

A Synthesis of Three St. Lucian Novels

by Modeste Downes and Anderson Reynolds

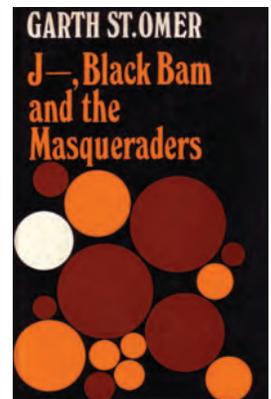
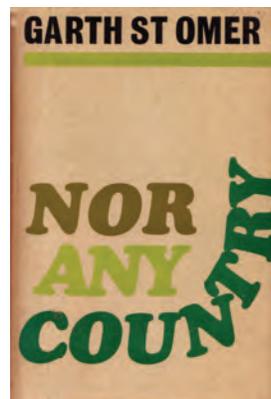
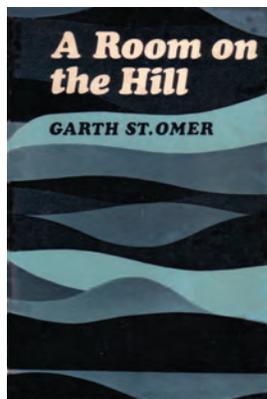
St. Lucia has no shortage of writers for whom poetry is their favored medium of literary expression. Whether this is due to the influence of the great Derek Walcott remains an unanswered question. What is known, however, is that St. Lucians haven't taken to writing novels as they have to crafting poetry. For example, while there are plenty of St. Lucian poetry collections to go around, the authors' research unearthed only nine novels written by St. Lucians and set in St. Lucia. The first of these novels, *A Room on the Hill*, was published in 1968 and was written by Garth St. Omer, cousin of the legendary St. Lucian painter, Dustan St. Omer, and a member of the famous 1950's St. Lucia Arts Guild. Garth St. Omer followed *A Room on the Hill* with three other novels in quick succession, including *Shades of Grey* (1968), *Nor Any Country* (1969), and *J—, Black Bam and the Masqueraders* (1972), making him second only to Derek Walcott as an internationally recognized St. Lucian literary figure.

After the publication of *J—, Black Bam and the Masqueraders*, St. Lucia had to wait twenty-three years for the publication of another St. Lucian novel and the emergence of a St. Lucian novelist other than Garth St. Omer. This honor went to microbiologist, Dr. Earl Long, with the publication of *Consolation* in 1995, followed by *Voices from a Drum* in 1996. Dr. Long has since authored *Slicer* (2000), a novel set in America, and his third St. Lucian novel, *Leaves in a River* is scheduled for publication later this

year.

Four years after the publication of *Voices from a Drum*, and marking the start of the twenty-first century, three new St. Lucian novelists emerged as if from nowhere, each with a novel set in St. Lucia, together forming no less than one-third of the total canon of St. Lucian novels. The first of these novels, *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters*, by Michael Aubertin, was published in 2000 by Caribbean Diaspora Press. The second was Mc. Donald Dixon's *Season of Mist*, also published in 2000, by Xlibris Corporation.

non is that all three works can be unquestionably classified as historical novels. A fact that hasn't eluded Mr. Jacques Compton, former director of Radio St. Lucia and the Department of Culture, and a man of letters, a cultural activist, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a Chavalier De L'Ordre Des Arts Et Des Lettres. In the foreword to *The Struggle For Survival: an historical, political and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia*, he asked: "What is it about the concern with history that has been occupying Saint Lucian contemporary writers? Dr.



