

Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature. LEAH READE ROSENBERG. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. x + 260 pp. (Cloth US\$ 69.95)

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In the past few years, critical voices have been calling for a reappraisal of the literary historiography of the Anglophone Caribbean, pleading in particular for more attention to be paid to the writing published before World War II. This artistic production, the argument goes, has been either ignored or under-

stated in much of the recording of the literary history of the region, and should be carefully considered because, as Alison Donnell (2006:13) points out, this would enable us “to re-establish the complexity of both cultural forms and politics pre-1950, thereby opening this archive up to the present and the future.”

Leah Reade Rosenberg's *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* clearly follows in the wake of such a rationale and constitutes an important contribution to the current revision of the Caribbean literary canon. It aims to tell “the story of the intertwined development of nationalism and literature in the English-speaking Caribbean between 1840 and 1940” (p. 5). It also highlights the exclusionary practices that often underlay the elaboration of this tradition and which can, in many cases, be perceived in the way the writers of the period engaged with matters of gender. Focusing mainly on Trinidad and Jamaica – two islands with “strong literary and political movements in the early twentieth century” (p. 9) – the book is organized in seven chapters, each dedicated to one author, or one group of authors, whose writing contributed to the formation of a literary tradition in the region.

Rosenberg starts with a discussion of three early Trinidadian novels – E.L. Joseph's *Warner Arundell* (1838), Michel Maxwell Philip's *Emmanuel Appadocca* (1854), and Stephen Cobham's *Rupert Gray* (1907) – which, she explains, went some way toward challenging Europe's claim to superiority. However, she points out, the same cannot always be said of the writers examined in the rest of the book, for in spite of their nationalistic and liberatory claims their works often led to a consolidation of the hierarchies, racial or social, which were advocated by the colonial order. Among the writers studied in the volume are Thomas MacDermot, H.G. de Lisser, Claude McKay, and Una Marson from Jamaica as well as Alfred Mendes and C.L.R. James from Trinidad. The last chapter is devoted to Jean Rhys, which might be surprising as she is from neither Jamaica nor Trinidad, but this focus on an artist who can be regarded as transitional – if only because her work straddles two generations of writers – enables Rosenberg to adopt a comparative approach and wrap up her overall argument.

There are many reasons why *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* should be recommended to scholars working in the field of Caribbean studies. As a well-documented volume using a wide-ranging array of unpublished or hard-to-find material, it provides a solid historical contextualization for the literature it examines, particularly in its thorough study of the role played by cultural networks or by institutions like the press in the establishment of a national body of writing. Rosenberg should also be praised for addressing with determination the many tensions inherent in a literary production which tended to depict working-class characters, many of them female, but nevertheless resorted to a dubious rhetoric of respectability inherited from Victorianism and therefore ended up promoting the interests of the middle class.

Overall, Rosenberg's focus is very much on the evolution of the literary scene and the development of individual writing careers, which means that relatively little attention is paid to the aesthetic features of the texts themselves (apart from occasional references to their linguistic makeup). As a result, the works' literary qualities are not really taken into consideration, with the exception of a few reported comments on the disappointing character of some of them (see, for example, p. 35). This is a shame, not only because the passages where the analysis becomes slightly more textual (e.g., the sections devoted to McKay's *Home to Harlem* and *Banana Bottom*) are among the best in the book, but also because an examination of the artistic value of the works in question would, in some cases, have explained why they have not received much recognition. Another regret is that some of the critical foci announced in the introduction are not fully developed in the body of the book; the notion of creolization is sporadically touched upon, notably in relation to Trinidadian yard fiction, but should have been tackled more directly, or perhaps more clearly. Finally, the book suffers from a certain vagueness, especially in its referencing system and in the terminology it deploys. For example, a word such as "elite," which is central to the argument, tends to be used rather loosely.

Ground-breaking because of its subject matter, *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* is also remarkable because it opens onto other original, if underexploited, vistas. It testifies, for example, to the importance of alternative sexualities in the construction of Caribbean identity. This field has not yet been fully charted and would have deserved even more explicit coverage in this book. More could also have been said on the relationship between pre-1950s Caribbean writers and the Windrush generation. Rosenberg offers a few points of comparison with George Lamming in the course of her book, and expands on this a little in her short afterword. Yet her explanations remain sketchy on the whole, which might suggest that there is material for another book in this.

REFERENCE

DONNELL, ALISON, 2006. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*. London: Routledge.