

Synopsis of a projected

Memoirs of the Life of George Padmore

George Padmore, in my opinion, was one of the most extra-ordinary men of the twentieth century.

He is to-day known increasingly in three continents, if not four, as the Father of African Emancipation. In particular he was one of those West Indians of African descent who have had such a remarkable effect on world politics (leaving aside, for the moment, their effect on literature). Padmore is one of that line of West Indian political commentators and activists on Negro life in the world at large which begins with Blyden, continues with Marcus Garvey, and reaches its climax (so far) with Frantz Fanon. For the purposes of a concentrated memoir I omit any references to Toussaint L'Ouverture. So it is at the high peak of a genre to which George Padmore belongs.

- I. I shall begin with the elementary facts of his life.
- II. I shall take up certain special facts which have been referred to in a recent biography.
- III. I will give one example of the specific kind of material which this Memoir will contribute to Padmore's general activity.
- IV. I shall give some indication of the relation of Padmore to the British Commonwealth, its past, present and future.

One, the elementary facts of his life. Born in Trinidad, British West Indies, in 1902, he went to the United States of America in 1924, attended Negro universities and finally became active in the Communist Party. In 1929 he went to Europe and began a career as a functionary of the Comintern. He was made responsible for the spread of Communism among Africans and people of African descent all over the world. He had permanent headquarters in the Kremlin and it is doubtful if up to that time any Negro had ever held a situation of such power and authority in the Western world.

In 1934 Moscow began to distinguish between the "democratic imperialists" e.g. Britain, France and the United States, and the "fascist" imperialists Italy, Germany and Japan. Padmore protested that his department could not follow the new line because the main "fascist" imperialists had no colonies in Africa. Faced with submission, Padmore uncompromisingly and publicly severed all connections with Moscow.

He came to England and with a year had organised the International African Service Bureau. Between the wars it was the only organisation, either in Europe or in Africa, which consistently advocated and organised for the independence of the African people and equality for people of African descent. Padmore won and kept the support, cooperation and confidence of valuable collaborators, among them Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah. With Nkrumah he developed the concept of Pan-Africanism and was Nkrumah's closest adviser and international representative from his re-entry into the Gold Coast in 1947 until the

achievement of independence in 1957. He then became a Secretary for African Affairs in the Nkrumah government but died suddenly in 1958. He is increasingly regarded as the Father of African Emancipation.

Two, certain special features which have been referred to in a recent biography. I cannot alter the fact that Padmore and I, and our families, were closely associated in the West Indies during our first twenty years, and that I was his close collaborator and intimate personal friend during the important years of his political life. Our conversations on the theory of African independence were unceasing. I therefore am likely to view his development and his work more broadly and, at the same time, in closer detail than many of those who met him only politically. I shall thus confine myself to three points at various stages of his life which I never see nor hear referred to but which I believe are needed to see his life and work in a genuine historical perspective.

On page two of Black Revolutionary by James R. Hocker (Pall Mall Press, London, 1967), there is the following paragraph:

"His father, a local schoolmaster, James Hubert Alfonso Nurse, who had married Anna Susanna Symbister of Antigua, was an accomplished naturalist who, if white, no doubt would have advanced further in government service. As it was, he rose to become senior agricultural instructor in the Department of Education and spent his retirement in writing an exhaustive (and unpublished) geography of the West Indies. His own

father, a Barbadian named Alphonso Nurse, had been born a slave, he had become a master mason, migrated to Trinidad and lived for more than a century. Tales of the slave days and 'apprenticeship' were part of the young Malcolm's heritage. On several occasions in later life, he referred to himself as the grandson of a slave. According to one report, James Nurse went so far as to become a Muslim and, in order to eradicate this past of slavery, assigned an Arabic name to his son."

In that apparently simple factual paragraph is hidden much that illustrates the political career of the Father of African Emancipation. His father was a local schoolmaster. He was the father of Sir Grantley Adams, Prime Minister of the West Indian Federation and one of the makers of the contemporary West Indies. And this particular social type created the future politicians of the West Indies and the powerful impact they have made abroad.

In Padmore's days the head of a local district was the warden, a white man who administered an area of a few dozen miles. He was remote and the ordinary citizen saw him only on business or when he made one of his royalian tours. Next in the hierarchy were the Roman Catholic priest and the Protestant clergyman. They were in close touch with the population and were guardians of morals and learning. But the real centre of intellectual life were the headmasters of the elementary schools. They not only taught the children and trained the teachers. They were responsible for the prevailing conceptions of social behaviour, manners, dress, etc. If anybody in the village or district wanted to know what was taking place in

the Legislative Council, wanted a reference in the local newspaper explained; wanted to know when Christopher Columbus discovered America, if Mr. Gladstone was dead, or who was the President of the United States; whether a book by Mrs. Henry Wood was a good book to read; what year the West Indies cricket team was going to England; needed to know the manner of addressing a letter to a Government functionary or a prospective father-in-law, it was to the local headteacher that he or she came, sometimes for information, not infrequently to preside or take part in some small function.

The local clergyman were the ultimate repository of knowledge and advice to whom at difficult moments the local teacher would apply, but the actual intellectual centre and the channel of communication between the local community and the national leaders of society was the head teacher. The community expected it of him and he and his family filled the role. This was the environment in which Malcom Nurse, the future George Padmore, grew up. ~~Being~~ Being responsible to the public for ideas and knowledge of every kind was the automatic result of growing up in such a household. I knew the process well for my own father was such a teacher.

