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## SCHOOL READERS IN THE EMPIRE AND THE CREATION OF POSTCOLONIAL TASTE

I begin with an image so familiar it hardly needs showing: John Constable's painting of 1823, "Salisbury Cathedral, from the Bishop's Grounds". To children everywhere it is known in the shape of a jig-saw puzzle, but for many who passed through the elementary school system in the British West Indies between 1926 and the early 1960s it possesses an additional resonance, reproduced as it then was on page 199 of volume five of Nelson's much-used *West Indian Readers*. Many would have encountered it aged eleven in Standard Five, and read with greater or lesser fluency the accompanying commentary by the editor Captain James Oliver Cutteridge, Director of Education for Trinidad and Tobago and a keen amateur artist. Cutteridge treats the picture as an exercise in perspective. He calls attention to the framing of the South Front by trees, and illustrates on the following page how the sightlines meet at a vanishing point at the base of the famous steeple. Then he issues a curt invitation: "Write a paragraph describing, *in your own words*, what you can see in Constable's picture".

During the early 1940s in wartime Port-of-Spain this invitation addressed to an elementary schoolboy of Indian ancestry shortly before proceeding to Queen's Royal College. Three decades later, from his cottage near Salisbury, he responded in literal terms to Cutteridge's challenge by conveying in his own words - and in exactly one paragraph - the image's original and continuing effects. The passage occurs towards the beginning of his novel of displacement *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrator of which is newly arrived in Wiltshire:

I saw what I saw very clearly. But I didn't know what I was looking at. I had nothing to fit it into. I was still in a kind of limbo. There were certain things I knew though. I knew the name of the town I had come to by train. It was Salisbury. It was almost the first English town I had got to know, the first I had been given some idea of, from the reproduction of the Constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in my third-standard reader. Far

away in my tropical island, before I was ten. A four-colour reproduction which I thought the most beautiful picture I had even seen.

The passage is all the more revealing because disingenuous in certain respects. If this narrator really did meet that Constable landscape in school before his tenth birthday, then his reading age - and the author V.S. Naipaul's - was two years in advance of his contemporaries. I suspect also that his consciousness of the process by which the plate was reproduced - four-colour printing - owes something to an article in Arthur Mee's ten-volume *Children's Encyclopaedia*, where that technique is explained via successive impressions of a self-portrait by Van Gogh. The middle-aged Naipaul complains of a lack of context, though his paragraph places the experience firmly against a backdrop of colonial desire. Perhaps the best-known judgment on Constable is given in Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. Constable, remarks Gombrich, aimed "to paint what he saw with his own eyes". To this definition of realism Naipaul responds by the disclaimer that, as a colonial child - or even initially adult - viewer, he had little idea what he was seeing. The truth surely is that he saw what he wanted, and what he wanted was England. In a modern British setting recondition of Constable's naturalism is impeded by intervening nostalgia. In the imperial environment it was obstructed by longing. The difference between these conditions is one of the themes of Naipaul's novel, which as well as addressing migration, conducts a master class in interpreting landscape and, though it, alternative histories: of the land, of architecture and of the conditioned, observing self.

Indubitably school readers of that period instilled an anxiety of influence in writers who once studied them. West Indian literature is peppered with acknowledgements to these modest books, and the detail of the references, specifying the volume and in some case even the page-numbers, suggests not only the avidity with which they were absorbed, but the frequency with which pupils failed to hand them in. Why did this standard school fare - and Nelson's Readers in particular - retain that sort of a hold? Thomas Nelson and Sons had been providing school readers for domestic and imperial use since the late nineteenth century, but the proliferation of branches and offices in far-flung dependencies

had gradually entailed a localization of provision. Until about 1907 the pattern was for uniform Crown or Royal Readers that served the needs of pupils throughout the empire, including as it happens Naipaul's Mr Biswas. But in that year the Nelson's Toronto office, which was expanding its educational provision, decided to issue a "Special Canadian Series", drawing on indigenous oral and literary sources where it could find them and organized imaginatively, as their Prefaces carefully explained, around the successive seasons of the Canadian year. Popular and successful, these locally orientated books were systematically updated. From the Nelson archives in Edinburgh it is clear just how anxious the firm became at the time of Great Depression to ensure that their readers were officially sanctioned as set books throughout the Dominion. From the 1920s, with growing competition from other companies, the priority was to work in close collaboration with directors of education in the various Canadian provinces, several of whom were appointed as consultants. The model of regionalization and fraternization with government was then exported. Since 1909, moreover, a preferential trading agreement had existed between Canada and the West Indies, extended in 1920 and again in 1925, as a result of which the Toronto branch gradually assumed responsibility for sales in the Caribbean.

