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Not just a Canadian Writer

Barret, Paul, ed.

'Membering Austin Clarke

Wilfred Laurier U P $39.99

Reviewed by Dr Sarah Lawson Welsh.

Festschrifts are often ephemeral things: constrained by the need to honour, celebrate and/or elegize their subject and often limited by the moment of their production. For readers situated outside of the charmed 'circle of remembrance', they can seem closed or lacking in the critical verve and robust analytical focus of less personal studies. Not so Paul Barrett's '*Membering Austin Clarke* which transcends the Festschrift genre whilst retaining some of its best features. This 2020 collection brings together creative and critical approaches to Austin Clarke's life writing, poems, novels and short stories and maps the extraordinary contribution of a writer, who although a key figure in both Anglophone Caribbean and Canadian Literature, is still strangely under read, under studied and under recognized.

Indeed, one of the strongest contributions to the book, Andre Forget's brilliantly illuminating chapter, 'Still the British Empire', addresses some of the possible reasons for the complex 'legacy of forgetting' surrounding the critical reception of Austin Clarke's writing and the continued marginalisation of his work in a Canadian literary context. Whilst Clarke arguably always found supportive networks and secure canonical status within Anglophone Caribbean literature (for example, the sustaining qualities of his early

friendships with other key Caribbean writers of his generation are delightfully explored in Kris Hart's revealing chapter 'These Virtues o' the Cullinery Harts: Talking Food and Politics in the Letters of Austin Clarke, Sam Selvon, and Andrew Salkey' and a later chapter by John Harwood documents how Clarke continued to meet, correspond with and maintain networks with other writers of Barbadian origin living and working in North America, such as Kamau Brathwaite and Paule Marshall), Clarke's status as a *Canadian* writer was never as assured or secure, despite the fact that he lived and worked in Canada for over five decades and was one of CanLit's most prolific authors. As Forget suggests, the marginalization or erasure of Clarke from even some very recent mainstream histories of CanLit is all the more striking given that Clarke was dubbed in 2016 "Canada's first multicultural writer" (*National Post* 156) and that in the boom years of CanLit Clarke was arguably not just "the most prominent Black writer in Canada [but] Canada's most prominent man of letters, period." (156) '*Membering Austin Clarke* is thus hugely welcome in demonstrating why we should take Clarke 'more seriously', taking on the task of evaluating, with skill, sensitivity and intelligence, the many sides to Clarke as a man and as a writer, and his important cultural and literary legacy.

Ronaldo Walcott's opening chapter, 'The Trouble of Intimacy' sets the tone of the collection. The contributions are often intimate recollections of those who knew, met or worked with Clarke, in either a personal or professional capacity, many becoming friends as well as colleagues. The inclusion of photographs and unpublished work (including drafts in progress) from Clarke's archive as well as creative tributes by other (mostly Canadian-based) creative writers, consolidates this intimate tone. However, as Walcott observes, "intimacy is double-edged" (2); to know somebody or something intimately is also to throw light onto the flaws, contradictions and ambivalences of the subject. Thus, the intimacy which

characterized “Clarke’s literary geography of Toronto” (4) a city Clarke came to, in part by accident, and in which he settled and lived for many years, also drove him to a career-long “outraged artistic reflection” (9) that this same city responded, at best ambivalently, to “black narratives” such as his own and ultimately, in his view, resisted “black people and Blackness” (4). Many of the writings in which Clarke most clearly explored Canadian-based experiences of racism and exclusion are critically considered in this volume, including his early ‘Toronto Trilogy’ of novels (*The Meeting Point,* 1967, *Storm of Fortune*, 1973 and, *The Bigger Light, 1975)*, short stories such as the celebrated but in many ways problematic story, ‘When He was Young and Free and Used to Wear Silks’ (1971) and his final book of poems, *In Your Crib* (2015). Such texts are, arguably, as much part of Clarke’s intimate examination of his environment as the more accessible writing of, say, his ‘Culinary Memoir’ *Pigtails and Breadfruit* (1999) which deals in different kinds of familial intimacy in a largely Barbadian context. Indeed, several of the contributors in this volume grapple with the fact that Clarke was both a committed activist and writer, casting their critical eye at the ways in which his writing connected to his interest in issues of race, migration and the politics of diversity in a Canadian context as well as a wider Black Atlantic context, how his writing was both accepted and shunned by a literary establishment and especially a literary prize culture in Canada which seemed perpetually uncertain as to how to respond to and categorise his work. Walcott argues that Clarke’s often uncomfortable narratives of black lives in a Canadian context were not only absolutely prescient in addressing the ‘polite racism’ which accompanied the public discourse of Canada’s multicultural policies, but continue to be crucial precisely because “black People and blackness remains firmly adjacent to the [Canadian] national narrative that continues to imagine itself as white, a whiteness that Clarke’s work spectacularizes for the violence it does to Black life” (4-5). In our

