

Walter Rodney Collection, 1960-1987

Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center

Archives Research Center
archives@auctr.edu
(404) 978-2052

Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library
111 James P. Brawley Dr.
SW, Atlanta, GA 30314
www.auctr.edu
(404) 978-2000

The Walter Rodney Collection is a compilation of materials donated by a number of individuals and institutions. The donations help to broaden the documentation about the life, contributions, influence, and legacy of Walter Rodney. The Walter Rodney Collection will continue to grow as more donations are made. The collection complements the Walter Rodney Papers that were donated to the Robert W. Woodruff Library in 2004. This collection is divided into seven series. The series include: Documents and publications, Events, News articles about Walter Rodney, Posters, Working Peoples Alliance (WPA), Writings by Walter Rodney and Photographs.

Biographical Note

Walter Rodney (1942-1980), Pan-Africanist historian and educator, was a highly respected intellectual who personified the “scholar-activist.” A prolific writer, Dr. Rodney authored nine books and over fifty articles, chapters, and book reviews during the brief 13 year period between 1967 and his untimely death in 1980. Walter Rodney is widely known for his seminal work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, first published in 1972. It has been translated into Portuguese, German, and Japanese, and is used as a text in numerous colleges and universities in the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.



Walter Rodney believed that education and history should be used as a tool for social change. Recognized for his scholarship and teaching on African and Caribbean history, Dr. Rodney is equally revered for his political activism. A popular lecturer with college and university students and at academic conferences and symposia, Dr. Rodney extended his teaching beyond academic settings to the broader community, making a specific effort to reach out to the working class and the disenfranchised. He spoke to school children, community groups, workers, labor unions, and at political forums and rallies. He traveled extensively, lecturing and teaching in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and North America.

A native of Guyana, Walter Anthony Rodney was born March 23, 1942. He was the second of six children of Percival Edward and Pauline Worrell Rodney. His father was a tailor by profession and his mother a homemaker and seamstress. His father was deeply involved in the development of the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) and exposed Walter to activism at an early age. The PPP was a multi-racial, anti-colonial, political organization that encompassed a range of political perspectives including Marxism and socialism. The PPP led the struggle against British colonial rule. Guyana achieved full independence from Britain in 1966.

Walter Rodney lived during a period of great expectation for revolutionary change in the world order. This was a time when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was defined and adopted as a world standard for freedom and justice; a time of African liberation and Caribbean independence, civil rights and Black power movements, Vietnam anti-war and anti-apartheid protests; a time of Cold War politics and capitalist, socialist, and communist forces waged a battle for dominance in the hearts and minds of people fighting for freedom and self-determination. Although Walter Rodney's education and academic achievements gave him credentials and acceptance to become part of the ruling class, he remained firmly grounded in his working class roots. Dr. Rodney was a Marxist historian, however, he interpreted Marxist theory within the context of African people's history and circumstances. Through his research, analysis, writings, and teachings Walter Rodney sought to bring awareness and understanding to issues such as race, class, slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, imperialism and its impact and legacy on working class people and their struggles for social justice and economic development.

In his formative years, Walter Rodney excelled academically and was awarded scholarships to pursue his education. He received high marks in his early grades leading to a scholarship to attend Queen's College, the prestigious secondary school in Georgetown, Guyana. Rodney continued his education on scholarship at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica, where in 1963 he completed a bachelor's degree in history with first-class honors. Following this outstanding academic achievement Rodney received an award to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. In 1965, Walter Rodney married Patricia Henry, a friend from Guyana who was in London studying nursing. To this union three children were born: a son, Shaka, born in London; and two daughters, Kanini and Asha, born in Tanzania.

While in London, Walter Rodney was active in student activities and community actions, and joined a West Indian study group who met regularly with revolutionary intellectual, C. L. R. James, the Trinidadian Marxist scholar, best known for his history of the Haitian revolution, *Black Jacobins*. In 1966, at age 24, Walter Rodney received a doctorate in African History. His dissertation, entitled *A History for the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* was published in 1970 by Clarendon Press (Oxford, England). Dr. Rodney began his teaching career in Tanzania at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he taught from 1966-1968. He then returned to Jamaica to teach African History at the University of the West Indies.

