

FROM THE PENS OF CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANTS: **The Founding of Liberia's Intellectual and Literary Class**

INTRODUCTION

Anyone remotely familiar with Liberia's history is likely to know that freed people of color from America founded the country in the early 1820's. They are less likely to know, however, that black immigrants from the Caribbean or the West Indies also played an important role in the founding of Liberia. They are even more unlikely to know that Caribbean immigrants formed the intellectual and literary class of early Liberia and that their impact is still largely felt in that African country today.

THE BEGINNING

John Brown Russwurm was not very typical of the Caribbean immigrants that would later come to Liberia. He did not grow up in the Caribbean nor emigrate directly from there to Liberia. But Liberians of Caribbean descent embrace him as one of theirs for two principal reasons. First, Russwurm was born in the Caribbean—in Jamaica—to a black mother and a white father, and lived there until he was about 8 years old. Second, Russwurm was an accomplished trailblazer. He was the third African American to attain a college degree in the United States, having graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick Maine in 1826.

At the time of his graduation, each Bowdoin graduate was required to give prepared remarks as part of the ceremonies. In his remarks, Russwurm displayed his literary gifts and emphasized the theme of freedom and equality that would guide him throughout his illustrious life. Speaking on the topic, "The Condition and Prospect of Hayti," Russwurm argued that Haitians, by resisting French domination and gaining their independence, gave proof to the fact that "it is the irresistible course of events that all men, who have been deprived of their liberty, shall recover this previous portion of their indefeasible inheritance." Russwurm's eloquence so wowed the audience that several newspapers published excerpts of his remarks.

But he was just beginning and was on his way to more notable achievements. In March 1827, shortly after graduating from Bowdoin, Russwurm together with a colleague, Samuel Cornish, founded and began publishing the *Freedom Journal*, the first newspaper in the United States to be owned, operated and published by an African American. Published in New York and circulated across the United States and Canada, the Journal devoted itself to general news stories and articles championing the cause of abolition.

In one of his last editorials for the *Journal*, Russwurm signaled that his next move in his already trailblazing life was to go to a land where blacks were free of any and all forms of racial discrimination. He wrote: "The universal emancipation so ardently desired by us

& by all our friends, can never take place, unless some door is opened whereby the emancipated may be removed as fast as they drop their galling chains, to some other land besides the free states." He issued the last edition of *Freedom Journal* on March 28, 1829 and a few months later set sail for Liberia, which at the time was a thriving place of freed blacks principally from the United States.

Once in Liberia, Russwurm quickly made his mark. In 1830, Russwurm was appointed Supervisor of Education for Liberia and was also named editor of *The Liberian Herald*, the first newspaper ever published in Liberia. In short order he turned the floundering newspaper into a literary powerhouse—providing news about Liberia and life in the new country to an American audience and reprinting articles and features of general interests published in American newspapers and journals.

By 1836, Russwurm was ready for yet another first. He became the first Black Governor of the State of Maryland in Africa. Maryland in Africa was located about 200 miles down the coast from what was then Liberia and, as its name suggests, had been settled by African American from the State of Maryland in the USA. Succeeding where the two previous governors—both of them white—had failed, Russwurm would over the next 15 years turned Maryland in Liberia into a relatively prosperous society, creating a local currency, adopting a legal code, stimulating agriculture production, and smoothing relations with indigenous African.

Russwurm died in Liberia in 1850 when he was just 51 years old, leaving behind a legacy as a statesmen, a philanthropist, but above all, as a man of letters—a newspaper man—who had used his pen to espouse the cause of black freedom. No wonder scholar Molefi Kete Asante included Russwurm on his 2002 list of the 100 Greatest African Americans, and Liberians, particularly those of Caribbean descent, continue to dearly hold him in the highest of regards as one of their own.

The year 1850 was significant for Liberia, which by then had been independent for only three years. The year marked the passing of Russwurm but it was also the year that another man of West Indies descent—a literal force of nature—arrived in Liberia. He was Edward Wilmot Blyden, who came to his new country when he was just 19 years old, but in no time would leave an indelible mark as a prolific writer, journalist, politician, university president, and a diplomat.

Walking in Russwurm's footsteps, Blyden soon became editor of the *Liberian Herald*, a position he would hold from 1855 to 1856. His column in the *Herald*, "A Voice from Bleeding Africa," was a must read for anyone wanting insightful analyses about events on the African Continent. He would spend time in the British African colonies of Sierra Leone and Nigeria, where he also served as the editor of various newspapers, including *The Negro* and *The African World*.

In all of his publications, Blyden used his immense gifts as a writer to make the case for immigration of blacks to Africa and for uniting all of Africa under one state. For example, in a 1853 article in the *African Repository*, the official American Colonization Society publication, Blyden responded to a prominent critic of the movement to settle blacks in Liberia that “Africa was the only means of delivering the colored man from oppression and of raising him up to respectability.” Accordingly, he is known as the “Father of Pan-Africanism,” his ideas truly laying the foundation for key Twentieth Century champions of a united Africa, including Marcus Garvey, George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah.

The more than six books Blyden wrote were highly acclaimed. So finely written was his major work, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*—in which he posited that Islam was better suited than Christianity to the African—that many in Europe could not believe it was authored by a black man, forcing Blyden to put his picture on the front page of subsequent editions of the book for all to see that its author was indeed a black man.