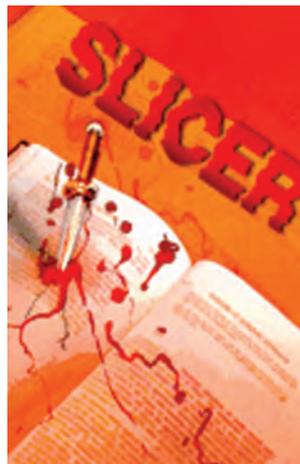
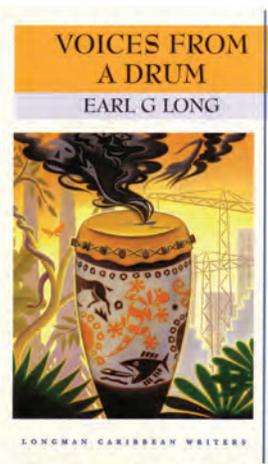
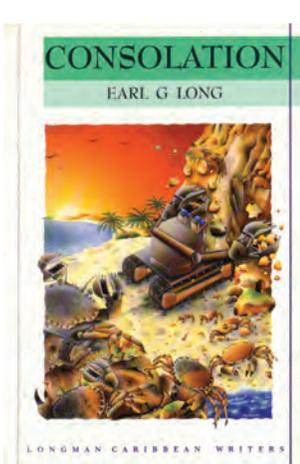
The Novels of Garth St. Omer

Death by Fire, the third novel, was written by Anderson Reynolds, and published in 2001 by Jako Books. Reynolds has since followed *Death by Fire* with *The Struggle For Survival: an historical, political and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia* (2003), which, though a nonfiction, reads (as the cover copy suggests) very much like a novel. Similarly, Mc. Donald Dixon followed his first novel with a second publication, a book of poetry titled *Collected Poems, 1961-2001*.

Besides the timing and the fraction of St. Lucian novels these three books represent, another interesting phenome-

Anderson Reynolds in his first novel, *Death by Fire*, Dr. Earl Long in his second novel, *Voices from a Drum*, Mr. Michael Aubertin with his novel *Neg Maron*, and Mr. Mc. Donald Dixon in his first novel *Season of Mist*, all have been dealing with the St. Lucian historical experience."

Answering his own question, Mr. Compton said, "That 'backward glance,' it has occurred to me, is not simply an effort to come to terms with that historical experience, but, more importantly, to establish who and what we are, what makes us tick. It is, in a very definite way,



The Novels of Earl Long

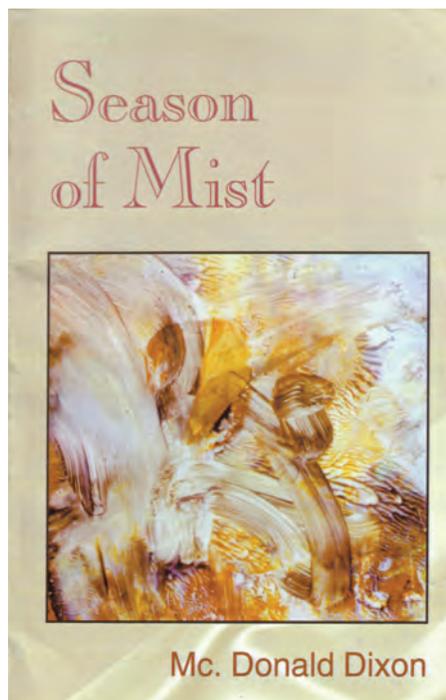
to establish the Saint Lucian personality, the Saint Lucian national and cultural identity.”

It stands to reason, therefore, that these three most recent St. Lucian novels represent a significant addition to St. Lucian literature. All three novels have received at least one extensive review—*Neg Moron: Freedom Fighters* was reviewed by journalist, Jason Sifflet (now with the *Star* newspaper); *Season of Mist* was reviewed by Jacques Compton, and *Death by Fire* was reviewed by The Voice editor, Victor Marquis, by poet Modeste Downes, and by Jacques Compton. However, the books have not been reviewed or analyzed as a group, nor has any significant contrast and comparisons been made of them. Accordingly, with this article we hope to provide a synthesis of these three novels and in so doing highlight their collective contributions to West Indian literature and their importance to St. Lucian society.

