

Walter Rodney: A Biography and Bibliography

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Walter Rodney was born in Georgetown, Guyana on 23 March 1942. His parents were workers who struggled to get him through primary school. He attended Queens College in Georgetown where he won an open scholarship to the University of the West Indies to read history. In secondary school he distinguished himself in extra-curricula activities. He was in the student cadet corps, as well as being a high jumper and a debater. At the University of the West Indies his debating techniques were improved and he was known as one of the sharpest debaters with a very cutting tongue. He was champion debater at the University and represented the University of the West Indies at the Pittsburg Debating Championships in the USA. While at university he was active in student politics and campaigned extensively in 1961 in the Jamaica Referendum on the West Indian Federation. His first writing on slavery and on Guyanese politics appeared between 1961 and 1963. It was at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, that he strengthened his skills at indoor-games such as bridge, scrabble and chess.

He got a First Class Honours Degree from the University of the West Indies in history and he proceeded to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1963. He came to Europe on a cargo boat, as part of the first prize he won in an IQ Test. It was his first visit to Europe. In London he did his Doctoral research on slavery on the Upper Guinea Coast and did painstaking work on the records of Portuguese merchants both in England and in Portugal. He learned Portuguese and Spanish during this period to add to his knowledge of French which he had learned at Queens College.

Before he finished his Doctorate in 1966 he married Patricia Henry from Guyana, who was studying in England.

In 1966 he obtained his Doctorate which was based on a thesis on the impact of slavery on the Upper Guinea Coast. This work was path-breaking in the way in which it analyzed the impact of slavery on the communities and the interrelationship between societies of the region and on the ecology of the region. This thesis was later refurbished and published under the title *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800*. Historians who study West Africa now see this work as a necessary guide for students of history of the

region. He published journal articles in the *Journal of African History* on 'Portuguese Attempts At Monopoly on the Upper Guinea Coast 1580-1650', in 1966, 'A Reconsideration of the Mane Invasions of Sierra Leone', in 1967, and 'African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression On The Upper Guinea Coast In The Context of the Atlantic Slave Trade', in 1966.

From London he went to teach in Tanzania for a year, but he soon returned with his wife to work in Jamaica where he lectured in the History Department at the University of the West Indies. He spent much of his free time with the Rastafarians in sessions called 'Groundings', enriching the Rastafarian understanding of African history and social change. When he attended the Black Writers' Conference in Montreal, Canada in October 1968, Hugh Shearer's Jamaica Labour Party Government banned him from returning to his job at the University. The riots and revolts in Kingston subsequent to his banning showed the deep respect that he had gained in the short 8 months period that he lived in Jamaica. His sessions with the Rastafarians were published in a pamphlet entitled *Grounding With My Bothers*.

After being banned from Jamaica, Walter Rodney returned to Tanzania to teach history at the University of Dar es Salaam. Here he was at the forefront of establishing an intellectual tradition which still today makes Dar es Salaam one of the centres of discussion of African politics and history. Out of the dialogue, discussions and study groups he deepened the Marxist tradition with respect to African politics, class struggle, the race question, African history and the role of the exploited in social change. It was within the context of these discussions that the book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was written.

In the same period, he wrote the critical articles on Tanzanian Ujamaa, imperialism, on underdevelopment, and the problems of state and class formation in Africa. Many of his articles which were written in Tanzania appeared in *Maji Maji*, the discussion journal of the TANU Youth League at the University. He worked in the Tanzanian archives on the question of forced labour, the policing of the countryside and the colonial economy. This work was later published as a monograph by Cornell University in 1976: *World War II and the Tanzanian Economy*. In Tanzania he developed close political relationships with those who were struggling to change the external control of Africa. He was very close to some of the leaders of liberation movements in Africa and also to political leaders of popular organizations of independent territories. Together with other Pan-Africanists he participated in discussing leading up to the Sixth Pan-African Congress, held in Tanzania, 1974. Before the Congress he wrote a piece: 'Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress: Aspects of the International Class Struggle in Africa, the Caribbean and America'.

In 1974 he left Tanzania to return to Guyana to work as Professor of History at the University of Guyana. On his way home to Guyana, he lectured extensively in the United States and there helped to clarify some of the questions of class and race within the context of African and black American struggle. This work on the question of class and race in black America was always important to him and he had lectured extensively in the

US in 1972. He was one of the main speakers at the African Liberation Day Rally, 25 May 1972 in San Francisco. Some of his most important papers in this period were reproduced by the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, Georgia.