He was a popular teacher and community speaker giving lectures and speeches on African history and Black power at student forums and to economically depressed people in Kingston and in the countryside, and establishing ties with the Rastafarian movement. Jamaica was in the 6th year of full independence attained in 1962. Rodney's radical socialist ideals and political activism for the empowerment and economic development of working class and disenfranchised people put him in direct conflict with the ruling class and government officials, in Jamaica and later with the political elite in his homeland, Guyana. Upon returning from the Congress of Black Writers conference in Montreal, Canada in October 1968, Dr. Rodney was denied re-entry to Jamaica. This action incited student demonstrations that led to the closing of the University for two weeks. Unrest spread to the community and the protest broadened to encompass discontent about conditions in Jamaica, ultimately resulting in riots in Kingston and forced extensive debates in the Jamaican Parliament. Several people were killed, numerous injured and millions of dollars in property was destroyed. This period of rebellion is captured in *Joey Tyson*, a children's novel by Andrew Salkey published in 1974. *Groundings with My Brothers*, published in 1969, is a collection of the major lectures Dr. Rodney gave in 1968 while in Jamaica and in Montreal.

The Rodney family moved back to Tanzania, where Dr. Rodney once again taught at the University of Dar es Salaam, serving as Senior Lecturer from 1969-1972, then Associate Professor from 1972-1974. Tanzania, under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere, was forging a new independent path for economic development in what was broadly termed, African socialism. The history department faculty was publishing and developing curricula that would "put the African back into African history." Dr. Rodney's research, teaching and scholarship flourished, and he continued his efforts to take history to the people: interacting in community life outside the university setting. Although living in Africa had much appeal to Dr. Rodney, it was always his intention to work for social justice in his homeland, Guyana.

In 1974 Dr. Rodney was offered a position as chair of the history department at the University of Guyana. Upon his return to Guyana, the appointment was rescinded by the government. Threatened by Rodney's popular appeal and radical revolutionary ideas, the government sought to silence him by depriving him and his wife Patricia the opportunity to earn a living. Undaunted, Rodney continued his work: speaking at public meetings, organizing workers and the community, researching and writing, and lecturing in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa.

During this time he completed his research and writings on the *Guyanese Sugar Plantation in the Late Nineteenth Century* (published in 1979 by Release Publishers, Georgetown, Guyana), and the *History of the Guyanese Working Class People 1881-1905* (published posthumously in 1981 by The Johns Hopkins University Press). Also in this period, Dr. Rodney authored two children's history books, *Kofi Baadu Out of Africa* and *Lashmi Out of India*. These are two of five proposed titles about the ancestry of Guyanese people who migrated from Africa, India, China, Holland and Madeira. The series began as a radio script and was written to educate Guyanese children about their heritage.

In the 1970s Guyana was in political and economic crisis and opposition forces rallied against an increasingly repressive government accused of corruption, mismanagement, and fraudulent elections. Walter Rodney worked in the leadership of the Workers Peoples Alliance (WPA), a political group organized in 1974 that became a political party in 1979. The WPA organized and supported mass demonstrations, pickets, and worker's strikes. The government lashed back with intimidation tactics and harassment, and many opposition leaders and their supporters were beaten, arrested, kidnapped and some murdered. As the situation deteriorated and became ever more dangerous, Dr. Rodney's international colleagues and friends appealed to him to leave Guyana. However, he remained steadfast in his commitment to stay in Guyana and fight for justice with his countrymen. On July 11, 1979, Walter Rodney and seven others were charged with arson in the burning of two government office buildings. Mass rallies were organized in support of the accused. The trial began June 2, 1980, however just a week into the trial the government asked for a temporary adjournment of two months. During the adjournment, on June 13, 1980, Walter Rodney was assassinated in a car bomb in Georgetown. He was 38 years old. Within Guyana and across the world, people were stunned by the sudden death of Dr. Rodney and there was an immediate outcry for an official investigation into the circumstances of his death. Despite repeated and continuous petitions an official investigation has yet to be realized. Over 35,000 people took part in the funeral procession for Walter Rodney on June 23, 1980, and memorial services were held in the United States, Britain, Germany, Nigeria, and Tanzania.

With the passage of time and change in government leadership, Guyana has increasingly recognized Dr. Rodney contributions. In 1992, the Guyanese government posthumously awarded Walter Rodney Guyana's highest honor, the Order of Excellence. June 2005 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Walter Rodney's assassination. As part of the commemoration programs, the Government of Guyana established an annual scholarship at the University of Guyana in honor of Dr. Rodney, and a plaque and granite monument was unveiled at the newly opened Walter Rodney Memorial Park. The new Guyana National Archives building, opened in February 2008, is also named in honor of Dr. Rodney.