

PHILIP NANTON

Philip Nanton is an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick. Born in St Vincent, he is a poet and short-story writer and his creative work appears in anthologies and has been broadcast on BBC Radio. He works as a freelance researcher on the Caribbean and is a visiting lecturer at the Centre for West African Studies at the University of Birmingham UK. His research interests are varied. His PhD research was on socio-political change in St. Vincent during the move to political independence in 1979/80. Current interests include the comparative study of government response to volcanic eruption, notions of Caribbean diaspora and identity and the role of the BBC and the development of Anglo-phone Caribbean literature in the 1940s and 50s.

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Shake Keane's Poetic Legacy

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Shake Keane achieved international acclaim as a jazz trumpeter and fugal-horn player*. While his musicianship will remain widely appreciated by jazz enthusiasts the world over, less attention has been given to his poetry. In his writing, perhaps more than his jazz, he left a legacy of direct interest to the Caribbean and especially his native St. Vincent. Keane completed some five monographs of poetry before his death in 1997. *L'Oubli*, his first collection was published in 1950 when he was 23 years old, *Ixion* was published in 1952, *One a Week With Water*, which won the Casa d'las Americas Poetry Prize, and *The Volcano Suite* were published in 1979 and *Palm and Octopus* in 1994. The aim of this paper is to examine some of the features of that inheritance.

Early Writing

L'Oubli, and *Ixion* explored a variety of his skills as a poet. These early collections seemed to fluctuate between introspective philosophical musings which drew on biblical references, nature and environmental interests on one hand, and on the other, a public focus that began to capture, in a creative way, the folk traditions of St. Vincent. He summarised the focus of his poetry as " Typical West Indian consciousness" with themes of " self-realisation through nature, nationalism, sense of the unreality of colonial life; therefore, social protest on one hand, and on the other (an) obsession with identity (after death since present life seems unreal). On the positive side an attempt to understand and restructure poetically the tragedy, hope, conservatism and ecstasy of peasant and folk life" (Contemporary Poets, 1970,p.587)

Keane had shown a particular interest in religious contemplative themes in the 1940's and 1950's. This was reflected in two articles that he published in *Bim* in 1952. His articles illustrated how writers such as Campbell, Seymour, McFarlane, Smith and Walcott all found the spiritual muse central to their writing. Some poets, he argued, borrowed ritual prayers and wove poems around them, others showed a preoccupation with love and charity. The contemplation of nature as a way to God and the reverence for the sun were also common themes. He also detected a contrast between male (indirect) and female (direct) approaches to this theme. *L'Oubli*, a long meditative poem from which his first collection takes its name, presented six variations on the theme of human fallibility and the transitory nature of the age. A central feature of his exploration of the Religious Muse in the poem appeared to involve a restless searching for stability beyond forgetting:

And we heard a voice from heaven
Saying
Seek me, O restless soul,

No rest for the seeking soul (Keane, 1950,p.7)

Some of his early writing he recognised as modeled on a West Indian version of writers of the 1930's including Auden, MacNeice and Day-Lewis. However, among the poems in that first published collection were two, *Shaker Funeral* and *Calypso Dancers* which also establish his reputation for originality. Gordon Rohlehr identified *Shaker Funeral* as an example of Keane's imaginative use of the religious paradigm infused with the energy of the oral tradition (Rohlehr, 1992). Edward Baugh recognised in *Calypso Dancers* the early use of jazz inflections which other poets in the Caribbean were to follow (Baugh, 1971)

Common to both his early collections was an economy that reflected a range of conflicts and moods; for example, the picture of rural life from the opening of the poem *Perhaps Not Now* contains both the hope of ease and the reality of hardship:

Perhaps not now the crops comfort,
The chair with its deep harvest of rest,
Afternoons unhurried naps.
Not now the day,
Some other time perhaps;
As yet only work, and waiting, and dreaming and the dust.(Keane, 1950, p.25)

In *Storm Season*, from his second collection, *Ixion*, he caught the dread of an approaching storm briefly, but effectively:

Sampling the possibility of doom
See us searching the papers
Nursing the radio
Tracking the storm with needle and dial
Oh God
How fast is the wind
How far is the journey of prayer (Keane, 1952 p.6)

During the late 1940's Keane was part of a small flowering of talent in his native St. Vincent. By the early 1950's, Keane, along with Danny Williams and Owen Campbell had become established as an identifiable trio of Vincentian poets. Their writing was regularly published in the Caribbean through the literary journals *Bim* and *Kyk-over-al* and broadcast over the BBC World Service programme *Caribbean Voices*. One reason for this interest in their work was that each in their own way wrote poetry distinguished by a sense of local commitment - illustrated by Owen Campbell's poem, *We*:

We have decided
Not to construct hope on continents
Or leave lost hearts to rove
In the quick air on oceans of dreams
We have decided to build here in the slender dust (Campbell, 1951).

In 1953, the output of this group was reviewed on the BBC *Caribbean Voices* programme; LePage, the reviewer, detected in their writing the beginnings of an identifiable school of poetry influenced by Derek Walcott with a strong sense of local place and their position in it.

