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## Struggle, Conflict and Contention

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In the brief she sent me for this “conversation,” Donette posed some questions for me to address. I’ve prepared a script of the answers, but it would take more time than is available to deal with all of them, so I’ll just begin at the beginning and stop when I think I’ve used up my time.

So, to begin with, she asked: “*What did it mean for you to return to the UWI in the 1960s, and to be appointed Head of Department in 1969; to set up teaching a West Indian Literature curriculum; and to begin producing the object called West Indian criticism? Take us back to the intellectual fervor of the period.*”

Several questions, each deserving a separate answer, but all inter-related. I’ll have a stab at the common question they involve, and thereby hopefully suggest answers to one or other of the more particular questions.

But first a correction or two, or at least a qualification or two. The chief instigator for the introduction of a course in West Indian literature was Kenneth Ramchand, who joined the Department at Mona in the academic year 1968-69, already having done, at the University of Edinburgh, a PhD thesis which was to become his ground-breaking book *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*, and with his *West Indian Narrative: an Introductory Anthology* already published (1966). (A little West Indian literature had been squeezed into the curriculum by two of the more recent members of the Department, Bill Carr and Louis James, both Englishmen, and both of whom had already left by this time.)

However, I think it is safe to say that the fact that I had been appointed Head of Department of Department in October 1969, the first West Indian Head of the Department since its inception in 1950, was instrumental in the push for the introduction of West Indian literature in a substantial way. Indeed, my appointment as Head, in difficult, indeed controversial circumstances, was itself a sign of the changing times. But that’s a story in itself ....

To speak now of the “intellectual fervor” of the time might suggest a generally accepted sense of joy and elation at the changes that were taking place, the light and light-heartedness of a new dawn breaking on every face; but that would be the idealization of hindsight. There *was* a sense of urgency, and a radical mood in the air, but it was more a sense of struggle, conflict and contention, though exciting. Interestingly enough, the most palpable opposition to the new move came chiefly from within the Department of English itself, from what we might call the vested colonial interests.

With regard to the introduction of a full course in West Indian literature into the curriculum, it was not that fact alone that stirred heat, but also my being, as the newly appointed Head, West Indian, and at the age I was,<sup>1</sup> and at the level of seniority (or un-seniority) I was at – in fact, I was

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: Baugh was thirty-three years old at the time of his first appointment as Head of Department.

appointed Head and promoted in academic rank at the same time. These developments did not please some people.

Perhaps I can illustrate by way of an anecdote something of the mood of the moment. One result of my being appointed Head was that I was invited to give a talk to the Jamaica branch of the PEN Club in April 1970. The topic I chose was “English Studies in the University of the West Indies: Retrospect and Prospect.” It was subsequently published in *Caribbean Quarterly* at the invitation of the then editor, Dennis Scott. The lecture was open to the public. Given the topic, and given the circumstances of my appointment, I gave a copy of the paper, before I delivered it, to each member of the Department. The only one of them who attended the lecture was Mervyn Morris. None of the others ever said a word to me about the paper. I took the non-attendance and the absence of comment as a pointed statement, but I said nothing to any of them about it, because I wanted to maintain my own “posture.”

This is how the paper began: “The opinions which I shall express are my own opinions and do not necessarily represent the views of the University or the Department of English.” It’s clear to me now, if it wasn’t clear to me then, that the very fact that I felt I needed to say that meant something: I knew what I was up against.

And here are a couple snippets from the body of the paper:

I believe that for us to continue to approach English studies in the way we have inherited, to take over wholesale a program and approach developed, quite rightly, for the well-being [...] of a people not our own, and to think that we are thereby allowing ourselves the full benefit that a society can derive from the study of literature is simply to perpetuate our cultural blight.

I believe that we will have to change the orientation and scope of English studies. I believe that what it should be for us here in the West Indies now is not the study of the history of the literature of England [which is what it had been up to then], but the study of literature in English. By this I mean literature produced by anybody anywhere who writes in English. We have a world to choose from – Canada, the USA, Africa, Asia, Australia, the West Indies, and, of course, Great Britain. And in this program the study of West Indian literature [...] should naturally have a central and increasingly important place. [...] This new orientation will not mean the rejection of English literature [...]. The value and relevance to all men of the great works of English literature are indispensable, and so is their particular relevance to all whose language is English.

You can sense what the “vibes” were like. While I was clearly, so I thought, on one side, even that last sentence of the quotation was saying something I had to be careful about, because the mood of the time *around* the Department meant that was a dangerous thing to say.

Donette also asked me at what point did I decide that I would be primarily a critic rather than a poet. It wasn't really a case of *deciding*. Perhaps it was more a case of a lack of courage. And incidentally, the caption for a photograph that appeared in a Jamaican newspaper a few years ago identified me as “retired poet.” Anyway, although I had written one or two poems when I was at school, and when I got to the Mona campus I wrote one or two more, the idea that I would be a poet never really entered my head. I knew, coming from the family background that I had, that I needed to get a job. Teaching was in my blood, and although today the thing I should most like to be thought of as having been is a poet, that wasn't going to be on the cards for me.

However, gradually, before I finished my first-degree program, the possibility that I might indeed be a poet started to occur to me. I never saw any conflict between the two, i.e. being a critic-academic and being a poet. But, of course, having to mark students' papers, and having to write critical essays, did deflect me from the poetry at times. I've never had the pleasure of a great roll of creativity. Sometimes it seemed to be coming on, but I would have to interrupt it, to deal with a colleague's problems (when I was Head of Department), or to finish writing a critical essay for which there was a deadline, or to prepare my lecture for next day.

I think I've used up enough time, so I'll stop there for now.