

St. Lucia's Men of The Century

Sir George Charles



William George Odlum



Sir John Compton



by Anderson Reynolds

A most propitious question to ask in this the 25th year of St. Lucia's independence is: Who is the man (or woman) of the century? Who above anyone else has helped shape the history of St. Lucia? Understandably, this is not an enviable task, because for a country that has won two Nobel Prizes during its mere 25 years of independence (giving it the highest per capita of Nobel Laureates in the world), there is no shortage of candidates for this honor. Nonetheless, in search of this St. Lucian man or woman of the century, three names invariably surfaced—Sir George F.L. Charles, Sir John G.M. Compton, and William George Odlum. Two of these men are no longer with us, and the one remaining is partially retired from public life. Therefore, in this pause in our nation's history, this moment of reflection, it may be useful to dwell on the lives of these men to, if nothing else, obtain a glimpse of what vision they had for their country, what circumstances helped shape that vision, and what legacy did they leave behind.

George Charles And The St. Lucia Labor Movement

Sir George F.L. Charles died in June 2004 at the age of eighty-eight. Following his death there was an

outpouring of praise and affection. Newspaper articles eulogizing his death carried titles like "A Man who Embodied a Movement and an Aspiration;" "A Secure Historical Legacy." In his tribute to George Charles the Prime Minister of St. Lucia, Dr. Kenny D. Anthony, said, "he was truly the Father of Decolonization." The radio stations were inundated with citizens calling in to talk about the goodness of George Charles, saying how he had taken money from his own pocket to help them put roofs over their heads, in the process labeling him *Ti Jezi*, little Jesus; others who called about how he had stood up to the then mighty sugar plantation owners to secure for them better wages and working conditions referred to him as the *Ti Hache*, the little axe. As proof that the nation wasn't simply being polite to the memory of a departed man, long before George Charles' death the nation had honored him by naming a community, a secondary school, and the island's busiest airport after him. And so as to ensure his presence was always with the nation, a statue of his likeness was erected at the airport that bore his name. During the last two general elections (which the Labor Party won by landslides), capitalizing on the political capital or goodwill embodied in George Charles, the Labor Party made sure that he was conspicuously present, in full party colors, at all party conventions. And not long before his

death, the Labor Government established the George Charles Foundation with the stated goal of institutionalizing the education of generations to come on the life and contributions of George Charles. Clearly, from this national outpouring, Sir George F.L. Charles would indeed be one of the nation's candidates for man of the century.

The public life of George Charles began at the age of thirty, when, while working as a time keeper on the 1945 construction of Vigie Airport, and having witnessed time and again the futile efforts of unorganized workers to secure better wages and working conditions from the administrators of the project, he joined what was then the first and only labor union on the island, the St. Lucia Workers Cooperative Union.

George Charles' entry into the labor union was by no means special. The decade before, in which he had come of age, had been almost as great a turning point in the history of St. Lucia and the other British West Indian islands as the 1838 emancipation proclamation. For it was the events of this decade that sparked labor and political movements throughout the West Indies. The sugar industry, then the mainstay of these economies, was in deep decline. Sugar prices (as well as the prices of most other export crops) were in a downward spiral. Under these circum-



hours of work, no rest on Sundays and public holidays, employment of child labor, little or no health facilities, no vacation leave, no compensation for industrial injuries and limited education facilities, 90 percent of our people were illiterate and disenfranchised.

By the 1930s worker discontent had boiled over into spontaneous strikes and revolts, with sometimes disastrous consequences. In St. Kitts, in 1935, police shot and killed three workers and wounded eight when a crowd of sugar workers marched onto a sugar plantation to demand higher wages. In that same year, three workers were killed and another twenty-six injured when a crowd of workers in St. Vincent came petitioning the Governor against recently increased custom duties. In 1937, attempting to restore order during an island-wide protest against the deportation of a Union organizer, police in Barbados killed fourteen protestors, wounded forty-seven and arrested four hundred. In Jamaica, worker upheavals during 1938 resulted in at least twelve deaths and one hundred and eighty wounded.

Growing up under these circumstances, it was by no means surprising that an educated and socially conscious young man would want to join the labor movement. However, what was remarkable about George Charles' involvement was that this mild mannered, slightly built, unassuming man of humble beginnings, with only a secondary school education, would rise to the forefront of not only the labor movement but also the political movement in St. Lucia. Upon joining the St. Lucia Workers Cooperative Union, George Charles was quickly elected secretary of the Castries branch, and made a member of the Organizing Committee. A year later, in 1946, he was elected to the Executive Committee as the recording secretary, then in 1949 he was elevated to the post of General Secretary, and then in 1954 he rose to the Presidency of the Union.

With George Charles in its leadership ranks the St. Lucia Workers Cooperative Union blazed a trail in the labor movement in St. Lucia. It took the island's first ever Union action when in 1947 it sought and gained recognition to represent sugar factory workers, and successfully negotiated wage increases, overtime pay, and eight-hour work days. Next, and in that same year, the Union tackled Castries bakers, who initially had refused to negotiate or meet the Union's wage

demands. In response, the Union launched St. Lucia's first ever Union strike that, after five days, forced the bakers to the negotiating table where the Union won pay raises and improved working conditions for its members. Later that same year, the Union led a march to the Government house, seeking pre Christmas season employment for its members. On the heels of the march, complying with the Union's request, the government launched a public work program that provided jobs for most of Castries' unemployed workers. Then in 1949, following a brief strike, the Union forced the Colonial Development Corporation (in charge of rebuilding Castries after the 1948 fire) to the negotiating table and won fringe benefits and a more than 20 percent wage increase for workers.

Just as it did for the labor movement, George Charles's St. Lucia Workers Cooperative Union would catapult the political movement in St. Lucia. The first step in that process was taken when the Union began setting its sights on the Castries Town Board, then as now, the second most important political organ in the island. But penetrating the Town Board would prove no walk on the beach. The Board was controlled by the middle and upper classes, who saw the Union and the labor movement as a lower class engagement that needed to be kept out of the Town Board at all cost. However, unperturbed, knowing time was on its side, the Union contested the 1947 elections and won only one of the four contested seats.

The following year the Union received some help in its fight for the Castries Town Board. On June 19, 1948, fire destroyed four-fifths of Castries, rendering 809 families or 2293 persons homeless. The fire being no respecter of income, class or race, placed everyone in the same homeless boat. This reality (and also that the Union was directly involved in the relief effort) helped erode class distinctions, if not permanently at least temporarily, and engendered a feeling of cooperation and togetherness. Thus, when the annual Town Board elections came around, the middle and upper classes lent a more sympathetic ear to the Union's cause. So, not too unsurprisingly, by the end of the 1949 elections the Union for the first time in history gained full control of the Board. Once in control, George Charles promptly moved a resolution to make the Choc Cemetery a common burial ground for all, thus doing away with the stigma of the paupers section which, according to him, was a "convenience for social discrimination even at death." This act of George Charles would be just the beginning of the

stances, to keep wages as low as possible, plantation owners took to importing indentured labor from India and to establishing laws and conditions that would keep workers tied to their plantations. Consequently, the masses were faced with high levels of unemployment, unliveable wages, detestable working conditions, deplorable housing, malnutrition, and low resistance to diseases. Worse, they had no legal avenue for voicing their grievances. The government of the day comprised a governor (or his representative, an Administrator) and an Executive and Legislative Council, both of which were under the direct control of the Governor since it was the Governor who appointed all members to the Executive Council and the majority of those in the Legislature. These Councils were invariably populated with white plantation owners or their surrogates. Therefore, the government served mostly as an instrument for safeguarding the interest of the plantocracy even at the expense of the masses. Furthermore, these privileged whites were banded together in exclusive white-only social clubs, and the best government and business jobs were reserved for them. Laws forbade peaceful worker picketing. Trade Unionism and labor protest was considered an act of treason. Here is what George Charles had to say of these conditions:

... it was a period of low wages, long

process of claiming St. Lucia for all of St. Lucians. Besides the issue of burial grounds, the Union controlled Board instituted a new wage structure for its employees that included higher wages, vacation leave with pay, improved promotional opportunities, gratuity and pension allowances, and overtime pay. In time a George Charles led government would permanently enter most of these workers rights (and more) into the law books of the nation. But before this could happen, a lot more work had to be done.

George Charles And The St. Lucia Political Movement

By 1950, with the Castries Town Board securely under its belt, the St. Lucia Workers Cooperative Union, renamed the St. Lucia Workers Union, along with the Seaman and Waterfront Workers' Union, began running for seats on the Legislative Council, and, through petitions, mass demonstrations, and public meetings, joined their voices with those of other Caribbean islands, demanding that the British government grant the islands Universal Adult Suffrage, and constitutional changes, including a fully elected Legislative Council, and an Executive Council with a majority of elected members. To further articulate these demands and to better advance the cause of workers, the Unions established the St. Lucia Labor Party to function as their political arm.

These were heady and feverish days. George Charles and his compatriots, young, bright, full of passion and fury and possessed with the righteous knowledge that justice, if not the law, was on their side, were giving their people, the poor, the downtrodden, the dispossessed a voice; giving them hope of a better tomorrow, hope of better pay and working conditions, hope of a somewhat dignified life, hope of overturning history. The fight against racial and class discrimination, against exclusive social clubs, against plantation owners and the colonial government was on. St. Lucia, like the rest of the British Caribbean islands, was caught in the hurricane of a movement, the labor movement, and at the head of the St. Lucian movement was George Charles.

The pressures that labor unions and infant political parties across the region brought to bear on the British Government bore fruit when in 1951 Britain introduced Universal Adult Suffrage and instituted changes in the structure of government that

allowed greater electoral participation. In the general elections held later that year, the first elections that involved mass participation, the St. Lucia Labor Party won five of the eight electoral seats, the People's Progressive Party, formed also in 1950 and perceived as the Party of the middle and upper middle classes, won two seats, and an independent candidate won the remaining seat.

On March 15, 1956, Britain introduced a ministerial system of government. Thus, as the party with the most members on the Executive Council, the St. Lucia Labor Party of 1956 became the first government of the people and by the people. This first labor Government included George Charles, Minister of Social Affairs; Dr. Karl G. LaCorbiniere, Minister of Trade and Production; Herman B. Collymore, Minister of Communication and Works; and Clive A.M. Compton, Minister without portfolio. Taking advantage of its elevated status, the newly formed Labor Government quickly updated the labor laws to address such issues as holidays with pay, workmen's compensation, child labor, the rights of trade unions, and hours of work.

General elections came again in 1957 to mark the third such elections under Universal Adult Suffrage. On contesting these elections, George Charles who was by then the President of the St. Lucia Workers Union was elected political leader of the St. Lucia Labor Party, and John Compton deputy political leader. At that election the Labor Party, continuing its success at the polls, won seven of eight electoral seats.

Three years later, January 1, 1960, Britain granted St. Lucia a new Constitution that, among other things, made provisions for a Chief Minister who essentially would head the government. As leader of his party, George Charles became the country's first Chief Minister, responsible for Finance, Internal Revenue, and Medical and Public Relations. In April 1961, soon after these constitutional changes, the government, as was required by Great Britain, called general elections at which the Labor Party won nine of ten seats.

Coinciding with and propelling this newly acquired political autonomy was the development of the banana industry, which since its renewed inception in 1951, grew so rapidly that exports increased over a hundredfold from a mere 27 tons (worth EC\$4000) in 1950, representing only 0.2 percent of exports, to 3.8 thousand tons (worth EC\$490,000) in 1954, or 14 percent of all exports. Eleven years later, in 1965, St. Lucia exported 84.4 thousand tons, valued at EC\$9.3 million and forming more than 83 percent of all exports. In fact, over the 1950-1965 period, banana exports grew by

an annual average of 142 percent, causing gross domestic product to more than double from EC\$10 million (\$147 percapita) in 1950 to EC\$27 million (\$303 percapita) in 1962.