In September 1974, he returned to Guyana to find that the Prime Minister had blocked his appointment with the University. Although the Government refused to allow him to teach, he decided to stay in the country in order to contribute his knowledge, experience and ideas to the Guyanese working people. Shortly after he had returned to Guyana he began to work among the workers, and he was one of those who was instrumental in the foundation of a new political organization called the Working People's Alliance in 1974. This Alliance was aimed at national unity and people's power and he directed his energies at trying to end the politicization of race which had violently ruptured Guyanese society. He exposed the falsehoods of Burnham's 'Cooperative Socialism' with such uncompromising vigour that soon even his wife was victimized by the state. She was also not allowed to get work.

Rodney's intellectual and political work was then focused primarily on the history of the Guyanese working class. He felt that such a history was needed to clarify the misconceptions which had been the basis of some of the racial divisions in the society. In the summer of 1977 he immersed himself in the records of the British Public Records Office to unearth the details of the material divisions which formed the basis of the Indian-African divide in the society. This work is now to be published as *A History of the Guyanese Working Class*. He had also compiled and edited a document called *Guyanese Sugar Plantations in the late 19th Century*. This work was part of his research into the plantation records in Guyana and in the United Kingdom.

Walter Rodney was an executive member of the Working People's Alliance and a full-time organizer of the party in Georgetown. He was loved by all sections of the working class and even by some of those classes who had been mobilized against him by the pernicious campaign of Burnham. Walter Rodney's efforts were to enrich the political culture of Guyana for the expression and the strengthening of working class organizations such as the Working People's Alliance. As a believer in the self-emancipation of the working class he stood for a new kind of openness, honesty and plain-speaking which has inspired a new tradition in Guyanese politics. One of his last major academic appointments outside of Guyana was at the University of Hamburg. There he also made his mark on academic colleagues who had already seen the importance of his work and had translated *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* into German. This book has also been translated into Portuguese and Spanish.

In 1979 he was charged with arson after a fire destroyed the headquarters of the ruling People's National Congress in Guyana. After being held in prison for a short while, Walter Rodney and his three co-defendants were granted bail after widespread national and international protest at their being arrested.

Though he was on trial, at great personal risk he and the others continued

work in the WPA and intensified efforts to remove the dictatorial regime of Forbes Burnham. Two speeches given at mass rallies in Georgetown during this period by Rodney have been reproduced as pamphlets: *The Struggle Goes On* and *People's Power, No Dictator*. These speeches, along with a short piece in *Transition*, were to be his last major contribution to the discussion of the form of state which should emerge or could emerge in a liberated Guyana.

Rodney had been invited to Zimbabwe to attend the Independence Celebrations, but the Burnham Government prevented him from attending. However, with exemplary bravery he was able to disguise himself and to go to Zimbabwe, after the celebrations. He met the Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, who asked Walter Rodney to stay in Zimbabwe to set up a research institute there. Rodney declined the offer, saying that he was committed to return to Guyana to stand trial and continue the political struggle.

On his way back to Guyana he gave a seminar for his friends and colleagues in Hamburg where he had stayed in 1978 as a visiting professor. Wherever he spent time teaching, those who met and worked with him see his political and personal legacy as a mandate.

That Walter Rodney was an internationalist, a humanist, a Marxist and an independent-minded thinker was clear to all those who met him and came into contact with his work. His struggle, together with the WPA, against oppression, racial discrimination, exploitation and violence will be carried on. His fight for 'bread and justice' was based on a deep respect for and love of the people.

At the end of May 1980, he returned to Georgetown after a short stay in Africa and Europe. It was announced the trial would begin on 3 June. However, it was adjourned until 20 August 1980. On Friday, 13 June 1980, Walter Rodney was killed at the hands of the dictatorial regime by a bomb exploding in the car used by himself and his brother, Donald.

From the WPA Statement of 14 June 1980:

Our talented, inspiring, committed and much-loved brother Walter Rodney died last night, 13 June, at the hands of the People's National Congress rulers. He is the third Working People's alliance victim and the first of the highest leadership of the party. He is the fifth political murder victim of the PNC State, including Teekah, the Minister of Education, and Father Darke, Catholic priest. One of the most politically intelligent opponents of the regime has been removed. A prophet of the self-emancipation of the working people has been silenced. A partisan of the liberation of all people is no more. The WPA and his comrades-in-arms will carry on his work.

