

PHYLLIS COARD 1943 – 2020. A TRIBUTE. A CONTEXT.

Anne Hickling-Hudson

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Phyllis Coard was a social worker, teacher, university lecturer, co-founder of the National Women's Movement in Grenada (1977 – 1983), and activist in the struggle to win rights for women, children and the impoverished. Her work as a novelist and poet developed during her experience of persecution over nearly seventeen years of political imprisonment after the collapse of the Grenada Revolution in 1983.

Phyllis was born and educated in Jamaica, and attained her undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications at the University of Reading, UK, the University of the West Indies, (Jamaica campus), and the London School of Economics. I am sorrowing at her loss, for she was my lifelong friend. She left us in a year of losses for me. Her death in September 2020 came shortly after the death from pancreatitis of my almost-twin, my year-apart brother Frederick Hickling, for whom I have written a tribute in another journal (Hickling-Hudson 2020). I never imagined that any part of my life would be without the two of them. Phyllis had suffered from a heart condition for the last four years. She died just before her 77th birthday, leaving her husband, Bernard Coard, three adult children, four grandchildren, and her sister who lives, with her husband, in Western Australia.

My schoolfriend Phyllis was more than a friend, a wife, a mother and a sister. She was a distinguished

Jamaican woman who fought for the rights of women and children in the Caribbean. She suffered wrenching hardships that arose from her struggles for justice. Phyl attained greatness in her life, both in what she achieved and what she endured. A report from the e-newspaper *Now Grenada* has this succinct outline of her achievements while she worked in Grenada, her husband's birthplace:

‘Upon her passing in early September 2020, Phyllis Coard’s contribution as an advocate for Women’s Rights in Grenada unveiled a silent hero with a legacy that is bringing benefits to a generation of women born after her conviction: Maternity Leave in law, Mobilisation of Women’s Cooperatives and women’s involvement in non-traditional occupations such as driving heavy duty construction equipment. The work of Coard goes back to the 1970s. From very early days she began community work, founding the River Road Day Care nursery’ which ‘was set up primarily under a series of programmes which the New Jewel Movement (NJM) had put in place called ‘The Economic Enterprises of the People’” (Straker, 2020).

The newspaper noted that Phyl had also organised training for young journalists in Grenada, and helped put in place systematic, regular radio and newspaper journalism.

“A generation of women born after her conviction”. This phrase introduces an important part of my memorial for Phyllis. I will provide historical context for what many newspapers describe as the fact that she was the lone woman convicted in 1983 for the murder of Maurice Bishop. After that, I will go back to reflecting on what her loss means for her family, friends and the region.

The ‘Conviction for Murder’ of Phyllis Coard. What is the context?

Phyllis Coard started work as a young social worker helping people in London, where she did postgraduate studies and met her Grenadian husband Bernard Coard, famous for his youth work and writing that exposed the racism suffered by Black children in the UK in the 1970s (see Curtis 2005, Coard 2005). Phyllis was an excellent organiser. She and Bernard Coard were among the key figures in the socialist-oriented revolution, led by Maurice Bishop in the tiny Caribbean tri-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique (population c100,000). From 1979 to 1983 the process of socio-economic change, affectionately called the ‘Revo’ by Grenadians, initiated decolonising transformations in a society that had been impoverished and exploited by some three hundred years of French then British colonialism. The changes were moderately socialist-oriented, in the sense of introducing into the almost entirely capitalist economy a small share of state sector ownership and people’s cooperatives, as well as establishing and strengthening popular community associations such as the women’s movement led by Phyllis. She was elected leader of the National Women’s Organisation in Grenada, and became the Minister for Women’s Affairs. In these areas Phyllis, together with many inspired and committed Grenadian colleagues, led teams of Grenadian women to implement life-changing projects for women and young children. Such projects were nurtured by the growing efficiency of the economy led by Minister of Finance Bernard Coard.

The tragic collapse of the Grenada Revolution in October 1983, after four years of innovative and foundational social change, came about with the fratricidal killings of Maurice Bishop and other leaders. This was followed within a few days by the US invasion.

