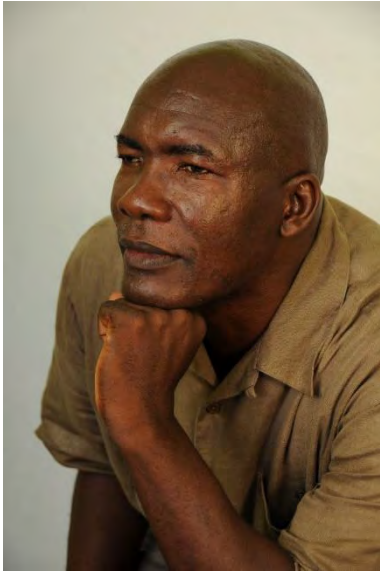


On The Literary Works of Anderson Reynolds

by Modeste Downes

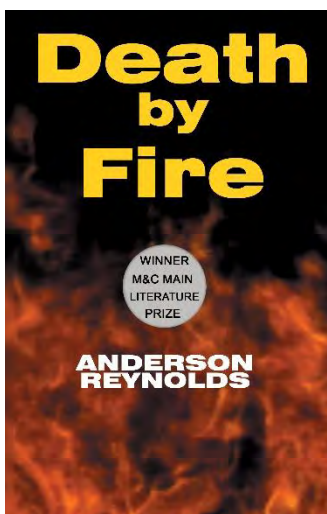
West Indian identity, particularly against the background of colonialism, is a theme that both links and typifies a great number of Caribbean writers in the major genres of the novel, poetry, and theatre. Nobel Laureate, Sir Derek Alton Walcott's poetry as well as several of his plays; George Lamming (see *In the Castle of My Skin*); Trinidad's V.S. Naipaul (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) and other works; Martinique's Aime Cesaire—all have substantially addressed the subject.



The Caribbean archipelago is a string of islands connected geographically and historically, and because they share the common experience of their inhabitants having been displaced from their natural environment, transported to unknown lands, enslaved and colonized, have had to undergo the difficult challenge of reforming their personalities, redefining themselves as a people, and reconstructing an orientation in relation to the space they occupy, particularly in terms of Emancipation and the fairly recent experience of Independence.

Anderson Reynolds is one of a new wave of St. Lucian writers who have seemingly undertaken the task of continuing where their predecessors left off. And not without reason. For there seems to be concern that not enough is being done to document and preserve his island's history, not only for posterity, but to inform the current crop of young citizens on whom all this history, culture and even recent developments are completely lost, growing up as they are in an environment where they are constantly bombarded by North American culture, values and the new consumerism beamed via 24-hour television.

Each of Reynolds' award-winning books, *Death by Fire*, *The Struggle for Survival: an historical, political and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia* and *The Stall Keeper*,



must be seen as heroic attempts at contributing toward the reversal of the negative effects of Americanization on the consciousness of particularly St. Lucian youth, especially in light of a fledgling independence, and the sharing of a history that is crawling dangerously on the edge of endangerment.

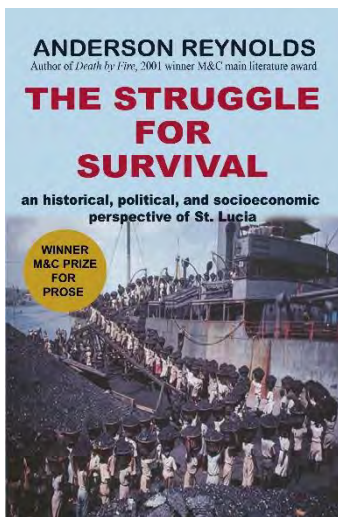
Death by Fire

Set on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia in the earliest era of post colonialism and Emancipation when its various 'native' peoples harbour fear and ill will towards each other, *Death by Fire* combines a major plot with several sub plots to create "an epic novel in which natural calamities, historical events, supernatural forces, and betrayed love combine in deciding

the fate of its characters". *Death by Fire* has echoes of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, in that where "The Village...is the central character..." and that "When we see the Village as collective character, we perceive another dimension to the individual wretchedness of daily living..." In the narrative of Reynolds' *Death by Fire*, individual characters who populate the pages represent different segments and character traits reflecting the actual circumstances of the society at that time. In that sense one might concede that the novel is "a profound statement on the nature of fate and the forces that shape (a) society". Or, as one commentator summarized, it is "a journey back into St. Lucian life...(which) paints the dark side of the struggle for survival of a young country."