After being crowned Chief Minister of Government, here is what George Charles had to say about the socio-economic effects of the banana industry on St. Lucia.

The Banana Industry was in the pinnacle of this momentum and the sunlight of hope was to be seen on the faces of large and small farmers, merchants, civil servants, teachers, fishermen, market vendors, speculators and workers. Small merchants mushroomed overnight to formidable business institutions, the more established merchants filled the William Peter Boulevard and Bridge Street with business premises of modern sophistication. The Royal Bank of Canada which closed its doors to St. Lucia during the years of depressions returned eagerly seeking its portion of the spoils, then followed the Bank of Nova Scotia all anxious to serve a developing St. Lucia. The working class felt free to verbally defend themselves before their employers.

Interestingly, this overwhelming Labor victory and the progressiveness of the economy would mark the beginning of the end of George Charles' rather smooth and meteoric rise to the top leadership of the Union and the Labor Party. Ironically, this would happen just when the leadership of the party would be vested for the first time with real power in the form of Chief Minister of government, and ironically, John Compton, one of the other candidates for the man of the century honors, was the one chiefly responsible for the political fall of George Charles.

John Compton Stakes His Claim

In John Compton George Charles would have been hard pressed to find a more formidable foe. John Compton was a man whose life was shrouded in mystery and myth. He was credited with tremendous sexual prowess and with supernatural feats, such as what allegedly occurred during the 1993 banana strike when he drove through a furnace of burning tires and other debris (set by protesting farmers attempting to deny

vehicularly passage), with seemingly no damage to his car or his person, yet when a trailing vehicle attempted the same feat it burnt to uselessness. John Compton's regular alternation between head of state and banana farmer was no less mystifying. It was not unusual during the course of a day for the Premier to lead the debate in parliament or hold court with other world leaders, then following this trade his tie and business jacket for banana stained clothes and long rubber boots, jump into his rickety vehicle, leave behind the suffocating heat and crowdedness of Castries, and head twenty miles south to his banana farm at Mahaut in the deep interior of St. Lucia, where with cutlass in hand he would tend to his bananas no different from any ordinary peasant farmer. Even John Compton's birth was a subject of mystery and myth. At the turn of the century the Compton clan had moved to St. Lucia from the neighboring island of St. Vincent. The move forever brought into question John Compton's place of birth and hence his St. Lucian nationality. Many were convinced that he was either born in St. Vincent or on the waters that separated the two islands. For years to come opposition political parties attempted to use the question of his birth place to deny him the people's vote. Nonetheless, John Compton never did lose an election, his opponents's barbs serving only to enhance his mythical persona. It was often said of John Compton that he could never hold a steady gaze, much less look one straight in the eye. Obviously, this was meant as a negative, but it tuned out to be yet another one of the attacks on John Compton that rather than harming him succeeded in elevating him above the ordinary affairs of men.

After graduating from St. Mary's College, John Compton worked for several years in Curacao, and then emigrated to England in the late 1940's to pursue his education. When he returned to St. Lucia in 1951 with a university degree in Law and Economics, he found a country on the move—three labor unions were in operation, Universal Adult Suffrage was yesteryear's news, and the island's two political parties (the St. Lucia Labor Party and the People's Progressive Party) had already contested a general election. George Charles and his brothers in the struggle were on a high. Any and everything seemed possible. In that euphoric state of mind both the St. Lucia Workers Union and the St. Lucia Labor Party were more than welcoming of fresh and talented men who could help in the struggle. So, unsuspecting that the very cause of his joy would later cause him great grief, George

Charles, referring to the arrival of John Compton and Maurice Mason from their studies, wrote: "The Labor Movement heralded this youthful and professional injection with enthusiasm and Messrs Compton and Mason were quickly embraced in the leadership."

The years that John Compton attended the University of Wales and London School of Economics had marked the beginning of a new colonial world order. The whole impetus of world War II had been to defeat tyranny and imperialism and to uphold democracy. Consequently, after the war, European allies could not very well justify denying democracy to others. Moreover, bruised and war weary, they had less of an appetite for overseas warfare to maintain colonial rule. By 1947, two years after World War II, India and Pakistan had fought and won their independence, and starting in the fifties the African continent had begun its independence march. It was under this climate of colonial cry for freedom that John Compton read his law degree. One could well imagine him and his other Caribbean and African classmates, all leaders in the making, staying up deep into the night, arguing and discussing the injustices of colonial rule, fueling their feverish impatience to return home to join the fight against colonialism and take their rightful place at the head of the governments that would replace their colonial counterparts.

So, understandably, John Compton arrived home feisty and impatient. And right from the start it was clear that he was a person of independent mind, who, if need be, was quite willing to go it alone. Indeed John Compton's upbringing suggested that he would have had to form a habit of independence. For although his yellow, almost white complexion would have given him greater access than otherwise in this then color and class conscious society, his complexion and the question of his birthplace would have rendered him an outsider in his own country. Throughout history this outsider status, this living on the fringe of one's own society, has afforded one the insights of the observer, the onlooker, but has left one with no choice but to depend more than others on one's own resources.

The first clue to John Compton's independence of mind and which George Charles should have taken as a signal of John Compton's imminent challenge for the leadership of the Labor Party and the country came in 1954 as the Party was positioning itself to contest the second post Universal Adult Suffrage general elections. For this elections the Party had nominated James Charles as its candidate for the

Dennery-Micoud seat. However, John Compton had other ideas. He insisted on contesting that seat, so he entered and won the race as an independent candidate. This political move alienated John Compton from the Party, but unrepentant he took up writing a column coined the "Jack Spaniard" in the *Workers Clarion*, a Union newspaper, in which according to George Charles he denounced "the aristocracy and social discrimination."

During the famous 1957 sugar workers strike, John Compton would show his mettle once again when as a union activist and elected representative he entered the compound of the Dennery sugar factory to articulate the Union's demands, only to find himself staring at the end of a gun held by the owner of the factory, and having to draw his own gun to



bring the confrontation to a stalemate. This image, this symbol, of John Compton like David facing Goliath, singlehandedly facing the enemy of the people, the enemy that had enslaved their ancestors, and returning unscathed and victorious, would further contribute to his mythical and epic-hero persona. This gun toting confrontation did not however end the strike. In responding to it, the magistrate invoked the riot act. Police from Barbados and Grenada joined those of St. Lucia. A British warship came to port. Sugar workers were so readily arrested and jailed that according to George Charles he and the Union went broke bailing them out. In Castries, on their way to joining sugar workers from the Cul-de-Sac Valley, it was only the quick reaction of John Compton when he pushed George Charles from the back and tumbled over him that saved

George Charles from the thrusting bayonet of a policeman, but not the arm of a worker who was trailing them. On a different occasion, police guards fired at George Charles as he was walking out of the Cul-de-Sac Sugar factory.

By the fifth week of the strike the Union concluded that if the strike didn't end soon it would turn into a civil war, so to hasten matters it spread the strike to banana workers and banana carriers in Castries, which effectively placed a strangle-hold on the country. A few days after, the factories came to the negotiating table. The rights of the union for collective representation were recognized. Workers got wage increases. The factories agreed to improve the methods of transporting canes by wagons to avoid spillage and to constantly inspect the scales used for weighing task-workers' harvested canes. After the settlement, John Compton was brought to court and convicted and fined for disturbing the peace. But thanks to his heroics during the strike, which according to George Charles helped foster a feeling of brotherhood and camaraderie, the Labor Party warmly welcomed him back to the fold.

But unfortunately for George Charles, John Compton's return to the party would be short-lived. After the 1961 general elections, disappointed that George Charles and not himself was the one appointed Chief Minister, John Compton along with two other elected members left the Labor government and formed the National Labor Movement Party. Then on April 1, 1964, The Bousquet brothers (J.M.D. and Alan Bousquet), resigned from the Labor Party, citing their dissatisfaction over the 1962 government restructuring of the SLBGA as the reason for their departure. The Labor Party no longer had a majority in the house, so Chief Minister George Charles opted for a premature general elections.

The Fall Of George Charles

To contest these general elections, the John Compton-led National Labor Movement Party joined forces with the People's Progressive Labor Party to form the United Workers Party. At these elections the Labor Party won only two seats, while the United Workers Party, joined by the Bousquet brothers who had run and won as independent Labor candidates, carried eight seats. After the elections the UWP elected John Compton as leader of the party, and John Compton

replaced George Charles as Chief Minister of government. Following the elections, adding insult to injury, the Labor Party lost control of the Castries Town Board.

After Labor's defeat in the 1964 general elections, although George Charles had won his seat, his political stock fell sharply. In 1967 the St. Lucia Labor Party elected Kenneth Foster as political leader, and two years later Charles Augustin replaced George Charles as President of the St. Lucia Workers Union. Following this turn of events, at the prompting of the banana carriers, George Charles established a new labor union, The St. Lucia Agricultural and General Workers Union.

When general elections came along in 1969, the Labor Party found itself embroiled in internal disputes over the assignment of delegates to constituency districts. To sidestep the internal strife, George Charles formed the St. Lucia Labor Party United Front, under which he contested the South Castries constituency. Jean Reynolds, who unsuccessfully contested the Vieux Fort seat, was the only other candidate of that new party. At these elections, the Labor Party won three seats, United Front (George Charles) won one seat, and the John Compton Led United Workers Party won the remaining six seats to once again form the government. George Charles served out his term as elected representative of South Castries and then (at the age of sixty) bowed out of politics, but by then and under his watch the government had reclaimed the Morne from the British, had successfully negotiated the return of the Gros Islet and Vieux Fort bases, had gotten the Americans to build a secondary school in Vieux Fort, and had secured from them St. Jude's Hospital, power stations, water plants and water reservoirs. But more importantly, George Charles had helped lay the political foundation and establish the industrial relations upon which to build a nation.

To place George Charles's accomplishments in proper perspective, it is important to remember that his entire public life had been an uphill battle in which he had never quite reached the top of the mountain or attained a plateau that could afford him respite. Universal suffrage and open general elections came in 1951 but the battle for claiming the island for the majority of its people had just begun. In these elections the SLP had gained a clear majority of elected members in government, yet the first SLP resolution introduced (by George Charles) in the Legislative Council, which sought to legalize holidays with pay, had met with defeat. The ministerial system introduced by Britain in 1956 had loosened the

colonial grip somewhat, but to some extent the hands of George Charles and the other SLP ministers of government were still tied. Responsibility for financial matters was still in the hands of the Governor of the Windward Islands. Legislation proposed by the Executive Council had to receive the endorsement of the Colonial Office in England before they could pass into law. Heads of government departments could override ministerial decisions by lodging their disagreements or complaints with the governor for final ruling. An administrator, appointed by the governor, was still presiding over the Executive Council and was in effect heading the government. Further constitutional changes in 1961 abolished the post of the Governor of the Windward Islands. The role of the administrator who had now become the Queen's representative was reduced to a more ceremonial one, and the Chief Minister had become the head of the government. Still, George Charles's SLP government could not operate with full domestic autonomy. Since the 1930's St. Lucia had been operating under a Grant-in-Aid condition whereby Great Britain had to approve of its annual budget before it went into effect. According to George Charles, under fear of having eventually to pick up the bill, England was bent on crossing out important development projects from the budget, even when the St. Lucian government was willing and able to secure funding elsewhere. Convinced that this British policy was impeding national growth and development, in 1964, at the risk of forfeiting grants and other financial aid from the British, the SLP government opted out of the Grand-in-Aid clause. Clearly, throughout his public life and right up to the very end of his political career, George Charles had been fighting against the plantocracy, against class and racial divisions, against colonial rule, to secure union recognition, workers' rights, political representation for the masses, and to claim the island for the majority of its people.

