

IN CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF JESSICA HUNTLEY

BY MICHAEL LA ROSE, CHAIR OF THE GEORGE PADMORE INSTITUTE

As Chair of the George Padmore Institute, I would like, on behalf of all the people around the GPI, New Beacon Books and the International Book Fair family, to send our heartfelt condolences and pledge our support to Eric, Chauncey and Accabre and the entire Huntley family, on the passing of Jessica Huntley.

I last saw Jessica at the memorial event held at the Trinidad and Tobago High Commission in celebration of Tony Martin, the Garvey scholar and publisher. She was with Eric and Accabre. Although frail, she had the typical Jessica twinkle in her eye when she smiled and greeted you. You cannot speak of Jessica's life and achievements without acknowledging the ever-present role of Eric Huntley.

Eric and Jessica were friends and political allies of my father John La Rose and my mother Irma. Their anti-colonial and independence struggles across the Caribbean brought them together. When they migrated to Britain in the early 1960s, it was only natural and practical that they united again in political and cultural struggles on the issues that they faced in Britain as well as the struggles in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia in particular. Many meetings were held in their homes and in the homes of other Caribbean activists.

When John started New Beacon Books, and the New Beacon Bookshop, he actively assisted Jessica in founding Bogle L'Ouverture Publications. These independent Black radical institutions had similar aims and policies. They refused to wait on and or depend on grants from anybody. They believed in financial independence. Both used the front rooms of where they lived to start their book selling. Jessica and Eric used their house in Coldershaw Road, Ealing. Later, Bogle L'Ouverture moved to the shop front in Chignell Place, Ealing West London. When organised racists carried out a campaign of attack on our bookshops with paint and fire, Bogle L'Ouverture and New Beacon were in the leadership of the organised response and formed **Bookshop Joint Action**.

Jessica was committed to publishing important campaigning books. Books such as Walter Rodney's *Groundings with my Brothers*, and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the ground-breaking children's book, *Getting to Know Ourselves*, by Bernard and Phyllis Coard, the new radical dub poetry in *Dread, Beat and Blood*, by Linton Kwesi Johnson amongst many publications. Jessica organised many memorable political and cultural events at Chignell Place, but I will always remember the exciting annual cultural shows at the Commonwealth Institute Theatre.

Jessica and Eric were part of all the organisations that were formed in the fight against racism, police violence and the struggle for proper education in Britain. When John started the campaigning organisation, the Black Parents' Movement (BPM), Jessica and Eric were members of the Ealing Black Parents' Movement. There were also branches in Manchester, and for a short time in Hackney. Jessica and Eric were key members of CARIG – Committee Against Repression in Guyana, which

campaigned against the dangerous excesses of the Forbes Burnham government. They were involved in all the activities of **The Alliance** which was comprised of the Black Youth Movement, Black Parents' Movement, the Race Today Collective and the Bradford Black Collective. This became a key formation in the New Cross Massacre Action Committee chaired by John La Rose. The committee organised the Black People's Day of Action which had such a powerful effect on the politics of Britain. Jessica was an integral part of all these activities.

When John La Rose founded the **International Book Fair of Radical, Black and Third World Books** in 1982, the component organisations were New Beacon Books, Bogle L'Ouverture Publications and Race Today Publications. The joint directors were John La Rose and Jessica Huntley. The book fair, held in London, Manchester, Bradford, Leeds and Glasgow, had a tremendous impact in Britain and internationally with networks of cultural and political activists which exist today.

When my father saw the importance of forming an archive of the struggle in Britain of people of Caribbean, African and Asian descent, he founded the George Padmore Institute (GPI). Jessica and Eric also believing in this idea, with the support of the London Metropolitan Archives, instituted the **Huntley Archives** at LMA. The **Friends of the Huntley Archives** have been organising tremendous annual events and lectures within the traditions of all that went before.

Jessica always gave support to young people and new ideas. She was grounded and practical, in the true tradition of strong African and Caribbean women. Jessica and Eric were visited regularly and engaged with a wide spectrum of cultural political activists from around the world. Jessica represents a generation of political activists that have engaged with struggles for social justice and progress wherever they live in the world. As John La Rose famously said "*we did not come alive in Britain*". In Britain, people like Jessica Huntley have committed their homes, lives and have made tremendous sacrifices in the pursuit of their ideas. Future generations will stand on the shoulders of these giants. They never forgot their Caribbean roots, neither did they turn their backs on the struggle.

Jessica Huntley and all those who went before her will always be remembered by those who seek social justice and equality.

I will end with an extract from the great Guyanese poet Martin Carter from the poem "*Death of a Comrade*":

"...dear Comrade I salute you and say Death will not find us thinking that we die"

Travel well, Jessica.

Michael La Rose
Chair, George Padmore Institute
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