The turning point for business there - and the origin of the West Indian Readers - lies in the appointment in December 1922 of S. P. Jones as a traveling representative in the region. After a six-month tour through Bermuda, St Kitts, Antigua, Monserrat, Dominique, St Lucia, Barbados, St Vincent, Trinidad, Grenada, British Guiana and British Honduras, he reported that the rapid evolution of elementary education among the black and Asian population entailed a need for purpose made textbooks. As his boss in Toronto, S. B. Watson, then wrote back to Edinburgh on 31 July 1923, enclosing Jones' recommendations: "You will notice that on folio five he makes a definite suggestion for a West Indian Reader, or set of Readers. I am going more fully with him into this idea, and will write you a separate letter in a few days."

The following winter, Watson himself toured the Caribbean, and while in Port-of-Spain he met Cutteridge. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful

association, not untouched by controversy. Four years earlier, Cutteridge had arrived in Trinidad to take over as Principal of Tranquillity Boy's Model School, perhaps the best elementary school on the island. He came equipped, not with a university degree, but with a First World War field commission, a fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society, a zeal for educational reform and an eye for a telling picture. By the time Watson turned up, he had been elevated to Chief Inspector of Schools and Assistant Director of Education. Taking a maple leaf out of Nelson's Canadian book, he volunteered not simply as consultant for the projected textbooks, but as author. He proved unstoppable. In twenty years he was to be responsible for several volumes of elementary school arithmetic, successive editions of these readers and – his all-time commercial success - *Nelson's Geography of the West Indies and Adjacent Islands*. The maths was sometimes questioned, the geography scorned. The books sold mightily.

Captain Cutteridge's versatility, or hackwork if you like, was his strength, though in some it seemed a weakness. By temperament he was a geographer and artist, and his inclination to allow these interests to shape his writing was consonant with Nelson's own editorial policy. After all, the books were to be illustrated and, following the Canadian model, they were to reflect the natural environment and the social setting of their young readership. Cutteridge's revolutionary idea – though to some at the time it seemed a misdemeanor – was to situate literature in the Caribbean itself. In their distinctive red covers, his readers - six in number including an introductory book - covered all sorts of subjects, from folklore and customs to fauna and flora and history, but the organizing theme was that of travel, and inter-connections between different places. It was a tendency enhanced by his pedagogical tactic of re-enforcing each subject by repeating it in successive volumes at different linguistic levels. Consciously or not, through graded exercises and extracts Cutteridge conveyed a vision of Caribbean culture as a continual inflow and outflow, movement and coalescence. He was less exercised by hierarchy than by variety, exploration, diversity, gravitation and change. The upwardly mobile, Garvey-inspired, Middle-class, Asian and Afro-Trinidadian, did not forgive him. And nor did Mr Biswas.

The introductory volume got off to a promising start by introducing Creole tales, including Brer Rabbit, the Caribbean manifestation of the Ashanti trickster-figure, Ananse. “Nancy” stories the critics dubbed them, and accused the editor of dumbing down. His inventory of livestock, including beef, was no more popular. “In a mincing voice” Biswas reads aloud from the chapter in Volume One on “Our Animal Friends”: “The cow and the goat give us milk and we eat their flesh when they are killed. You hear the savage?” Book Two introduces the salient topic of travel with Lesson 21, entitled “A Voyage to London”. It takes the form of an imaginary two-week journal by a passenger on a steamship ploughing across the Atlantic, through the “Sea of Weed” (The Sargasso Sea), eventually sighting the Dover shoreline and Tilbury beyond. There is a four-colour print of a steamer with attendant tug and the funnels of leading shipping lines, then black-and-white photographs of various sea- and landmarks, including the Azores and the legendary White Cliffs. It seems conventional enough until you realize that it was the generation of seven-year-olds entertained by this lesson in the thirties who in 1948, eighteen years after the primer’s publication, took ship on the one-time troopship, the S.S. Windrush. Is there another a school reader anywhere which, through describing a metropolis to groups of schoolchildren who have yet to visit it, helped change that destination forever? And there is more. Volume Three, set in the next standard up, re-enforces this travelogue by dwelling on the Sargasso Sea itself, wild and forbidding, introducing a motif recurrent in West Indian literature, and not just in Jean Rhys. And volume four takes its young readers into the heart of the Empire itself with a chapter on “London”, evoking The Tower of London, Trafalgar Square and Oxford Street. Sam Selvon would have been ten when he read these descriptions in Standard Four in 1933. Twenty-year years later, in *Lonely Londoners*, his character Moses exults over these self-same sights and congratulates himself, unlike Moses of old, for setting foot in the Promised Land.