Nonetheless, the accomplishments attributed to George Charles need to be seen more as the accomplishments of first a labor movement and then a political movement of which George Charles was a member. Therefore, an important question to ask is: Why then was it George Charles who rose to such status? This is a difficult question to answer, because at first glance George Charles may not have been one's first choice for a national leader. Of slight build and mild demeanor he was by no means an imposing figure. He was a graduate of the St. Mary's College, the best education to be had in St. Lucia at that

time. However, quite a few of his colleagues had gone beyond a secondary school education: some were lawyers, some were doctors. There was nothing auspicious about his background and upbringing. He was of a working class family from Marchand. In fact, the one visible trait that may have set George Charles apart was his performance on the political platform. It is said that once up there his diminutive figure would seemingly elevate to six-feet and he would roar like a lion. Nonetheless, besides his

the other Union leaders elected to the Legislature, proclaimed “a private in a general’s uniform is still a private.” On both occasions the doubters of George Charles’ ability had to take back their words. Reporting on the World Labor Conference, Caribbean newspapers depicted George Charles as one of the stars of the conference; and the author of the famous statement “a private in a general’s uniform is still a private” later openly withdrew his statement on account of how impressed he was with the performance of the George

committed and dedicated to the mission of advancing workers rights and claiming the island for the majority of its people. From his memoirs one also gathered that his preferred approach to arriving at decisions was by consensus. This combined with his perceived selflessness would have signaled to his colleagues that with George Charles as leader there was no need to be afraid of being locked out. Unlike many of his colleagues, George Charles didn’t have a profession. After secondary school he worked as a clerk for a few years, then for a year in Aruba and then back to St. Lucia in 1945 when he was swept into the labor movement. The work of the Union and the work of the state had been George Charles’ profession. It appeared that he was a man singular in purpose. All this suggest that what George Charles lacked in physical stature or education he more than made up for in character, dedication and commitment. And what better man to lead, than the one most dedicated and committed to the cause?

Lead, George Charles did, but like Moses of the children of Israel it seemed he was never meant to enter the promised land. For on March 1, 1967, three years after the 1964 general elections ushered John Compton into power, as if divinely ordained, St. Lucia attained Associated Statehood. The country took full control of its internal affairs, while Britain remained responsible for its defense and foreign affairs in consultation with the government of St. Lucia. Under Statehood, the Legislative and Executive Councils were replaced by a Cabinet and a House of Assembly, and the post of the Administrator as the Queen’s representative was filled by a local Governor. The first Governor under this new Constitution was Dr. Frederick J. Clarke. The Cabinet, to be headed by a Premier instead of a Chief Minister, would comprise five ministers, the Attorney General and the Secretary to the Cabinet. The house of Assembly would include the Speaker, ten elected members, three nominated members, and the Attorney General. As the leader of his party, John Compton made history when he became the first (and what would be the only) Premier of St. Lucia.

With statehood, John Compton acquired something George Charles never had—full control of the island’s domestic affairs. This, along with a thriving banana industry that was transforming the socioeconomic and physical landscape of the island, gave John Compton the tools to move beyond the struggle for labor and political rights, to laying down the economic and infrastructural foundation of the country.



George Charles’ funeral procession

platform metamorphosis, one may conclude that there were few tangible clues that would have foretold George Charles’ political rise.

In fact, all along the way there were those who doubted George Charles’ qualifications for the leadership role. In 1949 upon the invitation of the British Trades Union Congress the St. Lucia Workers Union selected George Charles to represent St. Lucia at a “Free World Labor Conference.” The St. Lucian government paid for his boat fare, while the British Trades Union Congress covered remaining expenses. According to George Charles, the occasion engendered much debate in the St. Lucia Legislature, as some questioned his stature and ability to represent the island at an international conference that the government was helping to sponsor. In 1956 when the Legislative Council was debating the change to a ministerial government, a nominated member, referring to George Charles and

Charles led SLP government. These two episodes suggest that all along the way there were doubters of George Charles’ qualifications or ability to lead, and George Charles had a habit of exceeding people’s expectations of him.

To understand George Charles’ appeal, one may have to examine the intangibles. Reports about him suggest that he was a selfless man who habitually placed the interest of the union, the party, the country above his own. As mentioned earlier, radio call-in programs commemorating his death were overloaded with calls from people praising his goodness and generosity, some indicating that he had used his own money to help them build their homes. A generosity that must have come at some personal sacrifice because in George Charles’ later years it was the John Compton led UWP government who had to come to his rescue and build him a home. Comments from observers and a reading of George Charles’ memoirs suggest that he was totally

George Odlum Makes His Entrance

General elections came along in 1974 and for the first time since the 1964 general elections had propelled UWP into power, the Labor Party would become a serious threat. Plagued by droughts, the banana industry was in sharp decline. Mr. Allan Louisy who had recently given up his judgeship at the Supreme Court of the West Indies Associated States to join the political foray had brought a boost of respectability and integrity to a Labor Party that had been riddled with infighting and instability. But above all, George Odlum, the third candidate for the man of the century honors, would join the Labor Party and make his grand entrance onto the St. Lucian political stage, and in the process change the politics of the country.

Even from his teenage years George Odlum seemed destined for leadership, and no matter the field of endeavor he stood above the rest. It was as if stardom was his birthright. At St. Mary's college where he was an honors student and later an English, History and Literature teacher, his goal-keeping (the best on the island by many estimates) was so brilliant and inspiring that teenage boys idolized and hero worshiped him. For those days, Ramanus Lansiquot, a St. Mary's College student of George Odlum, said: "It was an honor for St. Mary's College students to carry George's football boots after a match on Vigie Playing Field, to his home on St. Louis Street, with George leading the march all the way. In fact, we (boys) fought among ourselves to have the great privilege to carry George's football boots in the full view of cheering fans." George Odlum also carried his notoriety into the classroom, which by hindsight almost certainly was a training ground for the spellbinding oratory skills for which he would become famous. Jon, his younger brother, said that as a teacher at St. Mary's College, George Odlum delighted in "bamboozling" his students with Latin and Shakespeare quotes. Victor Marquis, editor of the Voice Newspaper and author of three books, recounted how, at his moonlight graduation party at Rat Island, he and his mentor, George Odlum, lay side by side on their backs, staring at the midnight moon and together recited word for word, from beginning to end,

Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar." During that time George Odlum was also making a name for himself in theatre. He was a member of the famous St. Lucia Arts Guild out of which arose such art and literary giants as Dunstan St. Omer, Garth St. Omer, and the Walcott brothers.

In 1956, at the young age of twenty-two, George Odlum left St. Lucia (apparently on his own resources) for London to pursue his education. According to Jon Odlum, he did not have an easy time there. To survive George Odlum took up some novel occupations, including playing a Turkish dancer in a street festival; and for the first time he took up barbering, his father's old trade. Nonetheless, in England George Odlum's fame followed him to both



the playing field and the classroom. For his heroics between the goalpost the English fondly renamed him the "flying darkie." George Odlum studied at Bristol and Oxford Universities where he earned B.A. and M.A. degrees with concentrations in Philosophy, Political Science, Economics, and English Literature. At Bristol he made history when he became the first black person to captain the university's debating team.

With his Masters and his well-honed debating and speaking skills in hand, George Odlum returned to St. Lucia in 1961 to take up the post of secretary in the Ministry of Trade in George Charles's Labor Government. After three years in that post and coinciding with John Compton's UWP unseating of the Labor Party Government, George Odlum returned to England where he worked as an Economist with the Commonwealth Secretariat. Then in 1967, at the age of thirty-three, George Odlum returned to St. Lucia to take up the prestigious position of the Secretary of the West Indies Associated States Secretariat, and, judging from hindsight, to begin his political career.

Between the time George Odlum left St. Lucia to study and when he took up the secretariat position a lot had changed in African, Caribbean and African American politics. The post World War II African cry for freedom had for the most part been answered. Beginning with Ghana in 1957, three quarters or forty-two out of fifty-six African countries or territories had gained their independence (Egypt and Liberia were independent long before World War II, and Ethiopia was never colonized). The men who led and fought these national liberation movements—Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, Sekou Touré, just to name a few—became not only national idols, but heroes to the whole non-western world. As was to be expected, in the euphoria of independence, the African continent was adopting an increasingly pan Africanist stance. Not to be left out, the English speaking Caribbean territories of Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados had also gained their independence. By then the 1957 Cuban revolution was so firmly instituted that wherever there was a cry for help, Fidel Castro in conjunction with Che Guevera answered with the gospel of armed national liberation and revolution. In America, Martin Luther King had already led his Civil Rights matches and delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech; and the seeds of armed self-defense and black nationalism that Malcolm X was able to sow before his assassination in 1966 was germinating into the Black Panther and Black Power Movements. Worldwide, communism and socialism were on the move and had become the doctrines of choice for oppressed, marginalized, and colonized people seeking to rid themselves of their oppressors who more often than not were of Western European extract and exponents of capitalism. Communism mixed with nationalism had become a potent catalytic brew of societal change. In St. Lucia, with a concoction of Marcus Garveyism or Africanism, nationalism, nature activism, spiritualism, Bob Marley, reggae music and marijuana the Rastafarian Movement was about to launch a social and cultural revolution.

Apparently, all of these cross currents of ideologies, doctrines, movements, and heroic personalities had found a home in George Odlum, to which he added an astute intellect, a potent combination of well honed oratory, literary and theatrical skills, and, it would seem, a born-to-lead

posture and self confidence. Thus George Odlum would emerge on the St. Lucian political scene with slogans and ideologies evocative of communism and black nationalism, with a demeanor and dress code seemingly patterned after revolutionaries like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and with a drama and theatrical flair reminiscent of Shakespearean plays.

Soon after George Odlum's 1967 return to St. Lucia, he took over the Crusader Newspaper and joined the St. Lucia Forum, an avowedly apolitical think-tank that sought to educate the population on the workings and policies of Government, and to act as a watchdog against government corruption, as well as to variously advise, criticize, or praise the government as they saw its actions and policies merited. Besides George Odlum, Peter Josie, a University of the West Indies (UWI) trained agronomist, working with the St. Lucia Ministry of Agriculture, also featured prominently in the St. Lucia Forum. Together, Peter Josie and George Odlum, would become one of the most formidable political duos of St. Lucian politics.

One of George Odlum's defining moments as a member of the St. Lucia Forum was with regard to the Education Act. Before then the island's education system was mostly under the supervision of the Roman Catholic Church. The Education Act, therefore, sought to free the schools from the hands of the Church and place them under government control. However, interpreting the proposed Act as a direct attack on its authority, the church opposed it, and since over 90 percent of the population were Roman Catholic, the government definitely had a fight on its hand. The Forum came out in support of the Education Act. At a Forum rally hundreds of people came out to demonstrate against the Act and the Forum. Facing the hostile crowd, George Odlum had marshaled the best of his oratory and debating skills to first silence the booing assembly, and then have them applaud and agree with him on why the Act was good for St. Lucia. Following the rally, the Act received broad public support and passed into law.