In addition to his work as a writer and journalists, Blyden held key positions in the Liberian Government, including serving as Secretary of State, Secretary of the Interior, and President of Liberia College, where he was also a professor of Latin and Greek.

But Blyden greatest gift to Liberia was perhaps convincing the country’s third president, Daniel Bashel Warner, who himself had immigrated to Liberia from the United States, to arrange for the first mass migration of blacks from the Caribbean to Liberia.

THEY COME EN MASSE

Blyden’s efforts to get more Caribbean immigrants to Liberia paid off. On May 10, 1865, a pivotal day in the history of Liberia, a ship named the *Cora* docked in Monrovia with 346 immigrants from the West Indies, the overwhelming majority hailing from Barbados—immigrants that would in no time begin shaping the country’s future in profound ways.

In literally a few years, the families on the *Cora*—the Barclays, Wiles, Padmores, Grimes, Thorpes, Weeks, Portes, Bests, and Holders—would produce scores of leaders, including two Presidents, five Secretaries of State; two Secretaries of the Treasury; two Attorneys General; several Justices of the Supreme Court, including a Chief Justice; and a Speaker of the House of Representatives in Liberia.

This was no small achievement. But perhaps the greatest and enduring contribution of those families to Liberia was in the field of journalism or, more specifically, advocacy journalism and the use of the written word to challenge succeeding governments of Liberia to fulfill the country’s self declared goal of creating a “sweet land of liberty” for all of its people.

The man who was a principal proponent of this effort was Albert Porte. Born in 1906, 41 years after the arrival of his parents on the *Cora*, Porte, through his pen, would be a thorn in the sides of five successive Liberian Presidents, including Edwin Barclay, whose parents also arrived in Liberia on the *Cora*.

Porte's criticisms of what he perceived as abuse of power by Liberia's 18th President, William Tubman, were so stinging that he became the first journalist to be imprisoned by Tubman. Unafraid after his release from jail, Porte increased the intensity of his critiques of Tubman, particularly after the President used some of Liberia's meager resources to purchase a Presidential Yacht. In fact, Porte began carrying a pair of pajamas and a toothbrush and toothpaste in his bag, indicating that he was willing and ready to go to jail at anytime.

Constantly persecuted by various governments that ruled under the banner of the True Whig Party, which monopolized political power in Liberia for well over a century, Porte in many ways was the founder of political journalism in Liberia. His major works included the pamphlet, *Liberianization or Gobbling Business*, in which he accused the brother of the sitting President, William Tolbert, of literally gobbling up various businesses and acquiring monopoly power in key sectors of the Liberian economy under the guise of a so-called Liberianization policy, ostensibly intended to help Liberians gain control of the economy from foreign merchants.

The President's brother, Stephen Tolbert, responded with vengeance, suing Porte in 1974 for libel and winning a judgment of \$250,000 in a case decided by the Chief Justice, who also happened to be Tolbert's father-in-law. So powerful was Porte's reputation that a civil society group, Citizen of Liberia in Defense of Albert Porte (COLIDAP), spontaneously emerged to rally around Porte and raise funds to pay off the libel judgment.

THE LATER YEARS

Porte died in 1986, but by then he had passed on the mantle of advocacy journalism to his nephews and grand nephews. In 1980, Kenneth Best, scion of the Best Family that also arrived on the *Cora* from Barbados in 1865, and a maternal nephew of Porte, established the *Daly Observer Newspaper*. The founding of the *Observer* coincided with the military coup of 1980 that brought Samuel Kanyon Doe to power in Liberia. A military leader, Doe had a particular dislike for press criticisms. But Best was undaunted in using his paper to expose Doe's abuse of power and corrupt activities. Doe responded by first having the *Observer's* offices burned to the ground. He would ban the paper twice, and on both occasions sent Best and his staff to jail.

Today, despite a fourteen year brutal civil war that forced him into exile, Best continues to run the *Daily Observer* and has not shied from, as he put it, "shining the bright sun

rays of fair and objective reporting as a disinfectant on the processes of government.”

Best’s nephew, and Porte’s grandnephew, Rodney Sieh, has kept up the family’s tradition. He competes with his Uncle and runs the largest selling newspaper in Liberia, *FrontPage Africa*. Sieh has been jailed twice since 2013 because of his reportage. The Supreme Court first jailed him on contempt charges in 2013 because of his critique of the court’s rulings. He was again jailed in 2014 after he was sued on bogus libel charges by a Minister of Agriculture. A jury awarded the Minister a one million dollar judgment against Sieh although his reports about the Minister’s corrupt activities was based on an official report of the country’s Auditor General and he was jailed under a Liberian law that allows for the jailing of anyone who fails to pay a libel judgment. Pressure from the international community forced the government to release Sieh after he had spent a couple of months in one of the country’s worst prisons.

CONCLUSION

Sieh represents the fourth generation of Liberian immigrants from the Caribbean. The fact that he has continued in the fine tradition of using the pen to hold those in power accountable in the face of immense odds and personal sacrifice is a definite sign that Liberia will continue to benefit from the tradition of public service and unabashed use of the media to protect Liberia’s democracy that his Caribbean forebears established more than one hundred and fifty years ago.