The Caribbean and especially Grenada was traumatised by the murders of the popular Maurice Bishop and his colleagues, the result of in-fighting within the leadership of the small Marxist party that led the People's Revolutionary Government. Trauma increased with the army-imposed curfew that followed the murders. These chaotic events in Grenada provided the opportunity, in the context of the Cold War, for the Reagan-led government of the USA to send nearly 8,000 heavily armed troops to invade the tiny population, the size of a city suburb. The invasion, welcomed by some, condemned by others, resulted in the US capture of Grenada's left-wing leaders, their torture, the allegation that they had carried out the murders, a systematic US propaganda campaign against them, the establishment of an unlawful 'court of necessity' to try them, the seizure of documents by the invaders, and the disappearance of the bodies of Bishop and his colleagues. The outcome of the trial was the sentencing to execution of Bernard Coard, Phyllis Coard, and other leaders, who came to be known as 'The Grenada 17' (see Gibson 2018).

Phyllis' death in September 2020 has aroused a fresh stream of attention to Grenada. Many of the current news reports of her life and death give distorted and misleading accounts of her historical context, especially that which relates to the Grenada Revolution. These accounts say that she 'was convicted for murder', but do not mention the illegality and travesty of the US-financed trials that sentenced 14 of the Grenada 17 to the gallows, and the other three to life imprisonment, with allegations that they had carried out the murders of Bishop and his colleagues.

Their 'convictions' were based on one man's evidence easily proved to be completely false, as was shown in reports from Amnesty International (2003), from Ramsey Clark (1997), former Attorney General of the USA, from Doris Kitson (1991), New York Times journalist, and from

the UK High Court in 2014. These internationally respected sources also use evidence to show that the Caribbean judges and lawyers were paid by the invading forces, that some of the defendants were tortured to extract false ‘confessions’, that the jury was selected by a former member of the prosecution team, that some jury members publicly stated before the trial their wish to see the defendants dead, and that the appeal court has never released a written report of its judgements

Following an international outcry, the death sentences imposed on the NJM leaders were commuted to life sentences. In 2000, Phyllis was released on compassionate grounds, after nearly 17 years in prison, to return to her home country, Jamaica, to receive medical treatment for cancer. The sixteen other leaders, including her husband Bernard, were released after enduring twenty six years of imprisonment. Phyllis’ sister Dr. Beverley Noakes, a retired University of Western Australia professor of French studies, has co-written a tribute to her sister Phyllis that describes the outcry that helped to prevent the seventeen captives from being hanged (see Noakes et al 2020).

When I and co-writers, utilising available sources, made the point that the convictions of the Grenada 17 were based on an unjust trial and false evidence (Hickling-Hudson, Scott, McKenzie, Tate and Bartholomew 2020), there were a variety of hostile reactions on-line. One called our article ‘a brazen attempt to exculpate Phyllis Coard’, while another wrote: ‘If they are all so innocent... then who killed Maurice Bishop, Jacqueline Creft, who I understand was pregnant with his child at the time, and all the others who were executed by firing squad in 1983?’

Part of the heavy price paid by the society for the legal travesty that played out was that, indeed, the travesty hid for decades ‘what really happened’ in the Grenada tragedy. This is currently being pieced together

by researchers who have been studying the Grenadian documents seized by the USA and now obtained under a Freedom of Information Act. An important and interesting analysis is provided by a retired American professor, Rich Gibson, who visited Grenada frequently, interviewing inhabitants including many of the incarcerated Grenada 17. Gibson says:

I spent 1996 in Grenada interviewing many of the jailed NJM leaders. To say they were innocent of everything is not the case. To say they were innocent of the charges brought against them is. Serious mistakes were made by the New Jewel leadership. The prisoners, in prison and after their release, issued extensive, indeed insightful, apologies to that effect, taking responsibility for the crisis of the revolution, but not for the murders they did not commit (Gibson, 2018).