It'll Be Alright In The Morning

In 1972, with the 1974 general elections drawing near, the Forum discarded its apolitical stance, and joined with Julian Hunte (the Mayor of Castries who had recently defected from the UWP) and a

few disillusioned members of the Labor Party to form the St. Lucia Labor Action Movement (SLAM). By then the Forum had gained a good deal of popularity and was credited with improving the people's understanding of the workings of government. It was also credited with instilling a greater appreciation of local products, and with fostering pride in St. Lucia's creole culture. However, despite all these positives, SLAM's public reception was at best lukewarm. It didn't help that the public had linked the Forum, George Odlum especially, to Black Power radicals, and that there was a suspicion that the Forum had communist intentions. It didn't help either that at public meetings George Odlum was dispensing such statements as: "We do not believe in party politics ... We must find another way;" and "the next batch of St. Lucians to fool the people of St. Lucia will be hanged in Columbus Square."

May 1973, barely one year away from general elections, Geest banana workers at the Cul-de-Sac and Roseau Valleys, protesting against low wages and what they perceived as undesirable working conditions, went on a strike that would present George Odlum with yet another defining moment and would allow him and Peter Josie to discover what John Compton and George Charles had discovered long before them. That the quickest way to political fame was not by well meaning (much less self-serving) intellectual forums, but by ingratiating oneself with the cause of workers. Upon the promise of wage increases to be negotiated among Geest, the Minister of Labor, and the Agricultural Workers Union (led by George Charles), workers soon returned to work. However, faced with a fledgling political party, George Odlum and Peter Josie refused to let an opportunity of getting into the good graces of the workers pass them by. Upon their encouragement, the workers resumed the strike and George Odlum and Peter Josie subsequently led a group of workers, allegedly mostly middle-aged and elderly women, on a protest march from the valleys to Castries where they hoped to force a confrontation with Geest Industries. At the Morne they were confronted by police who instructed them to cease from the march and return home because according to regulations a march in Castries required a permit from the Commissioner of Police. The strikers responded that they would rather die than turn back. There was a stalemate. The police fired tear gas into the crowd thus turning George Odlum and Peter Josie into saviors and heroes who were willing to stand with workers even unto death.

The Stoby commission that the

government had appointed to investigate the strike and the problems of the banana industry wasn't similarly impressed. On the contrary, though it would recommend



an increase in wages, the commission's report would state that because of low profit margins the industry could not survive the high wages that the workers were demanding, and that the actions of Peter Josie, George Odlum and Tom Walcott, another member of SLAM, had unnecessarily prolonged the strike. Indirectly accusing the ex Forum members of foul intentions, the report also made clear that acts of violence under the disguise of Black Power or any ideology were not to be tolerated.

Undaunted, following the strike, George Odlum and Peter Josie established the Farmers and Farm Workers Union (of which George Odlum was the first president), thus institutionalizing their struggle for workers rights.

George Odlum and Peter Josie had gained notoriety, but SLAM faced an uphill battle. At Vieux Fort and at Micoud, the stronghold of the Premier, crowds jeered and stoned SLAM party members off their political platform. Defections and membership apathy and disillusionment would soon set in, and before long SLAM was reduced to only three active members—George Odlum, Peter Josie, and Tom Walcott. On the other hand, weakened by defection and a long history of political infighting, the Labor Party wasn't in much better shape than SLAM to contest the 1974 general elections. So, not unlike when the John Compton led National Labor Movement Party had

joined forces with the Peoples Progressive Labor Party to successfully contest the 1964 general elections, just months before the 1974 elections, George Odlum, Peter Josie, and Tom Walcott of SLAM joined forces with the Labor Party. So too did retired Supreme Court Judge, Allan Louisy. Hunter Francois, Minister of Education, who, calling John Compton a liar and a dictator, had resigned from both his ministerial post and the UWP, soon followed the example of the retired Judge. Finally, given this injection of new personnel, it wasn't too difficult to successfully convince some recently defected members of the Labor Party to return to the fold.

And so it was that it came to pass that the Labor Party would amass under its banner the most highly educated political platform to ever grace the St. Lucian landscape. Needless to say, unlike the Labor Party that John Compton had faced in the previous two general elections, he now had a more formidable foe on his hands. It didn't help that with the defection of Julian Hunte and Hunter Francois, considered two of the more capable members of the UWP, his party was thought to have grown weaker. And as if his troubles weren't enough, the banana industry was being strangled by an extended drought.

Yet, miraculously and further adding to John Compton's mythical invincibility, the UWP won the elections by a ten to seven seat majority. But the elections wasn't without drama and controversy. Despite his newly found fame in the Cul de Sac and Roseau banana valleys, which formed part of the constituency of his candidacy, and also despite the fact that he was unquestioningly the best and most charismatic platform speaker of his Party, George Odlum, the man born to lead, lost his seat to Heraldine Rock, a relatively unknown in St. Lucian politics. The Labor Party would have to swallow an even more bitter pill. The vote count on the night of the elections had the SLP candidate for Vieux Fort winning by one vote, but come morning a recounting of the votes pronounced the UWP candidate the victor by over thirty votes, an event so aptly captured by the title *It'll be Alright in the Morning* of a book by Rick Wayne. This irregularity must have no doubt echoed déjà vu in the minds of Labor Party supporters old enough to remember the 1964 elections when many were convinced that Labor Party candidate, Willie Volney, had won by six votes, but only to lose to Allan Bousquet, his UWP opponent, by three votes.

The Passing Of A Great Man

Like a mighty oak
in time's forested valley,
you came crashing down
with a pre-empting thud;
And the smaller oaks around you
twirled and whimpered
at your falling,
While bigger, more towering oaks,
In fraternal sincerity
or impious ostentations,
Bowed solemnly
and sang sweet hosannahs
to your name
that detonated like a cannon.

Petty creatures in the 'hood
put on wings,
and in unnumbered masses,
volleyed over the veiled earth
to see, perchance to touch
That felled thing
that had quaked the muted earth,
Even beyond the rims
Of these pampered shores
that awoke too late
to accept your worth.

And that calvaried place,
The Golgotha of your sanitised
Hospital room
where your ghost
took leave of your mortal remains
and shuttled off to its maker,
The tale is told
of how your tough bark,
Your battle-scarred skin
That had weathered so many storms
seemed pitifully incapable
of containing your hallowed sinews.

Our wretched world,
like mummified Bedouins,
now looks on
at your gravel and mortar castle
that ill-befits your titanic mold,
Vastly ignoring the message of your
dying:
That the peopled earth is in fact one,
as you squeezed that unity
out of beckoned comrades' flesh;
And the last remaining of the Musketeers
squeezed flesh and a tear
In reading those potent lines,
the confiteor of your political gospel;

In parting, you taught too,
That truth is truth,
though we spite the carrier
or scorn the parchment on which it is
inscribed;

And that the forest
that grew that once mighty oak,
Is no more incapable now,
of producing other oaks
to replace felled ones;
That 'the struggle' that took your life
must not die with your passing;
And that, finally
the forest be sheltered
by a canopy of love,
that all may grow unwanted,
Bearing fruit that is pleasing,
till we face the Eternal Logger.

—Modeste Downes

John Compton Is Dethroned

On February 22, 1979, amid heated opposition from the Labor Party, St. Lucia attained its full independence from Britain, thus completing the work of self-rule and self-determination that George Charles had started decades before. With independence, St. Lucia's Parliament would include the Governor General, the House of Assembly and the Senate. The House of Assembly would comprise a Speaker, who may be elected from outside the House, and seventeen elected members. The Senate would comprise eleven Senators, six of whom would be appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister, three upon the advice of the leader of the opposition party and two in consultation with the general community. The Cabinet, which remained the decision making body of government, would include the ministers of government led by a Prime Minister who replaced the Premier as the Chief Executive of government. John Compton made history again when in addition to being the first and only Premier of St. Lucia, he became the country's first Prime Minister.

Besides Independence, 1979 was an election year and despite John Compton's mythical prowess there were many signs that foretold the fall of the UWP. Banana production had remained stagnant. Teachers and other government workers were on strike for retroactive pay and higher wages. The island was plagued with sugar and gasoline shortages.

But equally important, with the experience of one general election campaign under his belt, George Odlum had arrived at the peak of his political

proWess. Dressed in army fatigues, and weaving satire, vivid imagery, literary quotes and St. Lucian creole into an intoxicating web of words, he held St. Lucians and visitors alike spellbound. But his objective wasn't entertainment. When George Odlum was studying in England he was reported to have told a friend that he intended to be the Premier (Prime Minister) of St. Lucia by the time he was forty. Yet George Odlum was about to turn forty-five, and he had tasted not even a parliamentary representative seat, much less the Prime Ministership. Clearly, the 1979 elections was for George Odlum a matter of urgency. As the elections drew near, his platform rhetoric, and that of Peter Josie and some other members of the Labor Party was increasingly laced with promises of a forceful take over of the government if they were to lose the elections. They could be heard announcing, "if we cannot get into power by law, then we will get into power by violence."

Also spelling doom for the UWP was the Labor Party's success in painting John Compton as a dictator, lording it over an inept and corrupt government where nepotism was the norm, and which was


intent on taking from the poor to give to the wealthy. The Labor Party wasn't without help in making their case. As exemplified by its frequent platform cry, "listen to your masters," the UWP displayed great arrogance and an attitude that they were the lords and masters of the people.

According to George Odlum and the Labor Party, conditions in St. Lucia were sufficiently dire or appalling to warrant disposing of the UWP government by any means necessary. And it appeared that these were not idle threats, for it was rumored that the radical members of the Labor Party had a plan in place to overthrow the government a few days before the elections. There were also rumors that the party had sent people to Cuba to train in the art of overthrowing governments, and it had received large caches of arms from Cuba's Fidel Castro and money from Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi. As if to match the platform rhetoric of George Odlum and Peter Josie, in this 1979 election campaign, there was hardly a UWP rally that wasn't aborted by booing, and bottle and stone throwing crowds of Labor Party supporters.

So great was the climate of fear and of pending violence created by the unruliness

of Labor Party supporters, the alleged plots of overthrowing the government, and the platform rhetoric of George Odlum and Peter Josie, that many UWP supporters were said to have stayed home on polling day, hoping for a Labor Party victory and thus preclude the bloodshed that may result from a coup d'etat. The results of the 1979 general elections surprised no one, but brought great relief. The Labor Party won by a twelve to five seat majority. Referring to the pre-election climate of fear that the Labor Party had spread throughout the country, a bitter John Compton said: "The SLP didn't win an election. They hijacked a country."

No matter. This time around George Odlum won his seat, so would he fulfil his self-ordained destiny and become the Prime Minister of St. Lucia? Well, the nation would have to wait another six months to find out.

Note: The second and final part of this article, which will be about the same length as the first part, will be carried in the next issue of *The Jako*. 



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Men of The Century (Part II)

Sir George Charles



William George Odlum



Sir John Compton



by Anderson Reynolds

“George Odlum had thought and voiced that his destiny was to be Premier (Prime Minister) of St. Lucia. In hindsight, it is obvious that he had misread the oracle. The correct interpretation was that he would make such a tremendous impression on the St. Lucian psyche, that his stamp would be forever present and he would be counted among the great of his countrymen.”

