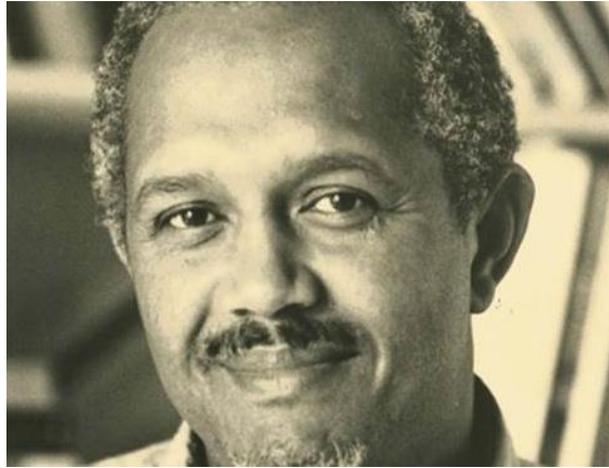


“In Celebration of my Father, John La Rose – His Life, Works & the George Padmore Institute”



**7.15pm
Friday, 26 February, 2016
Pan Afrikan Society Community Forum PASCf,
365 Brixton Road
London SW9 7DA**

Greetings, and thank you for attending this presentation. Thanks also to Brother Cecil and the PASCf for inviting me to speak.

I will be talking tonight about my father, John La Rose. He was a smiling, radical warrior. He was deadly serious about the struggle for cultural and social change, for racial equality and social justice and for human progress. He was also a poet with two volumes of poems. *Foundations*, and *Eyelets of Truth within me*. He believed passionately in combining culture with politics in the struggle for change.

Today I will be talking about his ideology and political practice in two periods – the anti-colonial struggle, and the struggles here in Britain for social justice from the 1960s onwards. I will be talking about John, not as my father, but as a leader of a movement.

He believed that leaders should be representative of their supporters and could be criticised in a democratic and healthy organisation. In the sometimes deadly struggle for change, we should be developing new leaders all the time. John developed these ideas as a young activist in colonial Trinidad and Tobago. He used to state *“We did not come alive in Britain!”*.

I want to start with part of a poem by the great Guyanese poet, Martin Carter, from the poem, *“Look at your hands”*. The poetry of Martin Carter was very influential in the anti-colonial struggle in the Caribbean.

*“I do not sleep to dream,
But dream to change the world”*

John said of this poem *“The last stanza was like an anthem of our hope and aspirations for a world in post-war convulsion. In the dream, in the imagination... are the beginnings. We dreamt to change the world”*.

John La Rose was born in 1927 in the cocoa-producing country town of Arima, Trinidad and Tobago. He won a scholarship to the elite St Mary's College, in the capital Port of Spain. He used the colonial education he received against the British colonialists who ran the islands. In his teens he joined the Arima Literary Group, and there, was introduced to "*Marxism and modern English poetry*". This marked the genesis of a radical political thinker and cultural activist.

What influenced him in this period, were the general strikes and insurrections up and down the Caribbean for better pay and conditions during the capitalist crisis of the 1930s that marked the beginnings of the Caribbean trade union movement. This threw up many political figures like Elma Francois from the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) and Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler, leader of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU). There was the international work of Marcus Garvey and his UNIA organisation and George Padmore's writings journals and his work for Pan-Africanism. There was also the cultural influence of the Beacon magazine, published by Caribbean intellectuals like CLR James, Albert Gomes and Alfred Mendes amongst others. These were cultural figures who looked to the richness of Caribbean art and culture and gave it real validation. This was from literature; poetry, criticism and novels to folk culture; from Kaiso to steelband.

John joined a group of political youths at the Trinidad Youth Council in Cocorite. In this organisation were his lifelong comrades in struggle, in particular Lennox Pierre, Kelvin Scoon, Karl Pratt, Pearl Nunes (later Pearl Connor-Mogotsi), Chris Le Maitre and Irma Hilaire, who later became his first wife Irma La Rose. Their programme was similar to the Beacon magazine, in that they showed a critical and practical appreciation of Caribbean culture, literature, poetry, music and art. These young people made a big impact. One of their tasks was to work with the steelband movement. They proposed a peace plan between the warring urban youth groups. This work laid the basis for the formation of the unified Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO), made up of the best player from each steelband. Island-wide fundraising allowed TASPO to attend the 1951 Festival of Britain on the South Bank in London, where they became the sensation of the festival.

John believed strongly in the organisation of workers in trade unions as a battering ram for change. He was elected executive member of the Federated Workers Trade Union, (FWTU), and through that developed relationships with the "*Rebel*" faction within the Oilfield Workers Trade Union. Working with the Rebels in OWTU, they were able to form a strategy to elect progressive leaders of the union. This strategy has produced a progressive leadership of the OWTU to this day establishing a strong tradition of radicalism in the OWTU for decades.