Another account of ‘what really happened’ - how the tragedy of the murders unfolded – is by Dennis Bartholomew. He draws attention to the role of the USA:

The US has systematically sought to discredit everything brought about by the Revolution and the people who organised it, including the ordinary Grenadians who sacrificed so much to achieve these gains. The false evidence of Cletus St Paul was designed to destroy the reputation of the leaders of the Revolution, like that which befell the leaders of the Fédon Revolution, thus ensuring that the noble experiment of self-determination would not be tried again (Bartholomew 2020).

The entire population suffered tragedy and trauma following the collapse of the Grenada revolution, the murders, the further killings as a result of the US

invasion, the relentless US disinformation, and the disappearance of the bodies, preventing burial by loved ones. Decades of incarceration separated the Grenada 17 from relatives, their partners, their young children and their society. Noreen Scott, referring to documents released from US archives, relates that the Governor General of Grenada Sir Paul Scoon had been informed, immediately after the unexpected tragedy of October 19th, 1983, about how it had unfolded. He had agreed to an independent inquiry which could be supported by the British Commonwealth Secretary General, and he participated in discussions about funerals for Maurice Bishop and others who had tragically died at the fort. This was prevented because of the US invasion. As she writes:

Had an independent inquiry taken place it is likely that the historical facts of what actually happened would have been established.

Instead, 37 years later, the nation is still divided – from damaging rumours, false and misleading pre-trial propaganda – which has left many individuals, including many who were falsely convicted, and their families, traumatised from torture, injury and personal loss (Scott, November 2020).

Reflecting on Phyllis Coard's legacy for the Caribbean

Phyllis has been vilified by those who have absorbed US disinformation. The rich significance of her life, however, was always appreciated by those who worked with her, and is unfolding further as a result of reflections following her death. Negative newspaper reports are being countered by informed tributes that are cutting away the falsehoods told about her. To talk about the life of Phyllis Coard is to face some unpleasant realities of the Caribbean and its geopolitical context, as well as to gain hope from the strength of those who, like Phyllis,

are striving to overcome the region's adversities and embrace its promise. She grew up during British colonialism in Jamaica, and her determined, activist challenge to tackling the distortions of neo-colonialism and Cold War politics plunged her into the difficulties and suffering of her long imprisonment. The tribute by Jacqueline McKenzie, one of the lawyers involved in the team defending the Grenada 17, is particularly successful in portraying the achievements of Phyllis and her Grenadian colleagues, as well as her anguish in the context of Caribbean adversities (McKenzie 2020). A three-hour virtual memorial organised online on 12th September 2020 by Valerie Gordon and the 'Grenada: Forward Ever' group, involved friends of Phyllis from Grenada and around the world. It expressed the deep esteem in which Phyl was held, and the affection she attracted from colleagues and friends.

Working closely with Phyllis and Bernard Coard and other Grenadian friends in the Grenada Revolution taught me much about how difficult is the task of decolonising our societies stagnating after centuries of colonialism. The significant and exhilarating changes that Grenada's 'Revo' achieved in only four years – as well as the circumstances of its collapse – make it worthy of a prominent place in world history. Those changes implemented by Grenada's revolutionary leaders, including Phyllis, are reforms that Caribbean countries still need to strive for today.

I was involved in the Revo, together with my husband Brian and our two boys, for two years, Brian heading the Town Planning department in Grenada, me working in the Grenadian Ministry of Education in teacher education and other important education projects (see Hickling-Hudson 1989), and Dominic and Alexis doing their first two years of high school at the Grenada Boys' Secondary School (GBSS). Our family's two years in the 'Revo' (September 1981 to August 1983)

led to life-enhancing watersheds for my understanding of education and society – including working in a teaching team with Paulo Freire in a two week seminar for Grenadian teachers (see Hickling-Hudson 2014), and working as a member of the National Women’s Organisation in the social reform programs organised by Phyllis Coard and her colleagues (see Hickling-Hudson 1999).