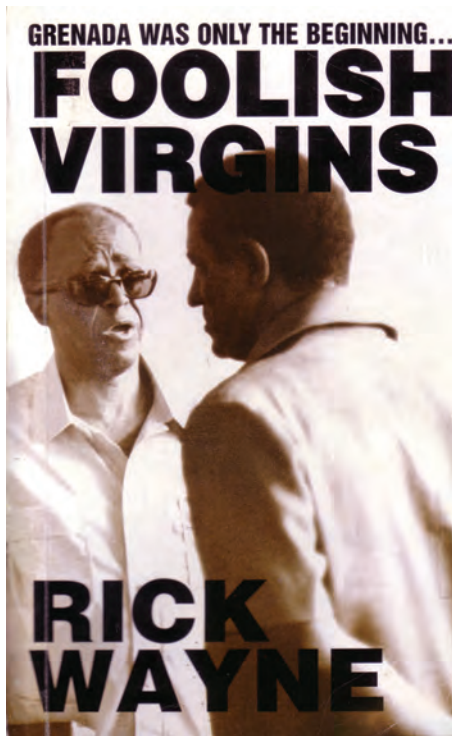
Foolish Virgins

During the 1974 and 1979 campaigns, many saw George Odlum as the rightful and legitimate heir to the party’s leadership. He was charismatic, self confident and no matter in what crowd he found himself it was obvious who the leader was. Not only was he one of the most visible and vocal campaigners of the party, but as a Bristol and Oxford graduate who had held senior national, regional and international administrative and policy-making positions (not to mention his acute intellect and spell-binding oratory skills), he displayed a genuine concern for the poor and the down-trodden. In the eyes of many he was the rightful heir to the legacy of George Charles. However, realizing that as party leader George Odlum’s militancy and combative rhetoric might drive voters away, the party had nominated the ex-judge, Allan Louisy, as Party leader with the understanding that if the party were to win the elections, after six months in office he would relinquish the post of Prime Minister in exchange for the Governorship, thus making way for George Odlum to fulfil his destiny as prime minister of St. Lucia. For his part, Allan Louisy had made it clear right from the start that he required nothing less than the top job for having sacrificed his

judgeship to bring respectability to the Labor Party.

As soon as the Labor Party took its place at the seat of power, by his actions George Odlum made it clear that he didn’t need the title of Prime Minister to function as one. Without first informing the Prime Minister, George Odlum reportedly sent men to Grenada for military training to supposedly form the nucleus of a People’s Revolutionary Army. Although the police department came under the Prime Minister’s Office, it was George Odlum who took to directing the police force. At most international meetings that required the presence of the Prime Minister, more often than not it was George Odlum and not Allan Louisy that would represent the country. For all practical purposes, it seemed that George Odlum was the one running the show.

Several weeks after the Labor Party took power, the UWP came together at the William Peter Boulevard in the center of Castries to, as they said, “say thank you to our supporters.” Besides physically attacking the speakers on stage, the crowd pelted them with human excrement. As John Compton was about to make his way to the stage, he was mobbed, punched and clawed. If not for UWP supporters who came to his rescue he would have no doubt suffered serious injury. All of the UWP platform speakers had to run for safety. The meeting was brought



to an end even before it had began. When the special security unit of the police force arrived on the scene and ordered the crowd to disperse and no one moved, they fired tear gas into the crowd. People responded by stoning the police officers and their vehicles. The officers took cover, and the mob proceeded to smash shop windows and carry away the contents of the stores. By the time things settled, all the stores had been broken into

and their contents carried away by looters. During that same period, the country was subjected to further bouts of lawlessness. Young men, some of whom were escaped prisoners, and some others were among those who had allegedly received arms to overthrow the government had the Labor Party not win the elections, went on an island-wide rampage of rape and armed robbery, such that the police took to shooting them on sight.

Six months expired, but citing that he didn't like the leftist direction in which Mr. Odlum would take the country, Mr. Louisy refused to resign as Prime Minister. The ex-Judge had now placed himself squarely between George Odlum and his much awaited and, in the opinion of some, deserved prize of the prime ministership. The coalition that came together under the banner of the Labor Party began to unglue. The Labor Party split into one faction led by Mr. Allan Louisy, and the other led by Mr. George Odlum. The Louisy faction controlled the party machinery and was considered conservative and middle of the road. The Odlum faction was seen as espousing a radical and left of center political and economic philosophy. There was now a power struggle in government. As the power struggle raged on, the Labor Party became increasingly demoralized. Kenny Anthony, an advisor to the government in the Ministry of Education, quit his post in disgust and sort the sanctuary of the University of the West Indies. The George Odlum faction took every opportunity in the mass media to accuse the Prime Minister of incompetency and indecisiveness.

It seemed that despite George Odlum's irrefutable qualifications for the job, even nature was against him becoming Prime Minister. A few months after the 1979 elections, Hurricane David struck, destroying 70 percent of the island's banana crop. And not to be out-done, the following year Hurricane Allen struck, reducing the banana crop to nought, and leaving the island's infrastructure in shambles. All that when bananas were still recovering from the droughts of the 1970's.

Nonetheless, unmindful of nature, the power struggle went full steam ahead. Less than two years after the Labor Party

formed the government, in protest, the Odlum faction along with the UWP opposition voted down Prime Minister Louisy's 1981 budget. Taking that as a vote of no confidence in his leadership, Allan Louisy resigned from his post and the Governor General, in consultation with the House of Assembly, appointed Mr. Winston Cenac as the new Prime Minister of St. Lucia. The Odlum faction resigned from Cabinet and formed a new political party, the St. Lucia Progressive Labor Party (PLP).

Soon, the PLP joined voices with the UWP in demanding an immediate dissolution of parliament and the calling of fresh general elections. Before long, public support for fresh elections came pouring in. The Teachers' Union and the Civil Service Association went on strike. Cable and Wireless imposed a work stoppage. The island's ports closed down. The Chamber of Commerce ordered a total shutdown of stores and businesses. The country had come to a standstill. So bowing to the will of the people and the opposition parties, on January 15, 1982, the Prime Minister, Winston Cenac, announced that the government had been dissolved, that general elections would be held by July 1, 1982, and that a new government of national unity would preside over the country. The interim government, which would comprise five elected SLP members, and two elected members from each of the remaining parties, would have Michael Pilgrim of the PLP as its Prime Minister.

As Winston Cenac had promised, general elections were held on May 3, 1982. The UWP won fourteen seats, SLP two, and the only PLP to win a seat was Jon Odlum. Once again George Odlum had failed in his bid to become Prime Minister, and for the second time in three elections he had failed to win his seat.

For his part, Mr. Rick Wayne, once again, came to the aid of the nation when he gave perspective to George Odlum and the Labor Party's bungling of the government in his 1986 book, *Foolish Virgins*.

Then, as if by magic, coinciding with John Compton's new reign, the banana industry rebounded, reaching unprecedented production and export levels; the country entered ten years of uninterrupted prosperity, turning it into the envy of the Caribbean, and attracting high praise from such well respected publications as *The Economist*. Riding this wave of prosperity, John Compton and his UWP went ahead and won general elections in 1987 and again in 1992. By then, as one of the longest lasting and most successful political leaders in the Caribbean, John Compton took his place alongside such Caribbean political bulwarks as Michael Manley of Jamaica, Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago and Grantley Adams of Barbados, in the process securing for himself no less an honor than the knighthood.

The End of John Compton's Dynasty

But then came 1993, a year in which, as a result of a depreciation of the British pound and the flooding of the UK market with Latin American bananas, banana prices dropped below most farmers' cost of production. In response, farmers demanded a guaranteed minimum price of 30 cents per pound of bananas, the dissolution of the allegedly corrupt Board of Directors of the St. Lucia Banana Growers Association

(SLBGA), the appointment of a new board, and the streamlining of SLBGA operations to return a larger portion of banana revenues to farmers. If these demands weren't met, farmers threatened to call a banana strike.

Neither the SLBGA nor the government heeded the demands of the farmers, so on Tuesday, October 5, 1993, activist farmers did not only go on strike, refusing to harvest their bananas, but they also took steps to ensure that the fruit of nonstriking farmers never reached the ports. Besides burning the banana sheds of farmers who refused to strike, striking farmers set up barricades of felled trees, burning tires, large vehicle rims, 10 to 14 wheel truck chassis, and derelict vehicles across feeder roads and at various points on the East Coast Highway, rendering them impassable. At the southern village of Desruisseaux, tucked in the interior of the island, farmers stoned tractor-operating police officers attempting to dismantle barricades. In the turmoil, one officer was injured and was rushed to hospital.

All over the east coast, no sooner had police officers removed a blockade than protesters would erect replacement barriers, even if it meant working overnight. The situation got so serious that the Police Department discouraged motorists from using the East Coast Highway, the SLBGA cautioned nonstriking farmers against taking fruit to market, and hotels at the northern end of the island encouraged vacationers arriving at the southern town of Vieux Fort to take air shuttles to the northern city of Castries, instead of the customary ground taxis.

Thursday, October 7, the third day of the strike, as police officers were attempting to unblock the East Coast Highway along the Mabouya Valley, protestors pelted the police with

stones and bottles. A stone hit one police officer, causing serious injury. The police opened fire, killing two of the protestors. These events would spark unprecedented changes in the structure of the banana industry and would mark the beginning of the end of John Compton's dynasty.

Two years later, in 1995, the middle of an election term, John Compton decided it was time, after nearly three decades, to give up the mantle of leadership. But apparently unable to find anyone in his party he deemed worthy of filling his shoes, of continuing his legacy, he selected Dr. Vaughan Lewis, previously Secretary General of the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), nephew of celebrated Nobel Laureate, Sir Arthur Lewis, and son of the distinguished Judge and ex Governor General, Sir Allen Lewis. To hand him the Prime Ministership, the Prime Minister requested of Mr. George Mallet, then UWP elected representative for Central Castries, to step down and allow Dr. Vaughan Lewis to contest the seat in a bye-election. In protest of what he considered John Compton's imposition of Vaughan Lewis on the St. Lucian people, George Odium also entered the contest. Notwithstanding, Dr. Vaughan Lewis won handsomely, and replaced John Compton as Prime Minister. For his part, Mr. Mallet was rewarded with the cushy post of Governor General.

However, the fact the John Compton had to go outside his government to find a suitable replacement for the Prime Ministership exposed one of the greatest weaknesses of his legendary political reign. Beginning with the George Charles era, John Compton had demonstrated an inability and or an unwillingness to work with any one just as or more capable than him.



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The disgust with which both Julian Hunte and Hunter Francois, men considered by many to have been as or almost as capable as John Compton of running the country, were two cases in point. So despite John Compton's glorious accomplishments, by surrounding himself only with people who had no designs on his job or who posed no threat to his leadership, he failed St. Lucia and the UWP in a big way.

Yet on second thought, this predisposition of John Compton's may have been what led to his singularly greatest accomplishment. Most of the development that took place under John Compton can be viewed as a function of the success of the banana industry, the outside world's discovery of St. Lucia as a vacationing spot, world technological development (into which St. Lucia had little or no input), development aid, the simple passage of time (a modernizing world), and population growth providing a critical mass for products and services. In other words, once the country had remained politically stable, most of the development St. Lucia enjoyed under John Compton may have happened irrespective of who was at the helm. But maintaining political stability and inspiring in the outside world confidence in the economic and political stability of your country is nothing to laugh at. After all, a look around the world would suggest that political stability is a prerequisite for economic development. Or for that matter, consider how the 1979 Labor Party power struggle crippled the country, despite the fact that in terms of education and talent, previous and even subsequent UWP governments fell far short of this 1979 Labor Party Government. Therefore, John Compton's shrewdness in maintaining a strong hold on his government and tolerating no insubordination or potential insubordination, allowed him to achieve the political stability that was so lacking in the Labor Party since the end of George Charles's reign. This probably was John Compton's most significant contribution to the country.

Interestingly, people are now accusing Dr. Kenny Anthony, the current Prime Minister of St. Lucia, of being a dictator, the same label that not too long ago was being applied to John Compton. One wonders whether the only way Caribbean governments can work smoothly is for them to have strong, almost dictatorial leadership at the helm. With the political culture as it is, where every government minister may have their own personal agenda, it may well be that the only way to minimize government corruption is to have a Prime Minister that keeps close tabs on all ministries of government. Clearly, a very non-empowering and inefficient way to conduct business. But maybe the lesser of evils given the climate of laxity, irresponsibility and unaccountability that pervade these societies.