Season of Mist

It was the 1790’s, part of the time period that Charles Dickens described in *A Tale of Two Cities* as: “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The French Revolution was on its second leg. In France, the guillotine was hard at work; among its prizes the head of the King of France, Louis XVI. In St. Lucia, the French and the English were at war yet again. In between them were the African slaves ever seeking opportunities to run away to freedom. As part of the high-mindedness of the revolution, France abolished slavery in St. Lucia and its other territories. Euphoria

and excitement reigned among ex-slaves and French revolutionaries alike. Egalite, Fraternite, and Liberte filled the air. In celebration and recognition of the revolution, the island’s towns and villages were renamed with French Revolutionary names. Unfortunately for the ex-slaves, all this liberation and celebration were short-lived because the English soon invaded St. Lucia, wrestled the island from the French, and promptly reinstated slavery. Having tasted freedom, many of the recently freed slaves joined French revolutionaries in the forested uplands of the island where they waged guerrilla warfare against the British army and plantations on the wrong side of the revolution. The slaves who had runaway to freedom long before the revolution and those who had turned guerrilla warriors to maintain their freedom would forever



be labeled neg marons. This war lasted four years, from 1794 to 1797, during which the neg marons attacked, ransacked and burned down the plantations, killing everyone in their path opposed to their cause; in like manner the British chased after and harassed the neg marons, and when they came upon a neg maron settlement or camp they obliterated everything and everyone in sight.

This is the time period and the backdrop of Dixon’s *Season of Mist*, which tells the story of Madlienne Des Voeux who, born in a neg maron camp at the foot of Morne Gimie, was never a slave. However, Madlienne is an only child. Her mother dies shortly after giving birth. One afternoon, fresh from a hunting trip, Madlienne and her band of five companions, all boys and all about her age, arrive at camp to find everyone, including Desolee, her father, the maroon chief, slaughtered. The culprits: a band of vigilantes organized by a nearby plantation that the neg marons used to raid. Though barely past her teens, overcome with grief, Madlienne vows to avenge the death of her father. She said, “I will find the men who killed my father even if they are rotting in hell. I will dig up their bodies and kill them again.” But Madlienne will have to wait ten years before she can embark on that path. Meanwhile, having lost her people, she and her five companions join the French Army in the woods, *L’Armee Francaise dans les bois*, where she leads in the fight against the British for her people’s freedom. Ten years later, as the guerilla war is winding down and the neg marons’ surrender to the British is imminent, she says goodbye to her childhood companions and the army in the woods and sets out to fulfil her ten year old pledge of avenging her father’s death.

Much like flushing out ducks on a hunt, one by one, Madlienne locates and assassinates the leaders of the campaign that had brought genocide on her people. Until there is only one left, Alexandre Gimat, the mastermind behind the murderous affair. However, he proves more elusive than the others, for he has moved to France. But Madlienne is willing to wait for his return. And while she waits she makes a living housekeeping, and passes the time cultivating an orchard, and tending vegetable and flower gardens. By the time Alexandre returns to St. Lucia, slavery is already abolished, and both him and Madlienne have entered old age. Yet

Madlienne's thirst for revenge is unabated. She works her way into the home and the good graces and confidantes of Gimat, until everything is poised for the ultimate kill.