The career of Phyllis Coard as a social worker and political activist/leader consumed much of her adult life. But she was also a successful teacher and an excellent writer. While imprisoned in Grenada, she taught literacy and English language use to female prisoners who asked for classes. During some of her post-prison years in Jamaica (from 2000), she worked part time as a tutor to undergraduates in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy at UWI, the University of the West Indies. She taught a UWI course, the ‘Fundamentals of English’, preparing students for an English language examination that they had to pass in order to be awarded their degree. In 2012, 85% of her case-study group passed the exam, compared to a pass rate of 42% for students in other groups. Her successful teaching methods were described in her academic article, co-written with her UWI colleague and the course coordinator Dr. Caroline Dyche, entitled “Integrating Psychological and Sociocultural Dimensions into the Teaching of English to UWI Students Who Speak Jamaican Creole: A Case Study”, published in the journal *‘The UWI Quality Education Forum’*, Vol. 19, 2013. The article won a UWI research award in 2014. It is a fascinating discussion, providing pedagogical, cultural and policy insights in the teaching of language in a bilingual ‘Creole’ society such as Jamaica.

In prison and afterwards, Phyl wrote short stories, a novel ‘The Healing’, recently published by Amazon, a

collection of poetry that was later sensitively analysed by a Croatian writer (Natasa Tusec 2007), and two memoirs. One memoir is a short book with the title '*US War On One Woman*' (1988) describing her ordeal in the initial years of being a prisoner of the US and Grenadian governments. Phyl's second memoir, *Unchained. A Caribbean Woman's Journey Through Invasion, Incarceration and Liberation*, published in 2019, is a detailed and poetically written description of her years in prison and her release. A 2019 Facebook post commented on this book:

It is said that you do not really know someone – including yourself – until a person encounters a profound crisis in life. In *Unchained*, fascinating insights into the real Phyllis Coard emerge as she faces the growing personal crises of her capture, isolation, psychological and physical torture, character assassination and judicial malpractice, five years on death row, and a total of sixteen and a half years in prison.

On a personal level, Phyllis enriched my life with her affection, cheerfulness, sharp intellect, and fun, ever since we met at Sunday school, and studied in the same cohort for our eight years at St. Andrew High School in Jamaica. We went to different universities, but re-connected in the UK when we were newly married. Our friendship deepened when we returned to the Caribbean in the 1970s to develop our careers, our social activism and our young families.

Those who knew Phyl rejoiced in her love of her family, her warmth towards her friends and colleagues, and her concern and activist care for the marginalized and needy in the societies in which she lived. In Bernard Coard she found her perfect partner, who shared her

life's goals to help change society for the better. When he was released from his prison ordeal and rejoined her in 2009, as her sister Beverley writes, 'they managed to recapture the happiness of their earlier years, enjoying life in the countryside of Jamaica and swimming together as they loved to do. Together they had 52 years of faithful married life. When Phyl became seriously ill, Bernard was there at her side: she was never alone, but always with the person she trusted above all others. All those who loved Phyl are so grateful to Bernard for his devoted care of her. We wish him peace, and happy memories of Phyl' (Noakes, 1st October 2020).

The loss of Phyllis Coard is the loss of one of my closest friends, my forever friend since childhood. Remembering the life of Phyllis, some of our St Andrew High School classmates sent condolences to her family via our e-mail schoolfriend group (which we dubbed 'The 59ers', since we took our Cambridge O Level School Certificate exams in 1959). I will end with two of these e-mailed messages from schoolfriends.

From Valerie, 8th September:

Anne, sincere thanks for sharing some of your memories of our beloved friend, Phyllis. It was with extreme sadness that I learned yesterday of her passing after her valiant battle with health challenges over the years. She was one of my dearest school friends and I will always hold her close in memory. I have often rued the fact that the demands of family life in different countries resulted in our inability to maintain close contact after she left for England. Nevertheless, we were heartened to renew contact at our 2011 class reunion in Jamaica and it was if all the lost years just rolled away when we met again.

Phyl was a favourite of the family and dear to my mother, who was always very concerned to know what was happening and could be done to help her during her awful trials in Grenada. It was only on reading her book that I got a better understanding of the travesty of it all.