In the 1940s, John was a founding member of the Marxist group Workers Freedom Movement (WFM). In 1952 WFM joined with other groups to form the West Indian Independence Party (WIIP). He became the General Secretary of the WIIP, and networked with similar organisations throughout the Caribbean region. This organisation was feared by the British colonial authorities to the point where when Claudia Jones was to be deported from the USA, the Trinidad colonial authorities ensured that she was sent to London, not Port of Spain. John was an electoral candidate for the WIIP in the 1956 pre-independence general election taking on the popular People's National Movement, (PNM) led by Eric Williams. The WIIP was heavily defeated, and John's personal life became precarious. He was depicted as the devil in the Catholic newspaper and was not allowed to marry inside a Church. He was under permanent secret service surveillance and employers were warned not to hire him. His activist wife Irma held a Venezuelan passport, and the young family moved to Caracas in Venezuela, where a leftist government had recently come to power, and welcomed the young family. They carried on their political work, keeping in touch with groups all over the Caribbean region from the Venezuelan exile.

John decided to study Law in London, and emigrated in 1961 with his nephew. His young family joined him later, but he separated from his first wife a couple of years later. They arranged regular access to his two sons. John brought experience, strategies and ideas with him to the political and cultural struggles of Britain of the 1960s.

In 1966, he formed the publishing house New Beacon Books with his then partner, Sarah White. He brought a clear vision to the project. Those ideas have been stated for many years in New Beacon's catalogues. I quote "*Growing up in colonial society made John La Rose acutely aware that colonial policy was based on a deliberate withholding of information from the population. There was also discontinuity of information from generation to generation. Publishing was therefore a vehicle to give independent validation to our own culture, history, politics – a sense of self – and to make a break with discontinuity.*" The way New Beacon started was based on John's ideological practice, which is embodied in the phrase, "*Start where you are*".

New Beacon bookshop started as a box of books, then developed into bookshelves on one wall in the front room of his house, and finally a bookshop with a store front at 76 Stroud Green Road, Finsbury Park, north London. All his sons worked in the bookshop. John was always conscious of developing young people and challenging them to join the struggle. New Beacon taught me "*everything was possible*". John's slow methodical vision for organising New Beacon meant the bookshop could be a base for independent action. Financial independence was very important and the key. He felt independent action could only come with financial independence. New Beacon refused to apply for or take government grants during the period of "projects" and "urban aid". This money swept up and then swept away many radical Black organisations. The workers in New Beacon like Janice Durham and myself, committed ourselves to low wages for decades to ensure New Beacon's survival. Many others volunteered their time and skills for free.

John's vision drove New Beacon to publish books which reconnected with the past, and looked forward to the future. Titles like:

Non-fiction

- *Marcus Garvey, 1887-1940*, **Adolph Edwards**
- *Labour in the West Indies, the birth of a workers' movement*, **Arthur Lewis**
- *Being Black: Selections from Soledad Brother, George Jackson and Soul on ice*, Eldridge Cleaver, edited by **Roxy Harris**
- *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar*, **JJ Thomas**
- *History of the Voice*, **Kamau Brathwaite**
- *For the Liberation of Nigeria*, **Yusufu Bala Usman**
- *How the West Indian Child is made educationally sub-normal in the British school system*, **Bernard Coard**
- *Barrel of a pen: resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya*, **Ngugi wa'Thiongo**

Novels

- *Minty Alley*, **CLR James**
- *Jane and Louisa will soon come home*, **Erna Brodber**
- *Pitch Lake*, **Alfred Mendez**,

Poetry

- *Poems of succession*, **Martin Carter**
- *The Myth of Freedom and other poems*, **Anai Klueljang**
- *I am becoming my Mother*, **Lorna Goodison**

Criticism

- *The Poetry of Nicholas Guillen*, **Dennis Sardina**

At the same time in 1966, John used the policy of joining with like-minded people to carry out political and cultural work. He founded the *Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM)* with Kamau Brathwaite, poet and critic from Barbados, and Andrew Salkey, writer and broadcaster from Jamaica. Between 1966 and 1972 public meetings, discussions and analyses were organised by CAM. They brought together poets, novelists, writers, painters and sculptors from Africa and the Caribbean based in London. They validated their art and its source. They took ideas and innovations back to their home countries or developed these rich ideas in Britain.