General Elections came again in 1997, and it seems now that John Compton had given up the Prime Ministership, all the forces of nature and the country had aligned themselves against the UWP. Since the 1993 strike, banana production and exports had continued to fall. Dr. Kenny D. Anthony, the education advisor under

the failed 1979 SLP government who, in the middle of the SLP debacle had sought sanctuary at the University of the West Indies where he was serving as a law professor, returned just in time to take over the leadership of the Labor Party and contest the general elections. George Odlum, who at the time was the St. Lucia Ambassador to the United Nations, resigned from his post and returned to St. Lucia to contest the elections as a Labor Party candidate. Such was the mass support for the Labor Party that it seems all groups and organizations were campaigning for the party. The Civil Service Association; The Teachers Union; youth and sports organizations across the nation; Rick Wayne, St. Lucia's leading journalist; and banana farmers with memory of the tragic 1993 banana strike, all threw in their support.

The results of the 1997 elections was tantamount to a bloodless coup. The Labor Party won by a 16 to 1 majority. In this Kenny Anthony led Labor Party government, George Odlum, who this time around had won his seat, was made the minister for foreign affairs. However, towards the end of his term, accusing the government of playing a game of *bèlèlesh* (smoke and mirrors) and advocating "bikini budgets," he resigned from his post, and, not unlike 1982 when he had joined forces with John Compton to oust a discredited SLP government, in 2001 Mr. Odlum again teamed up with the then retired John Compton to form a political alliance with which they hoped to successfully contest the next general elections and then introduce a government of national unity. In that alliance, a group of concerned citizens appointed George Odlum political leader, John Compton president, and Dr. Morella Joseph (leader of the UWP) vice president.

Besides still wanting to fulfil his dream of becoming Prime Minister, one sensed that George Odlum had some other reasons for ditching the Labor Party. Wary of his left of center ideology and recognizing his prominent role in the fall of the 1979 Labor Government, the 1997 SLP Government had gone to great pains to ensure that George Odlum had only a very marginal role in the internal workings of the party and the government. So much so, that between George Odlum and the Prime Minister were two deputy Prime Ministers. So, above all other reasons, it was probably this ostracism that caused George Odlum to rebel against



his party.

For his part, John Compton conceded that the government had made a shambles of the economy in general and the banana industry in particular. He said that many businesses and well-respected citizens had come to him with the suggestion of forming an alliance to save the country from the economic mismanagement of the Dr. Kenny Anthony-led Labor government. Yet one could well imagine that in John Compton's mind this new alliance would serve the same purpose as the PLP and the National Labor Movement Party alliance (nearly four decades before) that had provided him the vehicle with which to dominate the country's politics for three decades. Still, one could not help but suspect that another reason John Compton felt compelled to come out of retirement was to protect his legacy, which, since the SLP had attained power, had been under constant verbal assault.

Nevertheless, just when the Alliance had gained national acceptance and momentum and had become a serious threat to the Labor Party's rule come next elections (and in the eyes of many, represented the country's only hope of removing Dr. Kenny Anthony and his Labor Party from power), a leadership struggle developed between George Odlum and John Compton.

George Odlum accused John Compton of an unwillingness or inability to subordinate himself to anyone. And John Compton protested George Odlum's close ties with Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi and the potential harm that could bring to St. Lucia.

At a National Alliance Assembly, which George Odlum chose not to attend, John Compton was unanimously elected political leader of the Party. George Odlum denounced this new election as illegitimate and insisted that he was the political leader. Exasperated with the rivalry between the two men, and concluding that they were causing more harm than good, Dr. Morella Joseph divorced her United Workers Party from the Alliance and proceeded to prepare her party for general elections. But refusing to give up his dreams, George Odlum forged ahead with the much weaker and smaller National Alliance Party, of which he became the undisputed political leader. Mr. Compton on the other hand threw his support behind Dr. Morella Joseph and the UWP.

General elections were due in May 2002, yet the once formidable Labor Party that had come to power with an enviable 16 - 1 majority was now on shaky grounds because of a failing economy (due largely to a weakening tourism sector and a banana industry in shambles).

The UWP, historically a well organized and functioning party, was in disarray and its breakup with the Alliance had left it scrambling to regroup.

The National Alliance, which was never on solid ground to begin with, was sinking. The leadership struggle and the subsequent withdrawal of the UWP had caused people to lose faith in the party. More so because this was the very same party that was preaching government of national unity. Furthermore, without the UWP the National Alliance didn't have the necessary machinery with which to seriously contest a general election.

Recognizing its predicament of a weak economy, the Labor Party was quick to capitalize on the unpreparedness of the National Alliance and the UWP. It called early elections for December 3, 2001.

Two other parties, the Staff Party and the Freedom Party,

joined the fight. But to many they were only of 'nuisance value.'

The polls proved that the Labor Party had gambled correctly. The unpreparedness and disarray of the Alliance and the UWP were too great to defeat a well organized and functioning Labor Party, even one facing a failing economy. On December 3, 2001, the St. Lucia Labor Party returned to power with a 14 - 3 majority, making it the second consecutive elections that the party had won by a landslide, and thus leaving one to wonder whether George Odlum's dream of a one party state had finally become a reality.

The Death of George Odlum

Regarding dreams, George Odlum's Alliance won not even one seat, (the UWP winning all three opposition seats), so once again George Odlum had failed to achieve his ultimate claim to fame. This would prove his last chance, because two years later, on September 28, 2003, he passed away at the age of sixty-nine after a year-long battle with pancreatic cancer. Nonetheless, realizing that "important Caribbean



thinkers" were passing away without due recognition of their contributions to society, while George Odlum was on his death bed, St. Lucia made plans to celebrate his life with an evening rally of speeches and cultural presentations at the Derek Walcott Square in Castries. Unfortunately, George Odlum died on the morning of the same day of the rally, but fortunately he was aware that he was being honored. A few weeks later, George Odlum would receive further honor when the Jubilee Trust Fund celebrated his contributions to the creative arts with the publication of an anthology of poems titled, *Roseau Valley and other Poems for Bro. George*. The Fund also established a George Odlum Foundation, and an annual George Odlum Grant for creative artists.

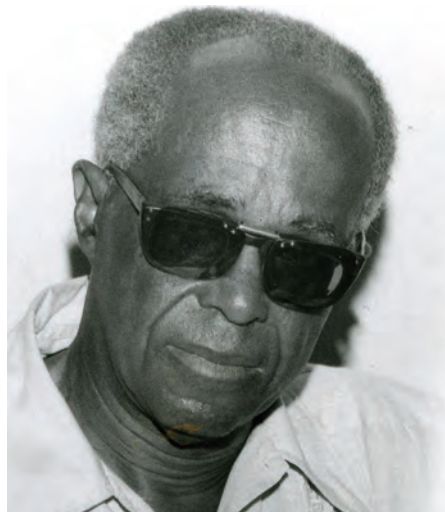
George Odlum's death was indeed an all consuming national (and even international) affair. The author could not recall any other public figure whose passing so touched the nation (the author included), left the nation with such a void, such a sense of loss, such a sense that St. Lucia (and the world) will never be the same now that George Odlum was no longer in it.

George Odlum's funeral was fit for a king. The funeral procession started in Vieux Fort, some forty miles from Castries, its final destination, and all along the way crowds came to greet the procession and to pay their last respects to the fallen leader. The

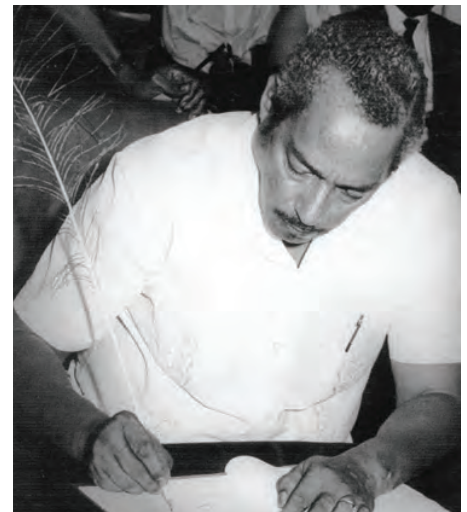
The Prime Ministers of St. Lucia



Sir John Compton



Allan Louisy



Winston Cenac



Michael Pilgrim



Dr. Vaughan Lewis



Dr. Kenny Anthony

procession made a stop at the Cul de Sac Valley, where George Odlum had fought so many battles for farm workers. In Castries, before heading to Victoria Park for the funeral ceremony, the procession also stopped at the Castries Market Steps, giving due recognition to the platform from which George Odlum had so many times held a nation spellbound. An eye witness to the funeral ceremony, writing in the *Mirror*, said, "In death the man popularly known as 'Brother George' got what he enjoyed in life. A marathon funeral at the Mindoo Philip overflowed with lengthy and sometimes fiery tributes and passionate eulogies to a life of sporting prowess, colorful oratory, political mobilization and public service ... Hundreds attended the service ... where followers, friends and representatives of fraternal political organizations from Antigua, Barbados, and St. Vincent recalled a great orator and integrationist."

Presiding over the ceremony, Monsignor Patrick Anthony said, "We are gathered here today for the funeral of a native son. In the inimitable Georgian style, he who transformed the political platform on Jeremie Street into the University of the Market Steps has today transformed Mindoo Philip Park into a people's Cathedral."

In the days and weeks following George Odlum's death,

over forty lengthy tributes appeared in the nation's newspapers. Their titles, moreso their contents, told the whole story: *He Would Be King; Touched By An Angel; St. Lucia Has Lost An Astute Statesman; Drums Roll For Bro George; George United Them; Reflections of Brother George; Politician Journalist Philanthropist; Brother George Remembered; They Cannot Stand In Your Shoes Brother George; Sing Hosanna, Farewell Brother George, I Still Love You; The Multifaceted Persona of George Odlum; Was Odlum Misunderstood to the Last; Would George's Death Unite Our Nation; Brother George Odlum: A Recognized Member of The Caribbean Literati; Labor's Lost Leader; St. Lucia and the Region Celebrate the Life of George Odlum; George Odlum Gone But Remembered.*

The *Mirror* said: "In death, as in life, St. Lucia's enigmatic politician and master orator, George William Odlum, knocked down icons and grabbed mass attention." The Prime Minister of St. Vincent, Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, said: "George was always full of insight and nuance analysis. His magisterial grasp of literature, history, politics, philosophy, economics, and Caribbean *picong* made him at once teacher, practitioner, sage, and raconteur ... George was among the best ever in the region as an articulator of progressive ideas, the lifter of the people's conscious-

ness and the mobilizer towards noble ends.” Jeff Fedee said: “George was a colossus who bestrode the political, social, and intellectual landscape of St. Lucia like a giant, compared to our pygmy existence ... I feel quite worthless when I measure my role and contribution to life, with that of George Odlum.” Nicholas Joseph said: “Odlum’s politics gave birth to a nation of progressive sons and daughters. He aroused their curiosity and consciousness and inspired a cadre of youth to commit their lives to public service.” David Vitalis of the *Mirror* said: “Odlum was a man dedicated to the promotion of critical thought. Many young men acquired their political consciousness from Odlum and his political twin Peter Josie who challenged the status quo at public political meetings.” Dr. Edel Edmunds, former St. Lucia’s Ambassador to the UN, said: “He (George Odlum) exuded a diversity in thought and action emerging as George the scholar, and philosopher, accompanied by George the orator, George the actor, George the master of the stage, and George the dramatist.” Cletus Springer, columnist for the *Mirror* said: “To some, he (George Odlum) was a dealer in hope, who frequented



the ghettos spreading a cocktail of well-chosen words that encouraged the *Malaway* (the poor) to raise their heads to behold a sky, full of limitless opportunities.” Former Prime Minister of St. Lucia, Dr. Vaughan Lewis, said: “His (George Odlum’s) was a politics of relentless perseverance, reflecting the nature of his life in other spheres of endeavor.” Mary Bruce said, “Everybody loved Brother George; Brother George just had to say walk, and everybody would walk; He would say Strike! And everybody would strike. With Brother George at the helm, nobody was afraid of anything.” Julian Hunte, St. Lucian UN Ambassador and President of the UN General Assembly, said: “George Odlum was a visionary who understood that for St. Lucia to be truly independent a strong and cohesive nation had to be built.” The St. Lucian government said, “As Foreign Minister, Mr. Odlum was the architect of the government’s foreign policy, the highlight of which was the establishment of relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).” Frank Girard of Daher Broadcasting Service (DBS) said: “Brother George had been responsible for the political awakening of a whole generation of St. Lucians as far back as the 1960’s onwards.” Denis Da Breo, editor of the *One Caribbean*, said: “George was a man many years before his time.”