As Phyl's family home was very close to mine when we lived on Ruthven Road, we would often visit each other and travel home from school together, discussing all our experiences and sharing the recent novels we were reading.

As you're in touch with Bernard, please extend my heartfelt sympathy to him and the rest of the family, including her sister Beverly. It gave me great comfort to know the love and respect Phyl and Bernard always had for each other and to learn from Phyl about their two lovely daughters, Sola and Abi, son Neto, and four grandchildren. May Phyl, now free from pain and suffering, indeed Rest In Peace.

From Charleen, 8th September 2020

Sad to lose Phyllis, my condolences to the family. I admired her dedication to the cause of Grenada and was very moved by both her and Bernard's books. I also noticed that the news report diminished her position with the Grenada government and outright lied about Bernard's involvement in Bishop's death, using a favourite preface to a lie: Many people say...Some people say. It is scary to think that one of the key traitors to the revolutionary government is still in a responsible position with the present Prime Minister. Rest in peace, Phyllis, you are gone from us but always part of history.

References

Amnesty International, 2003. 'The Grenada 17: the last of the Cold War Prisoners?'

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/104000/amr320012003en.pdf>

Bartholomew, D. (2020) 'Open Letter to the People of Grenada'. In *Now Grenada*, 18 August, 2020, <https://www.nowgrenada.com/2020/08/open-letter-to-the-people-of-grenada/>

Coard, B. (2005) 'Why I wrote the 'ESN book'. *The Guardian*, 6 February 2005.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/feb/05/schools.uk>

Curtis, P. (2005) 'Opportunity Locked'. *The Guardian*, 2 Feb 2005.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/feb/01/raceineducation.race>

Gibson, R. (2018) 'Thirty Five Years On: The Mystery of the Grenada Invasion Remains'. *Counter Punch*, 25 October, 2018.

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/10/25/thirty-five-years-on-the-mystery-of-the-grenada-invasion-remains/>

Hickling-Hudson, A. (1989) 'Education in the Grenada Revolution, 1979 – 1983'. *Compare*, 19 (2): 95-114.

Hickling-Hudson, A. (1999) 'Experiments in political literacy: Caribbean women and feminist education'. *Journal of Education and Development in the Caribbean*, 3 (1): 19-43.

Hickling-Hudson, A. (2014) 'Striving for a Better World. Lessons from Freire in Grenada, Jamaica and Australia'. *International Review of Education*. 60(4): 523 – 543.

Hickling-Hudson, A. (2020) '“The People’s Psychiatrist”: Chief madman or revolutionary healer? Dr. Fred Hickling and the Development of Postcolonial Psychiatry in Jamaica'. Forthcoming in *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, Vol 12 No. 2.

Hickling-Hudson, A., N. Scott, J. McKenzie, J. Tate, D. Bartholomew (2020) 'Countering Misreporting About Phyllis Coard'. *Now Grenada*, 10 November 2020.
<https://www.nowgrenada.com/2020/11/countering-misreporting-about-phyllis-coard/>

Noakes, B., T. Noakes and J. Watson (2020) 'Sustained by great courage and spirit'. Obituaries, *The West Australian*, 23 November 2020.

Noakes, B. (2020) 'Phyl was my little sister'. Tribute, personal e-mail to friends, 1 October 2020.

Scott, N. (2020) Response to comments following article by Hickling-Hudson et al 2020, above, at
<https://www.nowgrenada.com/2020/11/countering-misreporting-about-phyllis-coard/>

Straker, L. (2020) 'Phyllis Coard, Champion For Women’s Rights in Grenada', *Now Grenada*, 16 September 2020.

<https://www.nowgrenada.com/2020/09/phyllis-coard-champion-for-womens-rights-in-grenada/>

Tučev, N. (2007) 'The Poetry of Political Prisoners: Flora Brovina and Phyllis Coard'. Chapter in a 2007 edited Book in Croatian, translated as 'Language, Literature, Politics' (JEZIK, KNJIŽEVNOST, POLITIKA)