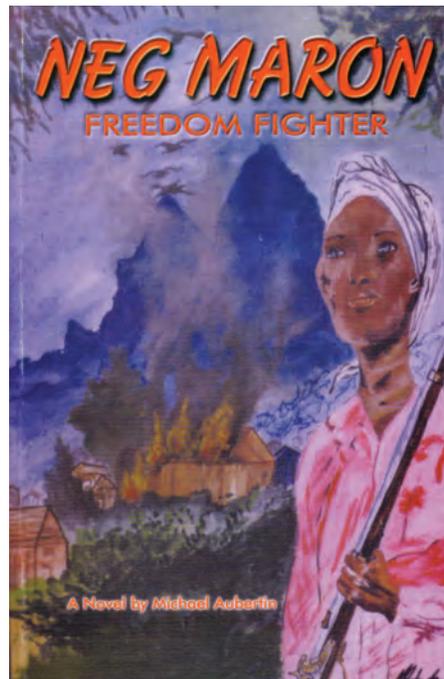
Season of Mist portrays the brutality of the neg marons' freedom war against the British and the high level of intelligence, planning and military organization and cunning that they brought to the war. Dixon's heroine, Madlienne Des Voeux, was probably inspired by the historical figure, Flore Bois Galliard, a mulatto woman and a military leader of the army in the woods, whose stronghold was at the foot of the Pitons. In this character, Dixon brings out the great dignity, fierceness, purposefulness, and fighting spirit of the neg marons, particularly the ones who were born in Africa or as Madlienne Des Voeux, born and raised in neg maron camps and hence were never enslaved.

Season of Mist examines the effects on the human spirit of extreme and devastating losses. It is a meditation on a life singularly dedicated to hatred and vengeance. Madlienne's devotion to avenging the death of her father has come with a heavy price. She is forced to give up her childhood friends, her closest companions in the war against the British and the last of her remaining clan. She denies her own nature, banishes her natural needs, kills things inside of her that threaten to abort her mission. For the sake of fulfilling her vow of vengeance, she chooses a solitary existence devoid of the comfort of a spouse and the joy of children.

Season of Mist, however, departs from the recorded history in two significant instances. First, the novel depicts the neg marons as falling into very unsavory conditions after their surrender to the British and before they were reabsorbed as slaves on the plantations. We see them fighting each other for scraps foraged from refuse heaps and raiding their own people for rations in short supply. However, a reading of Robert Devaux's *They Called us the Brigands: The saga of St. Lucia's Freedom Fighters*, suggests this wasn't the complete picture. Devaux indicates that after the war the Brigands or neg marons were placed in the West India Regiment and, keeping with their request of not being reenslaved and returning to Africa, the regiment was sent to the West Coast of Africa. The duration of the Brigands' war

is a second instance where the novel departs from recorded history. Dixon has the war lasting ten years, but the history books suggest a period of four years, from 1794 to 1797.

Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters



Michael Aubertin's *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters* begins somewhere in the 1750's or 1760's and ends in 1797 with the neg marons' surrender to the British, so like *Season of Mist*, and as the novel's title suggests, it also explores the phenomenon of the neg marons as freedom fighters. But whereas most of the pages of *Season of Mist* are devoted to the conflict between the neg marons and the British and the consequences or ramifications of that conflict as embodied in Madlienne Des Voeux's singular focus on avenging the atrocities that the conflict wrecked on her people, *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters* is also about, or rather, dramatizes slave plantation intrigues, military battles between the French and the British, and the debilitating social and psychological repercussions of slavery.

Most of the novel surrounds the Ti Anse plantation, situated somewhere in the neighborhood of Carenage, renamed Castries. At Ti Anse there is James Golang, a proud and intelligent field

slave with an infirm leg who possesses the gift of song and storytelling. He is in love with Emmanuelle, an ambitious slave beauty who, upon the wish of the master, Claude Leger, has moved beyond Golang's reach to the plantation house where she is to serve as companion for Victoire, the master's young, spoilt wife. Jacques, the sadistic and sex crazed overseer of Ti Anse whips the slaves at will and takes great pleasure in raping the women within earshot of their men who, being slaves, are impotent to do anything about it.