Take the name Symister. That also had important connexions in regard to Malcom Nurse who became George Padmore. I knew the Symisters well because for years I lived in Arima where Mr. Symister had been a mayor and was still a municipal

magnate.

Arima was a small town which was dominated economically, politically and socially by black men, certainly the only town of its kind in Trinidad and Tobago, and perhaps unique in the whole of the British Caribbean. Trinidad was not at that time purely a sugar-producing island. Cocoa was a substantial part of the economy. It required no large investment of machinery and round about ~~the~~ Arima some black men bought or worked up extensive pieces of land on which cocoa grew abundantly. Then a railway line from Port of Spain, the capital, reached to Arima and went no further. Arima thus became a great centre of cocoa and trade in general, and the town flourished. These black cocoa proprietors built themselves fine houses in the town. They organised a racing association and once a year held a grand turf meeting, in the Caribbean then and now the prerogative of the white merchants and planters. At the Jubilee of Queen Victoria, one of their representatives requested from the Queen permission to form a municipality. This was granted. Arima had a mayor, corporation, alderman and thus the paraphernalia as well as the actuality of urban power. These black men as Mayor or Town Clerk were invited to official functions at Government House. Thus they occupied a unique and somewhat dazzling social situation in the island, one occupied by no other body of black or coloured men. Mr. Symister was one of these, and when Padmore came to Arima to spend his vacations, ~~XX~~ this was the environment/which he experienced

this was the environment and social distinction to which he experienced.

"James Nurse went so far as to become a Muslim... in order to eradicate this past of slavery."

There was more to it than a historical erasure. Near the end of the century the Education Department of Trinidad decided to introduce into the elementary schools the theory and practice of home agriculture. Teachers were given special courses and one of these teachers, James Alfonso Nurse, learnt so rapidly and so comprehensively that he was removed from his teaching and made a general agricultural educationist. There rose in the local press some controversy about agriculture and science. Nurse entered the controversy with authoritative writing to which he signed his name and his status. This evoked extreme wrath from Professor Carmody, the head of the science department in the island. Nurse was reported to the educational authorities, there arose a heated altercation and in the end the father of George Padmore resigned in anger and became a private tutor. It was then that he openly became a Muslim, thus defining his utter rejection of the regime to which he had always been opposed. He lived in a small room about 12 feet square and all the walls were covered with books on shelves, from the floor, as it seemed to me, to the ceiling, the only room of the kind I ever saw in Trinidad.

That was the home and family from which George Padmore

came. He was not an accident. His whole past and upbringing had trained him to be a revolutionary, a leader of black people.

Three, I will give one example of the specific kind of material which this Memoir will contribute to Padmore's general activity. In a letter Padmore wrote to W.E.B. DuBois on January 8, 1951, though Nkrumah was in prison at the time, he was confident that the Convention People's Party would win the election. Padmore goes on to say:

"There has been a complete breakdown of the 'native' administration through an almost wholesale attack upon the 'stools', which had to be stemmed in order not to create a complete anarchy in government and a situation which might have held in it something of a disaster."

Nkrumah won the election and was taken out of prison to become Leader of Government Business, in reality leader of the party in power. Then ensued between Padmore and his wife on the one hand, and Nkrumah, on the other, a disagreement which as far as I know, is not recorded, but which is fundamental to any estimate of the decline and fall of Nkrumah. Padmore and his wife wanted Nkrumah, as head of the ruling party, to go right on, seize power and declare independence. In other words, to continue the revolution to a dynamic conclusion. Nkrumah instead kept up a constant if hidden conflict with Arden Clarke, the Governor General. He claimed openly that the Governor General encouraged the opposition. The revolution had to mark time, and Nkrumah finally gained complete power

in 1957 after six years which were far more constitutional than revolutionary. Whether revolutionary activity would have had better results is not in question here. What is important is that both the Fadmeres thought that Nkrumah was wrong.

In 1957 I had intimate conversations with Nkrumah about the way the revolution had developed. Knowing how uncompromising the Fadmeres were on the question, I asked him what after six years he thought of the policy. He confessed frankly that he didn't know; he said that he had no doubt that he could have carried his revolution to a conclusion in 1951 and the British government could not have stopped him. He added, however, that if he had gone on to take the power in 1951, and the British officials had cleared out of the territory, the whole system of government would have collapsed. In 1951 there was nothing to replace them.

At the time I appreciated and still appreciate Nkrumah's dilemma and respect his continuing uncertainty. But in 1960 the widespread complaints of government corruption in Ghana, and the deterioration in quality of his ministers (which Nkrumah saw very clearly) helped to make me believe that the Fadmeres were right: a revolution which stands still for six years absorbs much that it revolted against. Further, the experience of Guinea had shown that countries far more backward than the Gold Coast, if intent on rejecting an old order, could survive the violent departure of European officials and

work out a modus vivendi. The whole question is one of the many raised first, and therefore more sharply, in Ghana than elsewhere. Padmore understood and spoke frequently of this and similar problems.

IV

An indication of the relation of Padmore to the British Commonwealth, its past, present and future. Padmore was a British West Indian. But my knowledge of Padmore, and personal relationships with him from childhood to the end, make me aware of his uniqueness and characteristics, representative of a people of very special historical development. But like people of the French Caribbean whose French origin stands out in every line they write and every word they say, Padmore was a member of the British Caribbean community. A serious analysis of what he was, what he did, and the resulting influence (which continues and grows to this very day), can teach much about the Caribbean, about Britain, and about world politics in the twentieth century.