The Struggle for Survival

Reynolds' penchant for the historical narrative is carried over into his second major publication, the previously cited *The Struggle for Survival*. It is a beautifully crafted, well



researched and scholarly narrative in which the author captures a high point in his country's unfolding history—a period of upheaval in the vital banana industry that was once the lifeblood of the island's meager economy. The writer introduces 1993 as an ominous date: it is the year in which the European Community becomes a unified market. It is ominous for the banana industry—and for the thousands of farmers and families that depend on it—because at this precise moment market prices are plummeting, sinking farmers into protest and disunity and virtual chaos. After weeks of mounting tension between government and various stakeholders, two young farmers are shot and killed by police, painting the ironic picture that just when unity and cooperation is demanded, factional conflicts intrude.

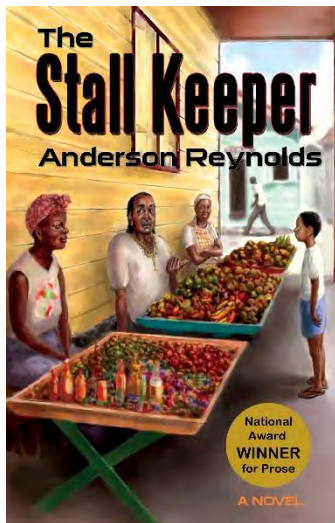
In *The Struggle for Survival*, Reynolds makes the narrative all the more palatable by giving the reader an almost blow by blow account of what is undoubtedly, and literally, the most incendiary period in the history of the agricultural sector. Further, what would have otherwise been tomorrow's *history*, is made to read as current events, with real, live characters.

By strange coincidence, as we watch some of the most dramatic political and social events unfolding in the Middle East and parts of Africa, one is reminded of the saying, 'Those who would not hear will feel', to suggest that those leaders who fail to listen to the protesting voice of their people will feel the weight of their numbers and the shifting tide against their grip on power. *The Struggle for Survival* is said to give "the feeling that the plight of the farmers was nothing less than an allegory of the history of the island, and the deaths an omen of the future of the industry". While another writer opines it is "history that reads like a novel", the late Prime Minister, Sir John Compton, who is infamously fingered as having sanctioned the shooting of the striking farmers, describes the book as a "well documented economic history of the banana industry..." However, as if to anticipate my observation about the importance of Reynolds' contribution to social

consciousness and the anti-Americanism that so distracts our present generation, it is a local poet and one in the vanguard of the literary arts who, I think, best captures the relevance of that writing: "***The Struggle for Survival***...is an easy-to-read, intriguing story of the social and political development of St. Lucia. The book lays the basis for critical examination of the legacy of European plantocracy and a determination of modern history's perception of the descendant of the African slaves in the Caribbean as victor or victim in our political destiny."

The Stall Keeper

Unlike his first two books which seemed to focus on the island as a whole, in his third book, ***The Stall Keeper***, Reynolds zeros in on his hometown of Vieux Fort, to provide an intense examination of the town. The novel is set against the backdrop of the World War II period when the Americans established a military base in the town's environs that overnight transformed Vieux Fort into a boomtown of excesses and employment for all, but at the same time producing what James Fallow has coined a "damaged culture." So much so, that long after the Americans were gone, Vieux Fortians were said to be sitting idle waiting for the Americans to return to bring back the good times.



As such ***The Stall Keeper*** explores the pathos and sociopsychological makeup of Vieux Fortians. It depicts rivalry between Castries, the capital city, and Vieux Fort, a provincial town; tension between Roman Catholicism and Adventism; and conflict between Christianity and superstition. It