At Ti Anse things go into a tailspin when Claude falls sick and dies a premature death in Europe, but not before he sires Gabrielle, the result of many nights of bedding Emmanuelle against her will while his wife is asleep in a bedroom next door. With her husband dead and Gabrielle, the only other person with claims to his estate abandoned and enslaved somewhere in France or the French Antilles, Victoire settles down to running her plantation. But Jacques, the overseer, has his eyes on the plantation, which he plans to own through a union with Victoire. To spoil things for Jacques, in comes Englishman Alfred James who had joined the army for the sake of glory and to escape English countryside boredom, only to discover that he has no stomach for the gore and misery that came with the territory. After just one battle in St. Lucia, the battle between the French and the English for Morne Fortune, he defects and gains sanctuary at Ti Anse. Victoire falls for the Englishman and, to the great chagrin of Jacques, transfers her affection from him to the deserter. The plot thickens when, now fifteen or seventeen, Gabrielle is brought back to Ti Anse as a slave. Despite the plentiful attention the Englishman is receiving from Victoire, he falls in love with Gabrielle. But before anything could happen between them, Golang, taking Gabrielle with him, runs away from Ti Anse and joins the neg marons in freedom. And when the neg marons' guerilla war against the British begins about fifteen years later, Golang joins the war camp of the legendary neg maron military leader, Flore Bois Galliard, at the foot of the Pitons, and becomes one of the most resourceful of neg maron military leaders. But before Golang makes his exit from Ti Anse, he gives Jacques a sound beating when the

overseer came visiting with murderous intent. So there we have Jacques vowing to find Golang to take revenge for the humiliating beating, and Alfred James to bring back the woman whom Golang had stolen from right under his very nose. And interweaving all this intrigue is the French and the English constantly engage in senseless battles for the island.

Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters alludes to the social and psychological damage that slave plantation life heaped upon the slaves. It suggests that the slaves patterned their treatment of each other after the slave masters' and overseers' cruel and debasing treatment of them. Self loathing, the popular use of expletives, verbal abuses, and the degrading treatment of women, are, according to the novel, some of the enduring effects of slavery. Though not explicitly stated, from the novel one can also deduce that slavery contributed to the development of such social problems as sexual promiscuity, a high incidence of shacking as opposed to marriages, disdain for farming or any activity that is reminiscent of slavery, the enduring perception of government (or for that matter any other estab-

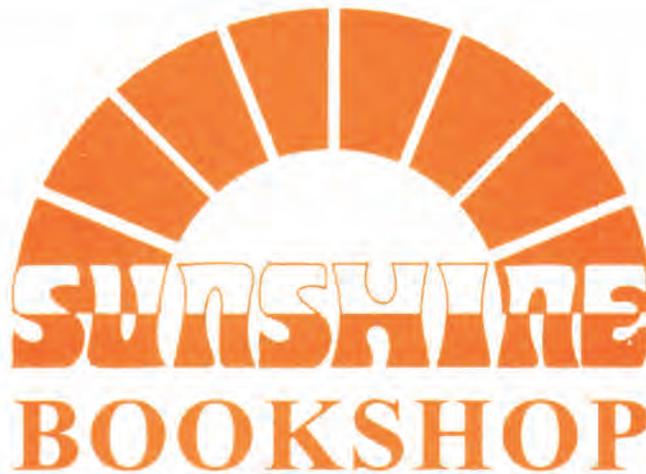
lished authority) as slave masters and hence the deliberate damage and disrespect of government property (bagai betche), and the concept of beauty as having straight hair and light complexion.

In the novel, the observation of the social and psychological damage slavery brought about is viewed through the eyes of Golang, the slave story teller on the Ti Anse plantation. To many young male slaves, the closest thing they ever had to a father or an authoritative figure was the slave master and his overseer. So it wasn't surprising that they would pattern themselves after them. Painfully witnessing young male slaves imitating Jacques' debasement of female slaves, Golang felt compelled to do something to arrest the psychological damage. So as a pretext of entertaining the master and his wife, he staged a play popularly known in St. Lucia as Papa Jab, the Devil at Christmas, in which the plantation owners and other whites were depicted as the real devils and therefore should not be emulated. In fact, it was this enactment that had so angered Jacques, the overseer, that led him to make an attempt on Golang's life.

