

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to draw attention to Eric Roach's unique contribution to West Indian literature and to establish his credentials as a master craftsman whose poetry drew on the traditions of English literature to which he was educated, as well as those of the folk origins, that had their beginnings in Africa, to which he was born. It is the contention here that Roach's capabilities as an artist have been inadequately assessed and that false conclusions have been assumed about the quality of his work and his validity as a West Indian poet.

In order to place Roach in a new perspective it was necessary to trace the development of West Indian poetry, and to fit Roach into this context and to document details of his early life, environment and education instrumental to his development as a West Indian poet, chronicling later events also influential to his work. The definition of Roach's perception of poetry, his emphatic statements on the subject and the main issues, arguments and conclusions arising out of the literary debate provoked by his stand are crucial to understanding how critics arrived at their evaluation of Roach's poetic scope. Evidence found through a close examination of his development of thought and form indicates a unity of theme and form where a detailed analysis of form reveals constant innovation and experimentation by a conscious craftsman who deliberately combined elements of traditional English language verse with those of oral folk traditions.

Contrary to critical opinion, therefore, this evidence refutes false allegations of limitation in vision and scope in this artist and is intended to enhance Eric Roach's stature as a

Caribbean poet who accepted the multiple heritages of his islands and strove to achieve a crafted syncretism of these in his art.

Since the decade of the 1970s poetry in the West Indies does not have to split into two separate schools or forms, the written and the oral. The written or printed form is usually associated with a contemplative and intellectual withdrawal into privacy of the mind, first of all by the writer and then by the reader, although the act of reading aloud is at times acknowledged as an added dimension of apprehension. Oral poetry, on the other hand, is based on communal folk traditions not associated with intellectualism, is usually performed and is intended for visual and aural public interaction between poet/performer and audience. This schism has led to continuous debate and speculation over the value and validity of public versus private, the written versus the oral poetry which involves historical, political and intellectual notions as to what the nature and function of poetry ought to be.

In tracing the development of West Indian poetry, numerous critics have pointed to the derivative and imitative trends and forms found in the early poetry of the region. The first colonial attempts at West Indian verse imported their literary perception along with their education and were heavily influenced by the Romantic and Victorian models with which they were familiar. In exercising the traditional formalist conventions of these, rhyme, meter and diction, writers like Tom Redex and Walter Mac. Intyre revealed a reverence for Empire even while the first awareness of their environment was being expressed. This fitted well with the presence of West Indian landscape gave birth to what has been called the Caribbean pastoral. Although originally overtly descriptive nature poetry with a tendency to sound exotic and lush literary for its own sake needed to be filtered through alien eyes, the consciousness of landscape became