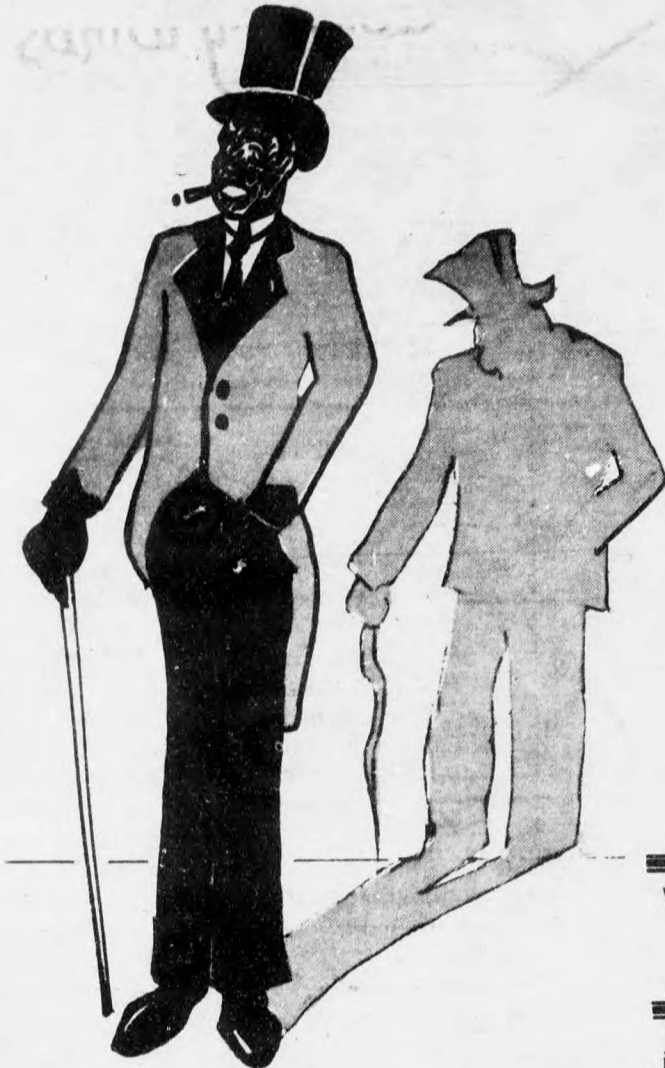


BOOKS

# when he was free and young and he used to wear silks



When He was Free and Young and He  
Used to Wear Silks  
By Austin Clarke  
Anansi 1971

illustrated by Mac Haynes

reviewed by Sheelagh Russell

Austin Clarke's current volume of short stories follows his previous three novels, *Survivors of the Crossing*, *Amongst Thistles and Thorns*, and *The Meeting Point* in depicting the pathos and humour of the life of the black immigrant to Canada. Born himself in Barbados, Mr. Clarke brings a special insight to the problems faced in new situations by a group of memorable and vital characters. This latest book, *When He Was Free and Young and He Used to Wear Silks*, should create for itself a special place in the growth of Canadian literature.

Mr. Clarke's style is alive, almost effervescent in its changes. It is at once both poetic and conversational. Light flashes from the combinations of words in the lively West Indian dialect employed, a dialect which makes one envious of such verbal freedom without reducing it to an example of any sociological "happiness". The tragedy of the situation in these stories is that what could be a joy in hopeful events is constantly being thwarted by policemen, mothers, and landlords, and that overall there seems to be an even greater force than these ordering affairs. Nowhere does Mr. Clarke ask us to feel that life back home would be easier, but at least it can be dealt with on a more personal level, as the first story shows us.