The Greatness of George Odlum

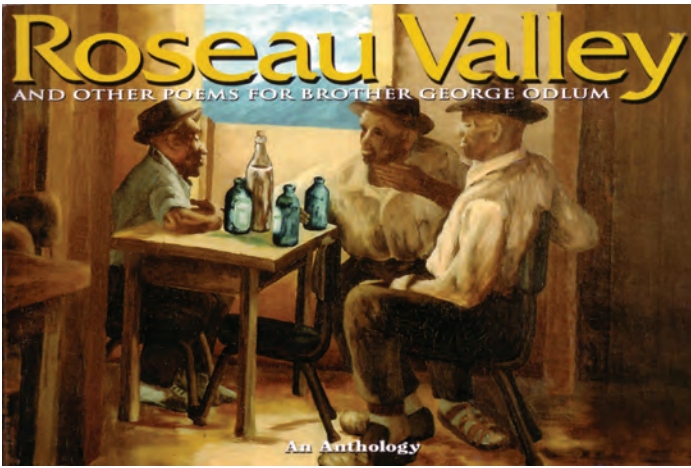
Just about all the tributes to George Odlum said he was a great orator, a great thinker, an accomplished writer, a man of the theater, a great athlete, and that he raised political consciousness. It is society that bestows the title of greatness on an individual, and as these outpourings indicate, St. Lucia and beyond said loud and clear that George Odlum was a great man. So then what was the principal source of George Odlum’s greatness?

That George Odlum was probably the greatest orator to come out of St. Lucia and one who could hold his own among the World’s best was clear to see. But being a great orator is not a sufficient condition, in and of itself, to warrant the man of the century honors.

While it was clear that George Odlum was a great orator, it wasn’t as clear that he was a great thinker. An acquaintance with socialist and communist philosophy and a reading (or a listening)

of the works (or rhetoric) of such personalities as Eric Williams, CLR James, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, and nationalist African leaders of the fifties and sixties, suggest that George Odlum’s political thinking was nothing new. It could be argued that most of George Odlum’s political failures resulted from his tendency of imposing ideologies obtained from abroad on a St. Lucian society at odds with the premises of these ideologies.

George Odlum came of age and was educated in an era where revolutions disposing of colonial and dictatorial governments were commonplace. It was also the era when communist ideology was finding a home in the oppressed peoples of the Third World. In most, if not all, of the countries where revolutions came to past, conditions there were begging for a revolution. Clearly, the racism and cruelty that African Americans were facing in America warranted the black nationalist, and armed self-defense rhetoric and ideologies of Malcolm X. The wholesale exploitation of the Cuban people for the benefit of a few Cubans and for the entertainment of fun seeking Americans certainly was sufficient justification for Fidel Castro to dispose of the Fulgencio Batista regime. Under England’s oppressive and debilitating colonial rule, India and Pakistan were more than justified in using their all to gain their independence. After being subjected to centuries of brutal European exploitation, who could blame the Africans for crying out “Africa for Africans.” And in Grenada, with Eric Gairy, the Prime Minister, using his Mongoose Gang to assassinate and intimidate opposition leaders,



one could well understand and appreciate the Grenadian Revolution.

But in St. Lucia, where since 1951 general elections have come and gone like clockwork, where throughout the island's political history there has been only two instances in which there were reason to suspect that a ballot box may have been tampered with, where there are few or no known cases of government embezzlement of public funds, and where there has been little restraint on freedom of speech and of the press (especially those not under government control), George Odlum's call for a revolution, for the forceful overthrow of the government, was clearly at odds with the St. Lucian reality. More so when one considers that the Labor Party's failures in the later half of the sixties and in the seventies probably had more to do with the internal strife and squabbles that rendered the party innocuous than with the population being enamored with the John Compton led UWP government.

To displace the UWP government, George Odlum and the Labor Party would have needed to put aside their pettiness and individual ambitions for the good of country and party and present a united political front. But instead, George Odlum went to great lengths to paint a picture of St. Lucia that fitted his imported ideologies. It appeared that George Odlum was a man with a ready-made ideology and a preordained existentialism or state of being, looking for a country on which to experiment. If the country didn't fit the ideology, well, no problem, he simply had to use his gift of words to make the necessary adjustments. People were often befuddled about some of George Odlum's political decisions. The discrepancy between George Odlum's ideologies and ideals and the St. Lucian reality may go a long way in explaining some of his seemingly inexplicable political stances.

Borrowing ideas (especially if they are good ideas) is not necessarily a bad thing, but it doesn't classify one as a great thinker. A great thinker is an original thinker. George Odlum did not leave any books behind chronicling his life and ideas. However, as the owner of, and a major contributor to the *Crusader*, he left plenty of newspaper articles and editorials behind. Many of the articles were witty, satirical, informative (especially those that focus on topics other than politics), and well crafted. But for the most part they were meant as attacks on rival political parties and personalities. They were not well developed thought processes where the author deliberated and expanded on his ideas. Neither were they well developed pieces

diagnosing and analyzing St. Lucian society. So while George Odlum's writings may have been reflective of an acute intellect and a gifted writer, they may not have pronounced him a great thinker.

George Odlum dabbled into the world of art and theater, but his dedication to and involvement in these undertakings wasn't sufficiently pronounced to have left a body of work in the manner of say the likes of the Walcott twin brothers, or Dustan St. Omer, or Garth St. Omer, or at least nothing to come close to bestowing upon him the honor of a great man of the arts and theater. In sports his heroics between the goalpost was the stuff legends are of, but clearly (by itself) this youthful preoccupation wasn't of sufficient national import to qualify him as a great man.

Among all the attributes people cited (in their tributes, in their calls to radio and television programs and in informal interviews conducted by this magazine) as evidence of George Odlum's greatness, the one most often repeated and given the greatest emphasis was that he raised the political consciousness of the nation. No one explained or went into any great detail as to what exactly they meant by political consciousness and what was this consciousness that he raised. Notwithstanding George Odlum's many talents, the greatest part of his working life was spent as a politician and a newspaper man (a journalist, to be more exact). Both occupations have to do with raising awareness, so it is fitting that the public would point to his success at raising political consciousness as probably his most significant contribution to the nation. So maybe, therein lies George Odlum's single greatest claim to greatness. To investigate this claim, it may help to delve into the nature of the political consciousness that George Odlum raised.

George Odlum's politics was one of inclusiveness. No citizen was too low to bypass his gaze. He brought in people—small farmers, the unemployed, laborers, stevedores, rastafarians—into the political fold who had long been designated second class citizens and relegated to the margins of St. Lucian society. George Odlum was a great humanist. He embraced every St. Lucian with a warmth, understanding, empathy, and brotherly love that said no matter your status in life, you too are deserving of love, of citizenship; you too are welcomed into the family of nationhood. He made those considered the least in society to realize that St. Lucia was as much theirs as it was that of the head of state; that they too were deserving of decent housing, jobs, livable wages, and of sending their children to secondary schools, and to colleges and universities. He made them believe not only were they deserving of these things, but it was their right to fight for it, to demand it of their government. George Odlum impressed upon the forsaken that they were just as important to the development of the country as the doctors, lawyers, and big shot business people; that they too had an important role to play in the country's development.

He dared the populace to dream, to aspire to better and greater things. He dared them to look beyond St. Lucia as a colony or ex-colony to a country that can forge its own identity, that can determine its own destiny. He made St. Lucians understand that they were no less bright, no less beautiful, no less intelligent, no less creative than any people in any other part of the world. George Odlum, Peter Josie, and the other members of the St. Lucian Forum were the ones who popularized the use of St. Lucian creole on the political platform. Hitherto, even though patois was the mother tongue of the country, it was regarded as

vulgar, slave language, the language of the uncouth and uneducated. By bringing patois into vogue, Odlum and his group said in effect that patois was on par with the languages of the colonial masters, and if so then St. Lucians were on par with the people who had enslaved and colonized them. They said in effect that to speak patois was to be St. Lucian, that the best patois speakers (who were mostly rural folks), those who probably couldn't speak a word of English, were the quintessence St. Lucians. George Odlum and the Forum impressed upon St. Lucians that things local, things inherently St. Lucian, were to be honored and appreciated above things from outside.

George Odlum said that when he returned to St. Lucia after his studies in England, he realized that slavery, colonialism, and Roman Catholicism had inculcated in St. Lucians a culture of servitude, of an acceptance of their fate or station in life, of docility in the face of religious and government authority. He also recognized that the laws, institutions and customs that St. Lucia had inherited from the French and English weren't designed with the best interest of the people (who now populated the island) in mind, but for the benefit of the plantation owners and the colonial powers who saw it as being in their best interest to keep the population in servitude.

For the most part, the George Charles-led labor union turned political party had been a voice of protest and a struggle for the rights of the working class. Under John Compton, aided by bananas, the country made great socio-economic strides, but the government had operated more or less within the structure and institutions laid down by Britain. But these were the same structures and institutions that George Odlum was seeing as not being in the best interest of the majority of St. Lucians, and which were helping to perpetuate the self-defeating culture and patterns of behavior that the people had been forced to adopt to survive. George Odlum must have been keenly aware that though the reigns of government were now securely in the hands of people who had risen from among the populace, the real power, the economic power, were still in the hands of a minority of people, remnants of the decedents of the island's slave and colonial masters. Maybe it was for this reason that George Odlum hadn't simply concerned himself with getting into power, but spoke of revolutionary changes.

George Odlum, Peter Josie and the Labor Party showed great disdain for tourism (which probably to them was reminiscent of slavery) and they talked of nationalizing industries. George Odlum often questioned the appropriateness of the Westminster style of government for St. Lucia. He saw what passed as democracy as a hoax, a farce on the people of St. Lucia. Because according to him, how could a country be truly democratic when it possesses a largely uneducated and timid population who could easily be cowed into submissiveness and whose

vote could be easily bought with a few dollars, a shot of rum, a promise of a job. Instead, George Odlum proposed a single party system in which the best minds would come together to work in the best interest of the country.

Of course, some may have seen that as self-serving when the chief proponent of such a system was already convinced, and made no bones about it, that he possessed the best of the best minds and therefore he would naturally be the one heading this single party system. And there is also the concern of how does the country go about changing the government if the great majority of people become dissatisfied with its performance.