But the gaze is not always trained overseas. Cutteridge was also interested in the demography of the Caribbean, and to that end inserts a running sequence of essays about its various communities, starting in Volume Two with a lesson

entitled “India”. There it was that seven-year-old Naipaul, author-to-be of *An Area of Darkness*, must have perused the opening sentence “MANY boys and girls who will read this book are East Indians. Their parents or their grandparents came from India.” Son of aspiring author and one-time journalist, he continued to the words “In India most boys do not choose the kind of work that they do, but they follow their father’s trade.” When in the next book the infant Naipaul learned about “A Hindu Wedding”, impressions were laid down that would be of use when depicting of the Tulsis, impressions re-forced for a third time in Book Four with its linguistically more demanding account of “East Indians in the West Indies”.

Cutteridge did not compose all the lessons from scratch. Many are synopses of classics, selected with a view to local relevance, and culled from existing Nelsons compilations like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tales from the Iliad* from their “Told to Children” series. The motif of exile, for example, appears in an early volume with a paraphrase of Defoe’s *Crusoe*, including J. C. Dollman’s sketch of a castaway staring gloomily out to sea. As the poet Derek Walcott later put it: “The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel/ Of a sail./The horizon threads it infinitely” in the title poem to his volume *The Castaway* published in 1965, twenty-eight years after he saw that illustration in St Lucia in Standard Two. By the time he read Cutteridge’s synopsis of the Homeric duel between Hector and Achilles in Book Three, the future author of *Omeros* was eight. And if the contest between his Homerically-named fishermen in that eventual mock-epic possesses a bathetic, Heath-Robinson-like air compared with the Greek original, it may well be because the accompanying illustrations in the primer, taken straight from *Tales from the Iliad*, are indeed by the English cartoonist, William Heath Robinson.

History, geography and source come together in the editor’s continual recounting of seafarers’ tales: Columbus, and most suggestively Sir Walter Raleigh. The account of the latter is drawn in the first instance from *Sir Walter Raleigh* in Nelson’s own “Teaching of English” series, which itself relies largely on Raleigh’s own *The Discoverie of Guiana* of 1596. Thus Cutteridge is able to echo the Elizabethan’s descriptions of the Asphalt lakes of Trinidad and Venezuela,

and to reproduce his approximate map of the South American coastline. Prompted no doubt by this, Naipaul, who had noted these details in Standard Four, sat in the British Museum Library in the 1960s poring over Raleigh's rare volume, which in turn became a major source for the early chapters of his history of Trinidad *The Loss of El Dorado*, conveying its own impression of Raleigh's career, as Naipaul's Preface explains, largely in Raleigh's words.

Raleigh had encountered the aboriginal Caribs, subject of an exercise in Book Three in the generic readers published from 1926. Ten years later, however, distinct regional requirements led Cutteridge to collaborate with Frank Ogle on a parallel Jamaica edition. Distinguished by its orange covers, but with identical pagination to the original version, this substituted individual chapters more in line with local needs. The lesson on the Caribs, for example, went to make way for one on the Arawaks, of particular pertinence when this run of readers was placed on the syllabus in British Guiana. It was therefore this version of exercise 34 that an infant Wilson Harris studied in the Georgetown of the 1940s, kindling an imagination that would later populate a whole hinterland with the Arawak archetypes of his *Guyana Quartet* and many subsequent novels. Nothing is more celebrated in the Quartet than the encounter at the close of *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) with a giant waterfall, up the face of which Donne and his hard-pressed companions toil. It had been long in the making, since Lesson 25 of Book 5 in the Jamaica edition is devoted to A Visit to the Kaieteur Falls "in the far-away interior of British Guiana", abridged with one tumultuous illustration from Sir Edward Davidson's survey *The British West Indies* of 1903. "Although it was discovered in 1870," runs the text, "very few people beyond the aboriginal Indians who inhabit the neighbourhood have seen this great natural wonder owing to the difficulty and expense of the long journey from the coast-lands. Where most of the people in the colony reside." Hence, one suspects, the astonishment experienced by Harris's explorers, and the transforming effect of that memorable final scene.