The Jazz Years and Return to St. Vincent

In 1952 Keane traveled to London with the intention of studying for a degree in English literature. He obtained work at the BBC both as a reader on *Caribbean Voices* to which he had contributed and later as a producer. His career as a trumpet and fugal horn player soon took off and he played with a variety of bands both in Britain and Europe. During this time he produced little poetry. One exception is *Fragments and Patterns* elements of which were reworked into the collection *One A Week With Water*. He claimed

that in this period jazz became the more appropriate medium for what he wanted to express. He stated that his poetry had "dried up" around 1965, but individual poems were anthologised and a few others published in *Savacou* and *Bim*.

In 1972, Keane took up an offer to return to St. Vincent to head a national Department of Culture. This again stimulated his interest in Vincentian folk traditions. That year, his one act play *Nancitori with Drums* was performed in St. Vincent. Three years later his Department was closed down following a change in the political regimen in St. Vincent. With little prospect of re-entering a full time jazz career in Europe, he returned to secondary school teaching in the island. His writing became pared to the bone, fragmented, satirical and, at times, angry. *Underwater Games*, *Seven Studies in Home Economics* and *Credential* were all written in the 1970's, after his return to St. Vincent. Much of this work betrayed a sense of frustration caused by local politics and the abandonment of his jazz career. In *Credential* he responded to the feeling of rejection of his role and jazz trumpet skills by Vincentians in the following way:

.....
But the sweet fool dem say
All-we culture all-we potential
is definitely non-residential
all dis trumpet is a famous load o' piss
hold on to dis.
So ah lif' up me credential
Same one wha' me fader show
how fe polish
how fe respec'
how fe blow
an' Ah say
fy arffffff (Keane, 1974)

One A Week With Water

In 1979, Keane won the Cuban Casa d'las Americas Poetry Prize for *One A Week With Water*. It was probably in this collection that he achieved his most imaginative commentary on Caribbean society in general and St. Vincent society in particular. Superficially, the reader is presented with a simple calendar offering observations for each week. These he described in the introduction to the collection as "notes and rhymes". They took the form of a collage of verse, riddle, story, letters, spoof bureaucratic form, aphorisms, reportage, and rhyme. Among the predominantly humorous pieces in the collection are distributed a number of poetic shards with flashes of anger, despair and loss. There is the sublime and the ridiculous. Regular patterns are avoided. Standard as well as local forms of English are tossed about for humour and serious intent. For the most part, however, Keane mixes humor and gentle satire while commenting indirectly on order and chaos in Vincentian society.

The author makes the point in a variety of ways that a culture is being formed out of a diversity of accident and tradition. This process of formation, he suggests, is chaotic, at times repetitive but it is also creative. It is distinctly Caribbean, approaching Benitez-Rojo's definition of Caribbean culture as a culture of performance, located in the public domain and, which is in its most distinctive aspect, one "whose time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by cycles of clock and calendar." (Benitez-Rojo, 1996,p.11)

The reader of Keane's "notes and rhymes" enters the realm of play and a kind of interactive public performance. Keane invites us to come out to play with time, words, traditions and received social and cultural order. All of this is framed by a time of reverie. The collection was written, he tells us, for his students "in the short lonely afternoons before their little town dropped to sleep." That is, a time when thoughts can stray anywhere and anything can happen. Closer inspection of the calendar form, which the work takes, reveals it is not fixed to fifty-two weeks nor is it chronologically ordered. Week forty-four precedes weeks forty-three and forty-two. The reader is advised to "check for astronomical errors

between weeks 41 and 48". There is a fifty-third week, week 47 follows a "discrepancy day (added every 3114 years)". However, there is also a serious element to this play with time. He points out that even calendar time is not set in stone. "Only in 1927", he tells us, "did Turkey adopt the Gregorian calendar. Maya astronomy moved easily forwards and backwards in time identifying days 400 million years away." (Keane, 1979, p.61) The author is suggesting that, in the context of St. Vincent's political independence, achieved in 1980, soon after the collection was written, both calendars and new societies take time to become established.

Keane also orchestrates play with words. "Truction", "bodderation", "long-guts", "edge up", "gutsify" and "jokify" are Vincentian creations that he offers without comment in his notes to the main text. They represent the building blocks of St. Vincent's creative use of language. Here word power (power over the word) and word play come together in the creation of these new words. However in the text he also illustrates that, for the written word, the process of building has some way to go. In week 6 he notes:

BUM BUM is a small but growing
village near the capital of St. Vincent
We have not yet devised a means
of spelling its name in a way
that satisfactorily indicates the way
it is pronounced. (Keane, 1979, p.18)

