

Marcus Garvey: A Premature Death

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At the end of May 1940, Marcus Garvey sat cold and forgotten in a tall draughty rented house at 53 Talgarth Road in West Kensington, London. Recovering from a stroke which had left him partially paralysed, he was sorting through the newspapers that his secretary, Daisy Whyte, had placed beside his bed when he came across a headline which he knew could not be true: 'Marcus Garvey Dies in London.' He scanned the other papers, some of which also carried notices of his death. They were not kind obituaries. It took almost a week for many of the papers to issue corrections. By then, wakes and memorials had been held for Marcus Garvey in the Caribbean and the United States. Garvey found himself eulogised by a number of people whom he'd considered enemies and vilified by others who had not forgiven him for his alleged exploitation of black people. Miss Whyte tried to shield her boss from some of the more uncharitable news stories but he insisted on seeing them all. Garvey was still weak from the stroke, but more than the distress and embarrassment of his disability, he was deeply upset by his public and

private impotence, by his inability to arrest the decline of his mass movement, and by his estrangement from his family: two years previously, his wife had left him and returned to Jamaica with their children; he hadn't seen them since. Even if he'd been physically able to travel, there were few transatlantic passenger ships prepared to run the risk of being sunk by the German U-boats patrolling the high seas.

Marcus Garvey was now 'faced with clippings of his obituary [and] pictures of himself with deep black borders,' wrote Daisy Whyte, '[and] after the second day of this pile of shocking correspondence, he collapsed in his chair.' Reading through the damning accounts, written by former friends and enemies, Garvey had suffered another massive stroke: he died two weeks later, on 10 June 1940.

In those last weeks of his life, Garvey might also have been caught off guard by the surprisingly balanced coverage of papers such as the *New York Times*, the *Daily Worker* and the *Chicago Defender*. Back in the 1920s the *Chicago Defender* had led a pack of Negro papers in shrilly denouncing Garvey as a menace and disgrace to the black race. Now, on 22 June 1940, the *Defender* wrote, 'Endowed with a dynamic personality, with unmatched oratorical gift, Garvey was easily the most colourful figure to have appeared in America since Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. From 1914 to 1921 he dominated the scene with ... the powerful Universal Negro Improvement Association. Had Garvey succeeded in his

undertakings, he would have been incontestably the greatest figure of the twentieth century. Having failed, he is considered a fool.'

A whiff of hypocrisy rose from its pages as it was the *Defender's* London correspondent, George Padmore, who had initially spread the rumour of Garvey's death. Amongst the small circle of exiled Caribbean intellectuals in 1930s London, the rising stars, George Padmore and C. L. R. James, had mounted a running campaign against the older man, heckling him at Speakers' Corner and at political meetings, and seizing every opportunity to harass him and pour scorn upon his head. In the 1920s, J. Edgar Hoover had considered Marcus Garvey to be one of the most dangerous black men in America, but by the time of his death Garvey had retreated from the radicalism and militancy that the Bureau of Investigation boss had so feared. Garvey's critics in London could not forgive his sharp turn to the right, nor his denunciation of Emperor Haile Selassie for fleeing Ethiopia during the Italian invasion of 1935.

If this tiny coterie of black intellectuals in London, including Garvey, had paused to reflect, they would have realised that they shared a commonality of purpose. Instead, they circled round each other in a narcissistic battle of minor differences. Theirs was a mirror of the many skirmishes Garvey had fought with other black leaders in Jamaica and Harlem throughout his unusual career.

C. L. R. James came publicly to regret his role in Marcus Garvey's final demise, but it would take two decades before Garvey's label as a fool was replaced officially with a badge of honour. In 1964, Edward Seaga (a future Prime Minister of Jamaica) arranged for Garvey's remains to be returned for a state funeral and for the visionary, the man they called the Black Moses, to be honoured as Jamaica's first national hero and one of the most radical and enigmatic figures in twentieth-century history.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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