The debilitating effect of slavery is

shown at its excruciating worst when Jacques rapes young Marguerite within earshot of Sylvester, her lover, and she is being comforted and cradled by Emmanuelle, who lets her anguish flow into a song once popular among St. Lucian children but who probably had no inkling of its origin much less its meaning. As Emmanuelle sang: An ti pyé pòyé / I té ni dé ti flè / An ti van vini / I jété tout a tè (A little cedar tree / It had two little flowers / A small breeze came / It threw all down), slave women in huts throughout the plantation picked up the refrain, and in this one gesture it was as if they were giving voice to all the suffering that slavery had brought upon their race.

Later, as a neg maron leader living in a neg maron camp, Golang's sense of the social and psychological damages of slavery becomes even clearer when he compares life on the plantation to life in his camp. For absent are the expletives that escape the mouth of the slaves every time someone falls or is getting a beating, absent are the constant fighting and quarreling that take place among the slaves, and absent too are the slaves' degrading treatment of their women in the manner



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of the overseers and plantation owners. So, if, indeed, there is some validity to this portrayal of neg maron communities, then one can conclude that the neg marons helped ameliorate or undo the psychological damage of the slave plantation system.

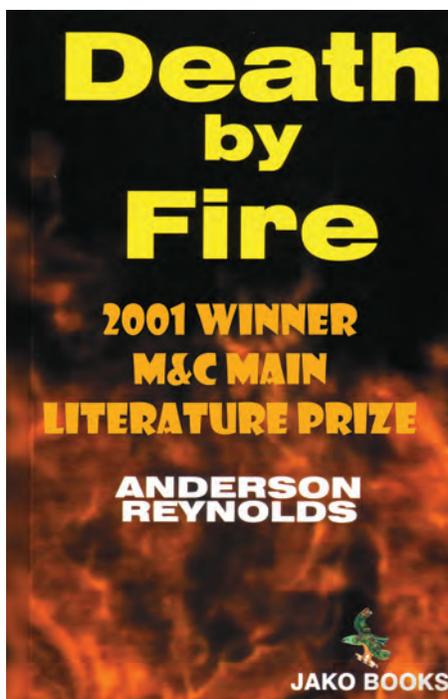
In the St. Lucian psyche neg maron is a derogatory word. A name assigned to someone whom one wishes to insult. A name that says one is ignorant, backward, uncouth, uncivilized. This is clearly suggestive of how successful the white slave masters were in denigrating the neg marons and brain-washing the slave population into thinking that running away from slavery and living self sustained in the woods was an act of debasement and savagery. Yet, in *The Struggle For Survival: an historical, political and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia*, Dr. Reynolds suggests that arguably no other group did more to perpetuate the island's African culture than the neg marons. He argued that this proposition suggests itself because, "firstly, evidence suggests that the slaves who were most likely to run away were not those born in slavery, but those who had had a taste of freedom. Most of those would have been born and raised in Africa, and therefore would have most of their African culture intact, a culture to pass on from one generation to another. Secondly, the concept of self selectivity suggests that the slaves who chose to run away were those who were the most proud, the most independent, the most obstinate. The very ones who were most likely to resist the efforts of the plantations to strip them of their African culture. Thirdly, away from the plantation, not only were the neg marons less influenced by the de-Africanizing slave culture that the plantation system bred, but they were more free to perpetuate their own African way of life."

This suggests that rather than denigrating the neg marons, St. Lucians should be proud of this aspect of their history. Proud that their ancestors did not take slavery lying down. Proud of their resilience, dignity, and perseverance in the face of adversity. Therefore, by telling the story of the neg marons, and keeping that aspect of the history alive, in the process inducing St. Lucians to be proud of their ancestors, proud of their history, and proud of their heritage,

Season of Mist and Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters, along with *They Called us the Brigands: The saga of St. Lucia's Freedom Fighters* by Robert Devaux, represent important contributions to the social development of St. Lucia.