St. Vincent's oral, folk traditions of "nonsense talk" or "nonsense making" are also an important source of play. Keane uses certain features of speech performance in Vincentian oral tradition to set up a tension between "nonsense talk" or "nonsense making" and "sense". Abrahams has made a detailed study of these alternative forms of Vincentian speech performance. He suggests that "nonsense talk" is usually associated with speech performance in public places or at crossroads where talking "broad" or talking "bad" occurs. These speech acts reflect a world of energy, action and freedom. This activity may take place at set formal occasions, the most obvious being Carnival. They may also be informal, for example, through *commess*. Often, the association is with public occasions involving indulgence in all activities to the point of excess, chaotic topsy-turvy behaviour, making fun in every dimension, especially through songs of derision. These displays are contrasted with the private yard where "sense", talking "sweet" and structured order and behaviour are expected. In this context the sensible behaviour or speech acts support the ideals of the community. Those who are the most adept at such performances, either the sweet talk or the nonsense, are described as men (and women) of words. (Abrahams, 1983)

The explanation of Vincentian folk culture which Abrahams offers appears to come close to what Keane's captures and interprets creatively in this collection. And so, indirectly, Keane becomes a 'man-of-words' in the St. Vincent context. Sometimes the focus of the nonsense that Keane supplies is the symbol of the sensible world. This involves, for example, statistical calculations which (as in *Lesson Five in Seven Studies in Home Economics*) are intentionally meaningless -

if you take the amount of
strong rum (calculated in proof - gallons)
consumed in any given month
of Sundays, ... (Keane, 1979, p.27)

or, the irreverent juxtaposition of prayer and pride

O Gard brederin
Was'n dat
a fun tas tic pray
I jus pray dey
Speak yo mine
bredderin (Keane 1979, p.38)

and the spoof bureaucratic file of a psychological patient, much of whose career involves traveling to

different parts of the Caribbean and Canada, struggling with changes of names. In the context of the explanation of "nonsense" that Abrahams offers, what Keane seems to be suggesting through his play with "nonsense" is that order needs to be worked for and revalidated in any society, it cannot be assumed as a given.

An occasional indication of "sense" in the text appears to be recognised when it takes the form of innovation and creativity. New words and phrases, as indicated above, are listed without remarking on them. Occasional footnotes indicate local events which he considers noteworthy. For example, in week 36 is the footnote

Formation of N.A.M. (New Artists Movement) 3 years ago in September. First Vincentian group dedicated to taking the Arts to the people and getting them involved. All those who recognise the importance of Art for social awareness, solidarity and progressive transformation say "yes", hold up your hands, and make them stay up. Keane 1979, p.52).

While he recognises that his island "deals perhaps less comfortably with situations of fact than with engagements of personality" he was encouraged by the hope that "what we will create, and even a'ready done start create, pon this scarred and hallowed mountaintop, could blow yo mind" (Keane, 1979, p,73)

Other forms of "nonsense" are also present in the text. Rhymes and riddles, a folk story and a *commiss* monologue also draw attention to the text as public performance. As Abrahams has observed;

Like Anancy stories and Carnival performances, commiss is classified as permissible rudeness, as licensed nonsense - licensed because of the need to embody antisocial motives and to castigate them. (Abrahams, 1983, p. 86)

Thus, in Faustina's one-sided conversation with Keane, which mixes an attempt to maintain propriety while flirting with him, she notices another woman observing them

Watch Flora, nuh!... stiff-backside (excuse me). Flora for Tooky over the road there! Watch how she p-eyeing you and I. I telling you, Shaykeen, people in St. Vincent not nice like long time, nuh! A person can't have a respectable chat with a old friend before the whole country don't know before the clock strike nought... Is a good thing you come back to bring us some Culture, you hear?... I was only small but my mother used to tell me how your father bring up his whole family with Culture... (Keane 1979, p.47)

What Keane presents the reader with in "One A Week With Water" is a slice of Caribbean, and specifically Vincentian oral tradition, converted to text. This enabled Keane to pay homage to a rural culture and comment obliquely on order and chaos in that society.

Exile in New York

In 1980 Keane departed St. Vincent once again, this time for New York where he made his home till his death while on a lecture tour in Norway in 1997. In the latter years of Keane's life he wrote more reflective, personal poetry as in the collection "Palm and Octopus", a collection of twelve love poems which he published independently in 1994. The poem *Angel Horn*, a vivid contrast, though on a similar theme, with the angry poem *Credential* cited earlier, was one of the last poems that he wrote. It offers a gentle interpretation of his musicianship and a lyrical summing up of an older man's perspective on his art and his life.

When I was born
my father gave to me
an angelhorn
With wings of melody.
That angel placed her lips
upon my finger-tips
and I became, became
her secret name. (Keane, 1997,)

In the context of a rich and varied artistic life, how is Keane's legacy of poetry to be assessed? His early

poetry can be located in the tradition of Caribbean religious poetry. His concern with the Religious Muse as a pondering about the way to God, formed part of a well established focus of interest for many Caribbean poets of that time. These concerns gave way to an interest in the secular oral tradition and its poetical representation in the context of his native St. Vincent. As more and more of the elements of this oral tradition disappear from the island, his writing will continue to offer a creative exploration of St. Vincent's folk culture which will last.

***Note**

Discussion on Keane's musicianship can be found in the following articles and interviews

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