Marika Sherwood


Henry Sylvester Williams’s was one of the most unlikely and remarkable lives, even for a child of the African diaspora. Born in Barbados in 1867 (not Trinidad in 1869, as previously thought), he accompanied his working-class parents to Trinidad, where he grew up in Arouca with five younger siblings. He barely acquired a secondary education, but in subsequent years became not only a qualified barrister in London, but also the first black man admitted to the bar in Cape Town, one of the first two elected black borough councilors in London, the publisher and editor of a monthly magazine, the author of a booklet, the representative—at the seat of the British Empire—of various Southern and West African political organizations and pressure groups, and the convener of the first Pan-African Conference (London 1900), three years after he had founded the African Association, comprising continental and diaspora Africans. He died in Trinidad in 1911 at age 44, less than three years after returning home from his long sojourn abroad.

He was long forgotten and under-appreciated after his death, even in Trinidad and even by people who should have known better. The self-serving and prolific W.E.B. Du Bois, who attended the 1900 conference, barely mentions Williams. C.L.R. James (Williams’s countryman), “that intellectual prodigy and indefatigable delver into the Caribbean past, ... seemed somewhat uncertain exactly what Williams had done before and after July 1900” (Hooker 1975:2).

Williams was resurrected almost forty years ago by two pioneering biographies—the first (1975) by J.R. Hooker, the American historian and biographer of George Padmore (another Trinidadian giant of the Pan-African movement), and the other by the Trinidadian journalist, Owen Mathurin (1976). Though valuable in their contribution and noble in their goals, both books suffer from the common affliction of pioneering work—incompleteness, unfinished business. This flaw, however, becomes understandable when one considers the dearth of archival material on Williams. To their credit, both men frankly acknowledged the lacunae in their work. Mathurin remarked that his writing of Williams’s biography was “seriously handicapped by the limited amount of material readily available. There are, for example, few letters and personal documents and writings” (1976: x). Hooker was brutally frank:

> I am aware of the weaknesses in my reconstruction, though I trust none will fault my sympathies with my subject. There are certain bibliographical possibilities, requiring time and effort I could not afford, which others

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may act upon, at least I hope they will. I have chosen to include several quite lengthy extracts from obscure publications, so that that this essay will remain of some use to students, if only as a sort of primary source.

1975:2, my emphasis

Many of these handicaps have not dissipated with time. No large files of Williams’s letters, and no journals or diaries have been discovered since the biographies by Hooker and Mathurin. Nevertheless, partly drawing on their pioneering work—including interviews with subjects, now long-dead, quoted in their books—Marika Sherwood has provided the definitive biography of Henry Sylvester Williams, a subject worthy of her Herculean effort. An independent and independent-minded scholar, Sherwood has been at the forefront of some of the most exciting developments in black British and African diaspora history in the U.K. for over a generation.

Through a series of fifteen tightly-packed chapters, often having only scattered archival fragments to draw on, Sherwood follows Williams unblinkingly from his childhood and young adulthood in Trinidad (c. 1867–1891), through his sojourn in North America, London, South Africa, his return to London, his visit to West Africa, and his final return to Trinidad in 1908, where he died. Throughout the story, she is eager not only to tell of Williams’s doings and thoughts (where discernible), but also the context (including the racial climate) in which he operated.

Sherwood managed to uncover aspects of Williams’s life that were previously unknown and long regarded as unknowable. For instance, between 1891 and 1896 Williams lived in the United States and Canada, first living in New York City (though shipping records do not register his landing there) and studying at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia between 1893 and 1894. Beyond this, little was known of the five years before he turned up in London. Now we have a more filled out, if still incomplete, picture of Williams’s life in North America, which Sherwood meticulously put together through an imaginative use of archival fragments (Chapter 2). He almost certainly worked as a Pullman railway porter in both the United States and Canada. We have a clearer idea of the people he probably met, particularly influential African American activists, many of whom reappeared in connection with the Pan African Conference. Sherwood clarifies the Dalhousie University experience and the reasons for his going to London in 1896 and provides the most comprehensive analysis of Williams in South Africa and his active commitment in operating as a representative of aggrieved Southern and West African groups (see especially Chapters 10, 11, 13, and 14).
Though clearly sympathetic toward Williams during his struggles, defeats, and accomplishments, Sherwood is vigilant in registering his flaws, documenting the moments when he seemed rather naïve about British imperial intentions, especially in South Africa, and when he revealed an all too typical New World African condescension toward his continental African “brothers and sisters” and the need for their “civilization.” What emerges is a flawed Williams, but no less an energetic, selfless, and courageous fighter against injustice, who despite everything managed to carry himself with uncommon grace and dignity.

It must be hoped that this book will soon be published in a paperback edition, since the price of the current edition confines it almost exclusively to well-heeled university and college libraries. A republication would also allow a few annoying copy-editing oversights to be rectified, including the persistent misnaming of Edward Wilmot Blyden as Edmund Wilmot Blyden.

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References