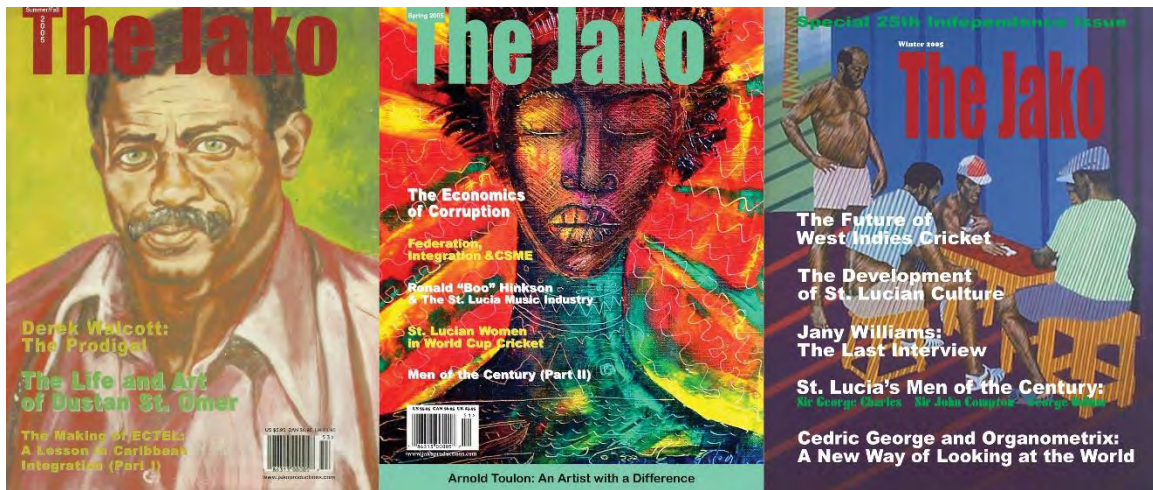
captures the exuberance and pain of growing up, and the damaging consequences of love denied. All of which prompted author and theatre director, Allan Weekes, to comment that "***The Stall Keeper*** is a compelling story of provincial bigotry, coming of age, religious experience and rivalry, faith, fanaticism, the supernatural, frustrated love, and the repression of intelligence and ambition, played against the beautiful wide-open spaces and relics of post American World War II occupied Vieux Fort."

Indeed, ***The Stall Keeper*** is told with deserving punctuations of pathos, drama, suspense, excitement and rare hilarity. It recalls with great vividness the social and cultural norms and mores of the time. It is an engaging narrative that readers of all ages will find both informative and climactic. A reassuring statement on the emerging class of St. Lucian novelists. An excellent aid to our understanding of our past.

For further confirmation that, like Reynolds' previous works, ***The Stall Keeper*** is a great read, one need look no further than what economist and CARICOM diplomat, Peter Lansiquot, had to say: "***The Stall Keeper*** made me laugh, giggle, ponderous, sad and glad, all at once ... the writing is exciting... when you pick up ***The Stall Keeper***, you just can't put it down...it should be read by every Saint Lucian man, woman, child and professor of literature! In Dr. Reynolds, St. Lucia has produced another writer of the calibre, or of even deeper essence than Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul."

The Jako Magazine

It is to be noted that Anderson Reynolds' writing is not confined to the novel, or the three books under reference. In 2005, the writer founded and published *The Jako*, a literary magazine, the only one of its kind on the island at the time. The Jako was charged with



presenting the best of S. Lucian writing and with encouraging and advancing St. Lucian culture and views worldwide. Reynolds' contributions to the magazine included book reviews and well developed essays on the development of St. Lucian culture, St. Lucia's political heroes, Caribbean integration, and the life and art of some of St. Lucia's most prominent artists, including Nobelist Sir Derek Walcott; Sir Dunstan St. Omer, St. Lucia's premier painter and designer of the national flag; and Ronald "Boo" Hinkson, arguably Saint Lucia's foremost musical icon. Three issues of the quarterly were published and were all well received by the St. Lucian public.

Conclusion

As highlighted above, Reynolds' writing is purposeful. His narrative is informed and eloquent. His craftsmanship is refined. In the current environment of the ubiquitous 24-hour television, and particularly in the face of the highly contagious way of life of North America, Reynolds' work is of especial worth and is to be encouraged, if St. Lucia is to both preserve and disseminate information on aspects of its social, political and cultural development in an ongoing basis.

Modeste Downes, is the first recipient of the 2004 George Odlum Award for Creative Artists; author of Theatre of the Mind (poetry), winner of the 2013 National Arts Award for poetry; and Phases (poetry), winner of the 2005 M&C main prize for literature.