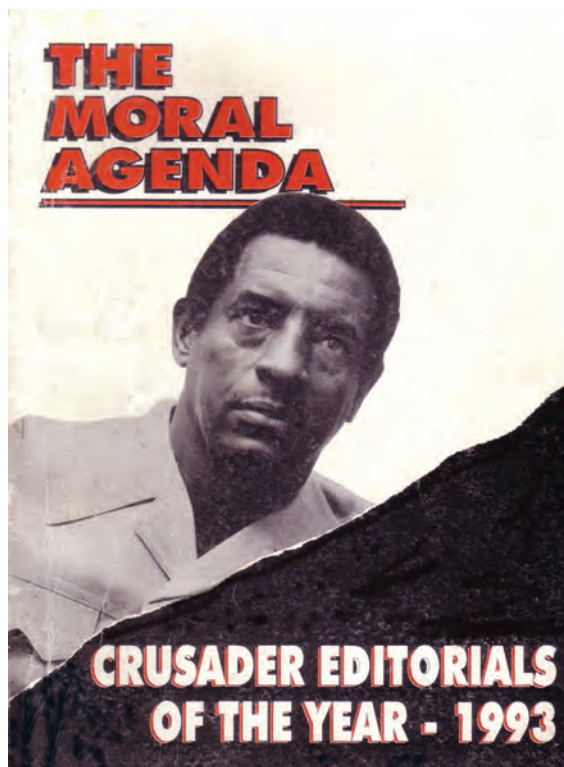
Indeed, George Odlum wasn't convinced that simply changing governments would have changed the real economic and power structure of the country. Hence the reason he wasn't simply interested in replacing John Compton as leader of the

country, but he wanted to radically break away from the country's colonial and slave legacy and instead to begin the work of fostering black pride, national identity and self-realization. He hoped to begin the process of mending the psychological damage of self-loathing and inferiority that slavery and then colonialism had heaped on St. Lucians. On the political platform George Odlum often said that when the Labor Party got into power the people would be free. It seemed that what George Odlum was trying to say was that for the first time since the ancestors of the majority of St. Lucians left the shores of Africa and India there was hope of total freedom—physical, mental, spiritual, economical, political.

As mentioned before, George Odlum wasn't the first person to dream of these ideas. Neither was he the first St. Lucian to go about educating the people on their political rights, their rights as citizens, their moral right to have

access as anyone else to the best the country had to offer. Labor unions had always seen it as part of their function and responsibility to educate their members and the general public on their rights as workers and citizens and on the main goals and objectives of unionism. In fact, the union didn't have a choice but to focus on educating its membership. In the early days the unions faced an overwhelmingly illiterate labor force who saw the union simply as an organ to address their individual grievances with their employers. The big picture of collective bargaining and representation was lost on most workers. One of George Charles's first duties upon joining the St. Lucia Cooperative Workers Union back in 1945 was to conduct adult education classes with the modest goal of teaching union members to read and write, at least up to the point where they could sign their names, understand basic union goals and operations, and safeguard themselves against employers shortchanging their wages. The business of raising political awareness among the masses has been around ever since the inception of labor unions and political parties.

If George Odlum's nationalistic ideas didn't originate with



him, and if it is true that from since the early 20th century St. Lucians have been engaged in the raising of political consciousness, why is it then that George Odlum is the one who is being singled out for this honor?

First, George Odlum may not have originated the ideas, but he was at the cutting edge of radical and nationalistic world politics. In the sixties, when George Odlum began making an impression upon St. Lucia, cable television news, the ubiquitous worldwide web, and the personal computer were still decades away. Meaning that St. Lucia's exposure to the outside world was extremely limited. This combined with the fact that St. Lucia was

Pays Natal

This god-sent pebble of my birth,
Fixed for all time in waters
Reeking of the stench from the armpits of history,
In better times laced with glittering sands
In whose laps weary waves came to rest their surfing curls;

This apostolic dot of earth
That homes amnesiac minions
Disendowed of all ancestral endowments,
Now dares to claim a voice where lion-nations disassemble.

This pinprick with hardly a worth,
A near still-born in the womb of impotence
Lactating at the breast of long-deceased empires,
Devoid of a will, she stretches out
For the stone-clenched hand of Ben-E-Factor.

This nowhere of an island-state,
Latched to other fetuses of common phallic jerk
Shaken off like grains of sand and abandoned,
Suffers the faticidal stampede for baited crumbs.

This sun-encumbered chunk of rock,
Catapulted by David's sling
To land here, and forever anchored,
Is marked to emerge and shape destinies for many.

This lethargic, rheumatoid speck,
Fallen moat from creation's eye,
Shall rise, like a phoenix,
From the ashen cleavages of sulphuric breasts,
To fashion a people fit for nationhood.

This paradisaical, brown-green stone,
Where the iguana and Laureate are brothers,
Where the lozèi and periwinkle lie in warm embrace,
Where the Rose and Magwit wage war in jest only;

This incomparable rock, whose divine mamelles
Defy gravity, never bent heavenward,
Stands as the ultimate poem, written by the finger of God,
Her every gesture a dress rehearsal for the grand recital.

—Modeste Downes

a poor, backward island (even in comparison to other West Indian islands), hugely uneducated, with only a select few possessing a secondary, much less a college education, suggests that George Odlum with his acute intellect and exposure to the crosscurrents of world ideas gathered during his stay in England and on his regional and international jobs, was far ahead of most St. Lucians in his thinking. George Odlum, therefore, was well equipped, probably more so than his predecessors, for the job of raising political consciousness. In fact, probably it was because George Odlum was far ahead of most St. Lucians in his thinking that so many thought of him as a great thinker, an original thinker. On a world stage George Odlum may not have been praised as a great thinker (a radical politician, yes), but for St. Lucians he was indeed a first.

Second, to really educate people, to guarantee that whatever you are preaching will sink in deep into their psyche and to get them to act upon what they have learned, you have to first grab their undivided attention, you have to speak in a language that they can understand, you have to bring out the relevance of your teachings to their lives, you have to clothe the teaching in a substance that would make it appetizing, chewable, easy to swallow and then digestible. As said above, George Odlum didn't just have ideas, he was at the cutting edge of radical nationalistic politics. But could he deliver?

It is here that all the other talents of George Odlum that I have discarded as being insufficient in and of themselves to bestow upon him the status of greatness come into play. George Odlum used his lively intellect, his oratorical prowess, the flair that had turned his goal keeping into an art, and his knowledge and understanding of literature, drama and theater to mesmerize and hold the nation spellbound, to have people begging for more of what he was offering, to have them waiting patiently and eagerly for hours in the hope of hearing him just one more time. George Odlum's brilliance at holding a crowd in awe was such that no one, supporter or foe alike, could leave his audience without feeling touched, without feeling that they had witnessed a phenomenon, without sensing that they had been through an unforgettable experience. It was under such a spell that George Odlum told the people that they can rise above their current station in life and soar with the best from any part of the world, that he empowered the nation with the thought that their destiny was in their own hands, that excellence and perfection had more to do with attitude, discipline, hard work, mental fortitude than the size of one's country or the amount of resources it possesses, that it was time that St. Lucians unshackled their minds from their slavery and colonial past and be free for real. This was the opium of change that George Odlum preached, this is what one suspects that both his detractors and admirers meant when they said that George Odlum raised the nation's political consciousness, and probably it is for that, above all else, that they have pronounced him a great man.

So the man who never presided over a government, who never completed a full political term in office, who was one of the chief architects of the country's worse political debacle, a debacle that according to John Compton set the country ten years back, is being mentioned in the same breath as George Charles who helped lay the political foundation and established the industrial relations upon which the nation was built, and John Compton who, taking off where George Charles left off, laid down the economic and infrastructural foundation of the coun-

try, and who was considered one of the Caribbean's most successful and effective political leaders.

George Odlum had thought and voiced that his destiny was to be Premier (Prime Minister) of St. Lucia. In hindsight, it is obvious that he had misread the oracle. The correct interpretation was that he would make such a tremendous impression on the St. Lucian psyche, that his stamp would be forever present and he would be counted among the great of his countrymen.

This is not surprising, for the men and women whose names never seem to recede to the backlog of history are not necessarily the great warriors and builders of nations, the great emperors and Kings, but those whose weapons were ideas and precepts, and whose battlefields were the hearts and minds of nations. I am talking about the Jesus Christ's, Shakespeare's, Muhammad's, the Buddha's of the world.



Peter Josie

George Odlum: The Error of his Ways

However, notwithstanding George Odlum's greatness, it came with side effects. So intent was he on changing the course of history, on displacing the John Compton regime, on wiping out the final vestiges of slavery and colonialism, that he was willing to use any and every means. Thus, in advocating that if the Labor Party couldn't get into power by law, then they would get into power by violence, and then backing this up with stock piles of ammunition (and willing candidates to use these weapons), he was saying in effect that it is o.k. for citizens to use violence to achieve their goals.

The same way that soldiers find it necessary to dehumanize their enemy before they could bring themselves to slaughtering them, in attempting to change the system George Odlum went about denigrating the nation's institutions of authority. A perfect example of that was the occurrence in the House of Assembly, January 11, 1982, in the middle of the famous Labor power struggle, when George Odlum initiated playing catchers with the mace, the very symbol of governmental authority. Another example, was George Odlum's sanctioning of his supporters' jeering and physically abusing members of the opposition party at their political rallies. This behavior and attitude on the part of George Odlum may have signaled to the population that once they disagreed with the government or with any other authority it was ok to disrespect them, to verbally and physically abuse them. It is not far fetched to suggest that George Odlum may have helped foster in St. Lucia a culture of incivility and disrespect of authority.

That was why I thought it was ironic when, after the December 31, 2000 Castries Cathedral killings, perpetrated by two misguided young men, George Odlum said that he took some of the blame for the atrocity because he had allowed himself to lose touch with the common elements of the society. If he had made it his duty to be around, he may have been able to avert

the incident. The irony was not that George Odlum accepted blame for the travesty, but he accepted blame for the wrong reasons. His source of blame was the culture of violence he had helped give rise to. It was even more ironic that Peter Josie, who in the heyday of his political career was an even greater proponent than George Odlum of the use of violence to achieve political ends, recently led a march against the escalating violence in the country.

However, as I said earlier, it is the people that bestow the honor of greatness on individuals. Despite the fact that George Odlum's advocacy of violence is common knowledge, since his death few have voiced such an opinion, and when one so ventured, his comments have been heavily criticized. Maybe the public have been willing to overlook this indulgence of George Odlum's because they thought that this was the only way the system could have been shaken up, the only way that (to borrow a term from

Rick Wayne), the "John Compton Institution" could have been dismantled. But what is meant by the John Compton institution? Well, considering that John Compton presided over the country for so many years and during so many of the critical points in the islands history, many of the entrenched people in positions of authority were sympathizers of John Compton; also many people had come to believe that John Compton was the only one that could hold the country together, that to consider somebody else for the job was to court disaster. This was another mythical hold that John Compton had on the country. After all, he wasn't called "Daddy Compton" for nothing. At independence, St. Lucians twenty-five years and younger had memory of only one person—John Compton—ever heading the government.

Maybe another reason St. Lucians were willing to overlook this aspect of George Odlum's political career was because on his death bed he had apparently seen his error. He spent his last breath talking about healing the nation, and making amends with the likes of his protégé, Dr Kenny Anthony, with whom he had a fallout when he resigned in 2001 from his ministerial post and formed the Alliance. In fact, in his dying moments, not unlike another great man, King Solomon, who after a lifetime of indulging in all the pleasures and knowledge of the world said, *I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit*, George Odlum was reported to have said: "I made a mistake. I thought politics was all. But it isn't about politics. It is about redeeming your country from the inside out. It is about creating communities where people love one another, where political differences don't divide us in a way that we cannot say that you are my brother and I am responsible for you." And his daughter, Yasmin, said: "George died a spiritual man. George died a man who knew God." It takes a truly great man, especially one like King Solomon who had taken great pride in his intellectual prowess, and who had been convinced that he was born to lead, to admit that he didn't quite get it right. 