In his book, Robert Devaux also indicates that St. Lucia and Jamaica were the two Caribbean islands where the most neg maron settlement sites were found, suggesting that the maroonage phenomenon was most prevalent in these two islands. Therefore, studying maroon life in St. Lucia and Jamaica may provide valuable insights not only into the heroism of our ancestors against great odds, but also into the genesis of West Indian culture. Thus, to the extent that *Season of Mist and Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters* have done so, they represent significant additions to West Indian literature.

Death by Fire



Although Anderson Reynolds's *Death by Fire*, touches on slavery, in contrast to *Season of Mist and Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters*, most of the novel takes place in the post-slavery period and through to the early 1970's. And although the novel visits places as far-off as India, most of it is set in Castries, and within Castries, the slums of the Conway, which in more recent times have been cleared and replaced

with high-rise government building blocs, a multi-storey carpark, and a Julian's Supermarket.

Against the backdrop of the mythical gods of the land (meant to be the Pitons) reaping havoc on the French for moving the capital from Soufriere to Castries, on the Caribs for allowing the French to carry away the capital, and on Castries for accepting the capital too greedily, *Death by Fire* tells the story of two mothers and their sons, and how the nature of the relations between the mothers and their sons influenced how the sons turn out. On one hand there is Christine, a never-before-seen beauty, who completely neglects her son, Trevor, because her fast-pace and glamorous life leaves her with little time for him. On the other hand, there is Felina, a woman betrayed by her first love but not before she is made pregnant with his son, Robert. Unable or unwilling to forgive her lover, she transposes her hatred of him to Robert. The story says that the two women were never to become friends. However, facing different but equally debilitating circumstances at home the two boys seek solace in each other and become bosom friends. And as often happens when children are neglected and or abused the two boys follow a path of petty crime and antisocial behavior, such that it is clear to Colletta, Conway's self proclaimed soothsayer, where Robert, who seems to have pass on his mother's hatred of him on to the world, will end up. The only question is whether Trevor, the more timid of the two and who bears no one ill, will end up the same place with Robert.

What brought the two women to the Conway partly explains their disposition. Valda, Christine's Indian grandmother, is tricked into migrating to St. Lucia as an indentured servant when her husband and stepmother (obviously) wrongly concluded that she couldn't bear children. Julita, Valda's daughter and Christine's mother, was kicked out of her home by her father when he found out she was pregnant for Leonce, a black man. The couple left the Forestiere-Baboneau area and moved to Castries. At eighteen and in the heights of her crowning glory Christine became pregnant with Trevor for a married man who, for obvious reasons, wished to keep the affair undercover. To make up for his need for secrecy he bought Christine a two-room house in the Conway. As for

THEY CALLED US BRIGANDS

*The saga of St. Lucia's
Freedom Fighters*



By Robert J. Devaux O.B.E.

Felina, her father and five brothers and sisters were killed in the great 1938 landslide that claimed 92 lives. Only by a miracle was Felina and her mother, Nelda, saved. After the landslide, Felina and Nelda moved to Castries where Nelda found work as a charbonnier, an activity that would eventually claim her life, and which would cause Felina to part ways with God.

Death by Fire provides a dramatization of many of the great natural calamities and historical events that have shaped St. Lucian society. Slavery, East Indian indentureship, the great 1938 landslide at the twin villages of L'Abbaye and Ravine Poisson, the 1948 Castries fire that destroyed three-quarters of the city, the terrible outbreak of cholera in 1854 that by one account claimed 1500 lives, the coal-carrying plight of the charbonniers when Castries was a coaling station, and the carrying of bananas unto Geest Banana boats by armies of women, are all depicted and integrated in the novel and are shown to have great impact on the lives of the characters who inhabit it.