From the first paragraph of "An Easter Carol", the reader finds himself in a world of different customs but familiar people. The situation is close enough that he can feel the combination of shame, anger and resignation with the little boy who loses the prized place in the Cathedral choir Easter Sunday, because his too-proud mother has forced him to wear too-small shoes, resulting in his being late at church. As his dreams of glory become brighter, the reader feels more and more the hopelessness of the situation, and his final humiliation:

"There was a beggar-man standing in the silhouette of the Gate, in the road, drinking from a small paperbag, with which he was conducting as the music romped and played. I was fighting with my shoes. And all the time my tears were falling on the clean, freshly-ironed cotton shirt, and into the shoes, as I tried in vain to get them back on my feet. And when I looked up and the film of sadness dropped with the tears, and I could see, I saw Henry step into the middle of the aisle, in the chancel and my heart broke. And straight away I saw my mother, standing at the entrance of the gate, waiting; waiting to examine my shoes."

"They Heard a Ringing of Bells" shifts the scene to Toronto, on the university lawn where a conversation is being carried out between three immigrants, one about to be deported, to the accompaniment of the carillon bells. The story covers only a brief moment in time, but as the trio discuss their plans and disappointments, the hopefulness of the bells turns to a jangling disharmony. At first Estelle says, "Bells playing hymns? God bless my eyesight! Boy, this Canada is a damn great country, in truth!" At the end, Ironhorse Henry says, "That damn bell ring till it give me a headache. And it chilly as hell here, too." The ringing of the bell is symptomatic of their condition.

#### A twist of the ironic

In "Waiting for the Postman to Knock", Clarke assumes a highly conversational tone in order to tell the story of Enid, penniless in Canada: "When she move in the bed the pain, child, the pain increase a little more. And water was coming outta Enid eyes like Niagara Falls self." The letters which Enid sends and receives become increasingly important, until an ironic, tragic twist at the end.

"Four Stations in his Circle" is the most complex psychologically and the most potentially tragic of these stories. Jefferson The Ophillis Belle has become obsessed with a dream, to "own a piece o' Canada," and the obsession leads him to take measures and face humiliations that lead to his ultimate degradation and friendlessness. The ending is wonderfully fitting, as Jefferson is unable to extricate himself from his pretence.

"Give us This Day: And Forgive us," "A Wedding in Toronto," and "What Happened?" ideal with the same characters, as Henry comes close to losing his Canadian girlfriend Agatha, is humiliated by the police at his wedding ceremony, and finally tries desperately to hold together his disintegrating marriage. Each story forms a whole in itself, but gives hints of what is to happen in the others. There is a change from an almost stream-of-consciousness technique in the first, to direct narrative in the second, and finally the situation rests in conversation and reminiscence in the third, with a tone of unknowing deflation.

Another obsession is dealt with in "The Motor Car," in a casual style related to that of "Waiting for the Postman to Knock."

Disappointment heaped on apparent success is a common theme in these stories, and this is no exception. The climax is indeed a memorable, almost comic one.

"Leaving This Island Place" is in a way a departure from the other stories, although it appears to deal with a familiar situation. Clarke imposes upon the thoughts of the narrator a sense of mystery, a certain inexplicable regret as he slowly unfolds some of the facts of his past.

#### A constant sense of the comic

The title story has to be read to be described. It is a fantastic crashing of the rapids of one man's mind which no adjectives can adequately describe. Pathos, comedy, tragedy are all intermixed as the author shifts from scorn to tears. In this sense, Clarke makes of himself Every man, who was once free and young:

"He was young and free again, to live or to travel imprisoned in a memory of freed love, chained to her body and her laughter by the spinal cord of anxious long distance, reminders said before and after, by the long engineering of a drive from Yale to Branders to Seaver Street to Branders dull in the winter Zion of brains, dull in the autumn three hours in miles hoping that the travel won't end like an underground railroad at the door of this negative woman, but continue even through letters and quarrels and long miles down the short street up the long stairs in the marble of her memory, clenched in her absent embrace but rejoicing with his fingers in the velvet feeling of her silken black natural hair . . ."

Although my previous exposure to the work of Austin Clarke has been only as a dramatized version of a story similar to "Four Stations in his Circle" on the CBC, even then I was struck by the accuracy of the emotions he depicted. The most impressive feature of his book, "When He Was Free and Young . . ." is a constant sense of the comic, which keeps even pain in perspective, and a wide variance of styles in portraying an all-too-common dilemma.

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