contemporary moment of the Black Lives Matter movement, of accelerated moves to decolonize educational curricula and to reappraise the colonial links of many major Western institutions, such writing could hardly be more relevant. Clarke is, as this volume suggests, still a writer for our time.

Overall, *'Membering Austin Clarke* makes for a lively and often fascinating mix which, with some exceptions (e.g., the under-contextualised creative contribution by Giovanni Riccio which may be confusing to a reader less familiar with Clarke's work), is well-judged and imaginatively structured. The careful placing of different but interweaving contributions and kinds of contributors, works iteratively and accumulatively, like the jazz music Clarke loved almost as much as his own skilfully-mixed home martinis. The chapters circle and recircle the beginnings of Clarke's writing career, his life-long interrogation of his Caribbean roots, his experience of and representation of Canadian urban spaces and of a more complex senses of 'Black Atlantic' connectedness (with its own sometimes ineffable and spectral temporality, as Winifred Siermerling's fine analysis of Clarke's 2015 memoir, *'Membering*, considers), his ambivalent location as a writer who was, as Andre Forget argues, "never only a Canadian" (156) but whose life and work straddled more than one place and challenged the status quo of Can Lit., to the question of genre, style and formal experimentation in his writing, Clarke's working methods and relationships with editors and publishers, not just as individuals but as the representatives of a wider institutional apparatus of canonicity.

However, unlike many Festschrifts this particular volume is unafraid to foreground the problematics of Clarke's life and work including his often-difficult dealings with others, his irascible and frequently outspoken personality, the problematic sexual (and sometimes

racial politics) which are reflected in much of his writing. Leslie Sanders' early chapter 'Why Teaching Your Work is Difficult' is an excellent example of this balancing act: intimate in address to the late author (who Sanders knew as a colleague) yet explicit in its address to the problems which Clarke's writing can present in a pedagogic context:

> As you know, I teach African-Canadian literature… and every time I put together a syllabus, I am torn as regards your work and what to assign. Especially at the undergraduate level. What can I teach of your work that will not make me feel I must attack, defend, or ignore your representation of women? And if attack is my only viable option, how will that affect how succeeding generations value your work and contributions?" (25-6)

One absolute highlight of this collection is Asha Varadhargajan's chapter '" The Workshop of the Kitchen" which places into a mesmerizingly effective dialogic relation a reading of Paule Marshall's *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009), her classic short story 'Da-Duh- in Memoriam' (1967), and Clarke's own memoir, Growing *Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980). Those chapters in the book which deal directly with Clarke's archive and which reproduce and revaluate Clarkes letters, diaries, working papers and previously unpublished writings are also extremely valuable, not lets because they are collected in one place. Some critical contributions are perhaps limited by their critical apparatus, turning to an almost exclusively American and/or African American critical framework for a reading of Clarke's work rather than a more nuanced and, arguably, appropriate focus on Canadian and Caribbean writers and on Clarke's transnational writing within these wider diasporic circuits of influence, context and exchange. However, this is a valuable and welcome volume which

brings into focus the prolific writings of a key figure in Canadian and in Anglophone Caribbean literature.

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