James Davis

Eric Walrond: A Life in the Harlem Renaissance and the Transatlantic Caribbean.

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Eric Walrond led a peripatetic life, residing in a variety of locations, including British Guiana, Barbados, Panama, New York City, and various cities in France and England. During several periods of his life almost nothing is known of his whereabouts and activities. Nevertheless, James Davis manages, by combing the records and existing correspondence and providing biographical information gleaned from Walrond's writing, to stitch together a plausible narrative of this enigmatic author's life. The book is particularly strong on Walrond's most productive period, 1918–27, when he lived in New York and published his highly acclaimed collection of short stories, *Tropic Death* (1926), and 1927–66, when only scrappy bits of information are known about him. Much of this material has come from Davis's visits to the places where Walrond lived.

The book chronicles Walrond's life from his birth in British Guiana in 1898 to his youth growing up in Barbados and then Panama. Walrond's father, a tailor, moved to the Panama Canal Zone after economic upheaval in Barbados. Davis's discussion of Walrond's life in the highly segregated city of Colón, where discrimination against Blacks was rampant, and the background on Walrond's beginnings as a reporter for the important English-language Panamanian paper, the *Star and Herald* are first-rate, and Walrond's decade in New York City is richly detailed. Davis describes Walrond's apprenticeship in Marcus Garvey's popular newspaper *Negro World* and his eventual involvement with the National Urban League's flagship publication *Opportunity*. The latter experience would foster his entry into the fledgling New Negro Movement. The chapter on *Tropic Death* (a collection of ten short stories set in the Caribbean) provides an insightful close reading of the book, which is Walrond's major literary claim and one of the earliest pieces written largely in the Caribbean vernacular. Davis explains the imposing linguistic challenges the work posed (and still poses) for its largely American audience.

Davis uncovers new material on Walrond's long sojourn in Europe. After winning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928 to do research in the Caribbean for *The Big Ditch*, a book on the building of the Panama Canal, Walrond never returned to the United States except for one short visit in 1931. He lived mainly in England, where most of his activities remain uncertain. Davis is particularly effective in documenting Walrond's years as a "voluntary" patient at the Roundway Hospital, a psychiatric facility, during 1952–57. While under treatment, Walrond published a wealth of material in the hospital newsletter, *The Roundway Review*, including numerous stories and fifteen installments of "The Second Battle," a

variation of *The Big Ditch*. Although these pieces are uneven in quality, as Davis forcefully argues, they help to refute the notion that Walrond's literary contribution was almost nonexistent after he left America.

The book's one drawback is its thin treatment (just 11 pages) of the thirteen years Walrond spent in British Guiana and Barbados, a period that greatly influenced much of his later work. Nevertheless, Davis has done a fine job filling a number of the gaps about Walrond, in part by establishing his connection with the many well-known figures who were part of his life, such as Countee Cullen, Shirley Graham (later the wife of W.E.B. Du Bois), and Carl Van Vechten. Skillfully weaving these portraits into his highly readable narrative, Davis provides a multifaceted look into this complex man who until recently has generally been thought of as merely a fringe, if intriguing, member of the Harlem Renaissance, but who, as interest in transnationalism and the black diasporic community has increased, has become the focus of heightened interest.

Disclaimer: In the acknowledgments to his book, Davis writes that "my greatest debt is to Louis Parascandola and Carl Wade."¹ While this is very gracious, it is a clear overstatement. In his excellent, painstakingly researched book, he has gone well beyond our preliminary work situating Walrond as both a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance and a pivotal player in the trans-Atlantic Caribbean, and helping to elevate this long-neglected author to his rightful place in studies of the diaspora.

Louis J. Parascandola

Department of English, Long Island University, Brooklyn NY 11201, U.S.A.

lparasca@liu.edu

¹ See Louis J. Parascandola (ed.), *Winds Can Wake Up the Dead* (1998); Louis J. Parascandola & Carl A. Wade (eds.), *In Search of Asylum* (2011) and *Eric Walrond* (2012).