant Black friends; she did not want money from White people (though that changed over the years). During the meeting Jessica called a family friend, Mr R. B. O. Hart. He agreed to make a donation and wanted to know how much he was expected to give, offering £100. This was a huge sum in 1969, and gave the group confidence it would be possible to raise the money for the printing. Ewart also contributed £100 but those members of the group who were students had no excess funds. However, many volunteered their time or held parties to raise money, including the late Maurice Bishop, former premier of Grenada.

Producing the manuscript of *The Groundings with My Brothers* was clearly an enormous task for Ewart that would have required a great deal of sacrifice on his part, since at the time he was doing post-doctoral research at University College London. His role went beyond the preparation of the papers for publication. But with humility, he is quick to point out the contribution of others, expressing appreciation of Richard Small's editing skills in helping to shape the book and the importance of having Andrew Salkey's support.

Ewart's description of Jessica's role in coordinating the publication of *The Groundings with My Brothers* shows her to be a woman of great courage, with a good deal of persuasive skills and the ability to lead others. She had no experience of publishing and had only been living in the UK for 11 years, yet:

She...had a way of marshalling the energies of those around her to kind of fit into this vision that she must have had. So without her nothing could have happened. Her role would be things like talking to John La Rose to get John to speak to the printer and then she would go to Mr Sankey the printer and influence him to the point that he would have to align his ideas with hers. And these are things she did quite effortlessly without machinations or anything. If she wanted things to happen, they would happen, people believed in the things she was saying and some of us would follow.

The months of hard work paid off for the publishing group when the copies of the book finally arrived from the printers. Eric recalls the moment:

The Groundings With My Brothers was given a welcome like that of a new baby. We all fingered the pages, to make sure it would not fall apart, smelt the fresh ink on the paper (very evident in those days),we marvelled at the result of our labours. Walter Rodney was very pleased with the production...

The first edition was priced at six shillings and sixpence, although because it was a campaigning document most copies were given away. The group used their contacts to distribute the book to as wide an audience as possible in the UK and around the world, this included selling it on the streets. The book was essential reading for most forward-thinking Black people at the time.

Following the enthusiastic response from the Black community to their first publication and the experience they had gained with the distribution of the book, the group decided to set up a publishing house to promote radical Black writing. They discussed the prospective name at length. “Claudia Jones” was suggested, after the publisher of the UK’s first Black newspaper, the *West Indian Gazette*, but it was not a popular choice. They could not decide between two other suggestions. Richard Small proposed “L’Ouverture”, as in Toussaint, the great Haitian revolutionary, who in the 18th century trained and led an army of enslaved Africans that outmanoeuvred and defeated the French army. Chris Le Maitre suggested “Bogle”, in honour of the Baptist deacon who led the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Paul Bogle was one of the leaders of a group of small farmers who protested about lacking political representation. The Governor of Jamaica branded the protest a “rebellion”, arrested and hung the leaders and many of the protestors. Jessica thinks that it was Andrew Salkey who suggested combining the names of the two Black heroes, Bogle and L’Ouverture. The publishing group agreed, and using the legal expertise among them, notably Richard Small and Errol Lloyd, registered the publishing house as “Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications Limited” at Windermere Road, South Ealing.

The next title from Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications (BLP), in 1971, with a print run of 1000 copies and a cover designed by Errol Lloyd, was *One Love*, a collection of essays by four new Jamaican writers: Audvil King, Althea Helps, Pam Wint and Frank Hasfal. They were recommended by Andrew Salkey, who introduced and edited the publication. Andrew, a Jamaican by birth, came to England to study at the University of London in the early 1950s and became a prolific writer of novels, poetry and short stories for adults and children. He was the main presenter and writer-in-residence in the Caribbean section of the BBC World Service in London, a position he used to help Black writers to present their work. Jessica recalls his generosity in supporting new writers with the technical presentation of their work. She admired how easily he moved between Standard English and Jamaican Patois in his writing, encouraging new Caribbean writers to use their mother tongue. Linton Kwesi Johnson benefited from Andrew’s support. Linton’s first collection of poetry was published by BLP, after Andrew brought his manuscript to their attention. Apart from bringing new writers to BLP, Andrew brought his own works to be published and gave all proceeds from the sale of his books to the company.