The successive exercises of both editions not only supplied images and references that fed works of the postcolonial imagination; they also supplied

future writers with metaphors for the colonial condition itself: enslavement, indentured labour and its aftermath. In *The Polished Hoe*, Austin Clarke's prize-winning novel of 2003 set in the Barbados of the 1940s, a policeman named Sargeant is led through an underground dungeon beneath the Great House of a sugar plantation by a woman who has just confessed to murdering the manager. The dungeon is a site of constriction, punishment and terror, profoundly symbolic of enslavement in many senses. He thinks of the "reading exercises in *Nelson's West Indian Reader* Book Three "about a spider who bores a hole in the ground and covers it with a lid made of pieces of straw and mud, as a protection and as a guillotine. As a weapon." Sargeant's memory, like the author's, is uncannily precise. What both are recalling is the "Trap-door spider" as described on page 119 of Lesson 29 of that book, with a drawing of the arachnid's hide-away or nest, the tiny cap laid open and resembling a slice of coconut shell. "The trap-door spider is a very interesting one," Cutteridge records. "It makes a hole in the ground for its dwelling, and covers the top with a little door made of its threads and earth. This hole forms its hiding-place until it sets out on a hunting expedition."

In the section from Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* entitled "The Journey" the narrator speaks of the early months of his sojourn in Wiltshire, and recounts how a lifetime of wandering has left him feeling impaled, spread-eagled, feminized, washed up. He had been working on a historical saga, evidently meant to be taken for *The Loss of El Dorado*, when "I had the waking fantasy of myself as a corpse tossing lightly among the reeds at the bottom of a river (a river like the one in the Pre-Raphaelite painting of the drowned Ophelia, reproduced in the *Nelson's West Indian Reader* I had used in my elementary school in Trinidad, a river that turned out to be like the river in Wiltshire at the back of my cottage.)" That local stream, of course, is the Avon, and the literary and pictorial one is the "weeping brook" depicted in John Everett Millais' painting of Ophelia after her suicide, reproduced in Cutteridge's paraphrase of *Hamlet* in book five of his famous readers, where Naipaul the elementary pupil would have seen it at the age of ten.

In effect, these well-thumbed textbooks proved a quarry from which are hewn the plots of several of the more remarkable Caribbean novels of the second half of the twentieth century, together with the something of the region's poetic sensibility, its sense of history, culture and place. From public reaction in the early years one would scarcely have expected this result. Far from receiving credit for his re-positioning of literature in a late colonial setting, the editor was reviled by the parents whose children's eyes he was attempting to open. The assault was initiated in the late 1920s by Howard Bishop, a one-time teacher, a disciple of Marcus Garvey and editor of the *Trinidad Workingmen's Journal*, who drew attention to the Director of Education's lack of a degree. The same criticism was levelled by Eric Williams, a former pupil of the Captain's at Tranquillity, an Oxford history first and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. "Cutteridge was not a university graduate," Williams snobbishly pointed out. In 1942 the much-maligned Captain, who had done quite nicely out of his many publications, withdrew weeping to the tax haven of the Isle of Man. Six years later *The Clarion*, instrument of the Trinidad Labour Party, invited its readers to envisage the geriatric former Director of Education in an old folk's home, "spending his last days in a wheel chair and wearing a bib". But his books continued to sell, in edition after revised edition, up to and beyond his death in August 1952, as Keith Sambrooke, an employee of Nelsons from 1954 to 1962, well remembers, and as the weekly printing and monthly sales figures preserved in archives rescued from Nelson's Park Side works abundantly confirm. They continued in use until a drastic revision of the early sixties, a local imprint of which is available to this day

It was not for his alluring visions to Salisbury or London that Cutteridge received such opprobrium, nor for his recasting of the classics, his summaries of Defoe or Dean Swift, but for sidetracking local aspirations to universal excellence through the siren call of relevance. That conflict of interest is now a matter of history. To recognize its one-time existence, however, is to question one well-received theory that may be styled the "reactive model" of postcolonial writing. According to this view, school authorities throughout the empire force-fed Wordsworth's Daffodils

poem to their tender charges 'til, sick of this foreign diet, they revolted by producing writing of their own. The example of the Caribbean tends to suggest on the contrary that - in this context at least, and over one protracted period - publishers and teachers sought valiantly to localize literary appreciation, in the teeth of parochial *petit bourgeois* resistance. But what the conscious mind of one generation rejected, the unconscious mind of the next permanently absorbed, yielding in the long run a literature.