Death by Fire asks several questions that are very pertinent to modern day St. Lucian society with its youth disengagement and escalating crime rate. What are the causes of crime and other forms of antisocial behavior? Are crime and social decay a result of poverty, unemployment, depressed socioeconomic circumstances? Or a result of obeh or some other form of malice or curse that someone has placed on the people? Or is it a result of the punishment a hidden force such as

God, or an evil spirit or the mythical gods of the land (as in *Death by Fire*) has heaped upon the people for some unknown crime, or for living in abomination, as was the case of Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah? Why are some people poor? Is it because they are just plainly and simply lazy? Or is it because of governmental neglect: the government hasn't done enough to educate its citizens and to foster the climate and infrastructure that would allow businesses to thrive and thus improve the island's unemployment situation? What does the home (parental disposition, the relationship between parents and children) and family structure have to say about how children turn out? And how do the attitudes and prejudices of the community influence (negatively or positively) the psychology of children?

Additionally, *Death by Fire* provides a characterization of the social and economic conflicts that used to plague the relationship between Indians and Blacks in St. Lucia's recent past. The novel also provides a meditation on the nature of fate. It begs the question: Are our lives preordained from birth, so no matter how hard to the contrary we try, our fates are sealed? Or is there something called free will that allows us to determine how our lives will turn out? If so, how do we explain the many acts of nature (the 1938 landslide, for example) and man (slavery, for example) over which the vast majority of us have little control?

Taken together, *Season of Mist*, *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters*, and *Death by Fire*, summarize the past of present day St. Lucians. The first two novels dwell on slavery and, by extension, its enduring mark on the St. Lucian psyche. Still, within this dark era of St. Lucian history, both *Season of Mist* and *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters* capture the period, though brief, during which our ancestors took control over their lives and many fought to gain their freedom and others to maintain it, thus clearly suggesting that our ancestors hadn't taken slavery lying down, but, like most other people in such circumstances, did everything in their power to undermine the plantations and to seek their freedom. Taking off where these two novels ended, *Death by Fire* focuses on the post-slavery era, the period when we began having a say in how our lives were conducted, and explores the forces that

have shaped our society. In the process, the novel provides a cultural and sociological characterization of near present day St. Lucian society. Therefore, together, these three novels provide no less than a slice of the cross section of St. Lucian history and sociology.

The Authors

These three most recent St. Lucian novels have been brought to us by three contrasting personalities. Mc. Donald Dixon started his career as a banker, and now he is a special trade advisor to the government of St. Lucia. Besides writing poetry, novels and short stories, Dixon is an accomplished photographer and painter and he is involved in the theatre as both actor, director and playwright. Dixon has been involved in the arts since his teenage years. He said that at sixteen, while browsing the shelves of his secondary school's library, he stumbled upon *Twenty-Five Poems* by Derek Walcott and from that moment he knew he would be a writer. In recognition of Dixon's longtime contributions to literature and photography, he was honored in 1993 with the St. Lucia Medal of Merit.

Like Dixon, Michael Aubertin is a multifaceted artist. Besides writing fiction, he is a song writer, musician, and a one time calypsonian. His short story, *Calypso Finals*, won a BBC Caribbean Magazine award, and recently he wrote and produced a hit reggae tune (performed by his son) as a tribute to Bob Marley. *Neg Maron: Freedom Fighters* grew out of Aubertin's master's dissertation, which dealt with patterns of gender socialization in St. Lucia. For several years Aubertin headed the Department of Culture, renamed the Cultural Development Foundation.

Anderson Reynolds holds a PhD in Food and Resource Economics from the University of Florida. Before resettling in St. Lucia in 1999, he worked for two years with the University of Guelph as a visiting professor and then for nine years as a corporate economist with the American telecommunications giant, Southwestern Bell. In contrast to Dixon and Aubertin, Dr. Reynolds was already in his thirties when he began delving into the world of creative writing. 