The impact Walter Rodney made on his countrymen and -women was expressed clearly in the participation of nearly 35,000 people at his funeral on 23 June. Although the Burnham regime had threatened to dismiss from work anyone taking part in the Memorial Service, people followed the horse-drawn coffin, singing and shouting their condemnation of this cowardly murder.

Walter Rodney will live wherever and whenever men and women stand up to fight injustice, to declare their love of freedom and goodness.

A Selective Bibliography of Works by Walter Rodney

On African History

- A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970).
How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications and Tanzanian Publishing House, 1972; Howard University Press, Washington DC, 1974) also German, Spanish and Portuguese editions.
West Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1967).
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 'State Formation and Class Formation in Tanzania', *Maji Maji*, (Dar es Salaam), 1973.
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 'Class Contradictions in Tanzania' in *The State in Tanzania*, edited by Haroub Othman, (Heinemann, London, 1979).
 'Education and Tanzanian Socialism' in *Revolution by Resolution*, edited by I. Resnick (Longmans, London, 1968).

On Socialist Transformations

- 'Declaration: Implementation Problems', *Mbioni*, Journal of Kivukoni College, Dar es Salaam, August 1967.
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'Will The World Listen Now?' an interview with Walter Rodney in *Guyana Forum*, Vol.1, No.3, June 1980.

On Politics in the Caribbean — Caribbean History (including Guyana)

Some Thoughts on the Colonial Economy of the Caribbean, delivered at the Caribbean Unity Conference, Howard University, Washington DC, April 21, 1972, A New Beginning Pamphlet.

Guyanese Sugar Plantations in the Late 19th Century — A Contemporary Description from the Argosy, edited and introduced by Walter Rodney, (Release Publishers, 258 Forshaw Street, Georgetown, Guyana 1979).

A History of the Guyanese Working Class, (John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1980).

'Contemporary Trends in the English-Speaking Caribbean', *Black Scholar*, Vol.7, No.1, 1975.

'The Colonial Economy: Observations on British Guiana and Tanganyika', *Institute of Commonwealth Studies Seminar Papers*, 1977.

'Immigrants and Racial Attitudes in Guyanese History', *Institute of Commonwealth Studies Seminar Papers*, 1977.

'Internal and External Constraints on the Development of Guyanese Working Class', *Georgetown Review*, Vol.1, No.1, August 1978.

On Pan-Africanism

'Towards the Sixth Pan-African Congress, Aspects of the International Class Struggle in Africa, the Caribbean and America' in *Pan-Africanism: Struggle Against Neo-Colonialism and Imperialism*, edited by H. Campbell, (Afro Carib Publications, Toronto, 1975).

On Rastafari

The Groundings With My Brothers (with an introduction by Richard Small), (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, London, 1969), reprinted in 1970, 1971, 1975 (new introduction by Omawale in 1975).

An appeal, signed by many Africanists, is being circulated to urge an Internal Commission of Inquiry into Walter Rodney's death. Those who would like to contribute funds or be associated with setting up such a commission are asked to contact the **Los Angeles Committee for Academics in Peril (LACAP)**, PO Box 25722, Los Angeles, California 90025, USA.

TRADE UNION HUNGER STRIKE IN MAURITIUS ENDS IN VICTORY

The following message, reminding us of the importance of international solidarity was recently received:

On 19 September 1980 the 13-day long hunger strike of thirteen trade unionists came to an end as the government agreed to the immediate employment in the Development Works Corporation of all workers sacked in the August 1979 strike movement (see *Review* Nos.8 and 15/16). The victory of the hunger strike was a direct result of the massive popular mobilization that developed around the thirteen determined union leaders. Every day, workers from different sites would demonstrate with banners and posters in the streets. People from poor villages and poor city areas would also form up in processions, chanting and carrying slogans. And perhaps more important were the evening demonstrations. People all over Mauritius began to hold vigils grouped around home-made lighted torches. Often these would become night-time processions to the trade union offices where the hunger strike took place. There was almost unanimous support from all local social organisations. Every trade union and every club, and even many religious organisations expressed their support — by visits, letters, demonstrations, and press communiques. Support from abroad in terms of telegrams, both to the hunger strikers and to the Prime Minister, and of donations to the support committee, helped a great deal.