As in the cultural area, John strived for political unity and action at all times, to build movements around specific issues and also to recognise and educate through struggle, an understanding of how our oppressors work both locally in Britain and globally. This can be divided into areas of State oppression and economic exploitation. His analysis of Britain was that it consisted of a number of national identities – the English, the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish – within each of these groups there were political struggles and interests. The Black community was one of these identities in Britain with the same conflicting interests. For progressive groups to advance, they had to form alliances with similar groups across British national identities.

The issues facing the Black population were police oppression and murder, poor education for all in the working class, discriminatory housing and lack of employment due to racism. John was involved in anti-bussing and anti-streaming campaigns in the education system. He founded the *Caribbean Education and Community Workers' Association (CECWA)*, which campaigned against the placing of droves of Black children in ESN schools. He founded one of the first Black supplementary schools, the George Padmore and Albertina Sylvester Supplementary Schools. These schools later mushroomed into a national Black education movement. He initiated the *Black Parents Movement (BPM)* and the *Black Youth Movement (BYM)* which campaigned for better education, and organised campaigns against police brutality and fit-ups in London, Manchester and Bradford. The strategy for these struggle campaigns against the police came from the experience of the *Mangrove Nine* trial in 1971 where the defendants organised both legally and politically and won against the Metropolitan Police. With Franco Rosso, John made the film *Mangrove Nine*, to record that experience. This is still available on DVD.

John was committed to practical Pan-Africanism. He was always meeting with groups from the continent in London and closely followed the politics of post-independent Africa. He was interested in supporting radical groups and individuals who were not just happy with following the post-independence neo-colonial model. New Beacon Books was used as a base for a number of pressure and monitoring groups campaigning for change and against repression in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and the Sudan. The book shop was also a base for the various campaigns including those about the Caribbean, especially Guyana, Antigua and the tragedy of the Grenada Revolution. Finally there was the *European Action for Racial Justice*, with activists based in Europe. During this period the BPM and BYM had branches in West London, Hackney and Manchester. During the campaigns, we worked closely with other groups and John proposed an alliance of these groups, and we called it simply, *The Alliance*. It consisted of all the BPM and BYM groups, along with *Race Today Collective* and the *Bradford Black Collective*. It was the Alliance that in 1981 responded to the murder of 13 young Black people at a firebombed 16th birthday party in New Cross, which we called the "*New Cross Massacre*". John was elected as chair of the *New Cross Massacre Action Committee* at the regular Monday assemblies at the Moonshot Club in Pagnell Street. John's policy as chair, was to unite the various Black organisations that were part of that movement including *BUFP*, *PACM Headstart* and many others. This united front organised the "*Black People's Day of Action*" on 1981 with over twenty thousand demonstrators who marched from New Cross to Hyde Park.

New Beacon Books joined forces with *Bogle L'Ouverture Publications* and *Race Today Publications*, to form the *International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books*. This took place annually in London, Manchester and Bradford between 1982 and 1995. John's idea was to bring together similar publishers and organisations from all five continents to meet, exchange and support each other's activities. There would be the *Book Fair* itself to give exposure to people's books, pamphlets, art and magazines to audiences in Britain. There was also a *Book Fair Festival* which exchanged and explored ideas on politics, literature, art and culture. There was an International Poetry Evening, film screenings and once a play. We analysed the then coming technological revolution. John concluded that in a rampant capitalist system, workers should be fighting for a "*Shorter working week, shorter working life with more time for rest and recreation*". This would be like how people had to fight for the 5-day week and the 8-hour working day in our recent past.

In 1991, John founded the *George Padmore Institute (GPI)* which was to be the archive for the struggle of people of African, Caribbean and Asian descent in Britain and Europe. It was to be both an educational resource as well as a practical and political guide for future generations. The GPI is based on two floors in the same building as New Beacon bookshop. There is the archive itself and meeting rooms used for many programmes of political and cultural events. The GPI is a charity managed by a board of trustees. In conjunction with New Beacon Books, the GPI has produced a number of publications including *Changing Britannia: Life experiences with Britain*, *Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books*, and last year, John La Rose *Unending Journey selected writings*.

On 28th February 2006, ten years ago, John La Rose passed on. His death left a deep chasm in our movement. In 2005 before his death, the great film maker Horace Ove was able to produce a documentary on my father's life called "*Dream to Change the World*" which is available on DVD. Finally in May 2015, at the Islington Museum, London, the GPI mounted the exceptional exhibition "*Dream to Change the World: the Life and Legacy of John La Rose*". We hope to get this powerful exhibition seen nationally and internationally in various formats in the future.

John La Rose was an intellect in the service of the people. His ideas and practices have left us with a rich legacy to build on and develop.

Thank you.

Michael La Rose
Chair of the George Padmore Institute