



George Priestley passed very early on the morning of June 28<sup>th</sup> in New York, after a courageous battle with a long illness. He is survived by his wife, Marva Wade and son, Amilcar Priestley. We extend our deepest condolences to his family. George has been a long-time and dedicated member, and most recently newsletter editor of the CSA, and we shall miss him deeply.

In memoriam: George Priestley (October 1940-June 2009)

George Priestley – Democratic Revolutionary  
Contributed by Holger Henke

I wrote this obituary for George Priestley as I had just returned from a memorial service in his honor, held at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. I went to that service with a heavy heart mourning the loss of a friend, colleague, and mentor, but I am happy to report for the benefit of whoever may read these lines that I returned home with a somewhat lighter spirit, knowing that his work and personal influence continues to live on in the lives he touched. For those who have a sense of paradoxes, I was reminded of Hendrix's song "Ballad of Jimi," dedicated to the memory of his best friend, which ends in the line "He's not gone, he's just dead."

I met George about 10 years ago and since 2002 we closely worked together on a regular basis, when I began working with him as co-editor of the newsletter of the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA). Until his death on June 28, 2009, we must have produced about a dozen or so newsletters. We also occasionally worked together under the umbrella of the journal I am editing, *Wadagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*, for which George served as a contributing editor. Finally, as newsletter editors we regularly met within the CSA Executive Council, which mostly meets during the annual conference, but also in between to plan for the conference as well as to take care of other initiatives pertaining to its activities.

During these years of various interactions I have come to know George quite well, albeit certainly not as well as his closest friends and family. In my mind I will remember George as both firm and gentle. I remember how on one occasion George found that I had not made sufficient effort to contact him when (in my mind, at least) a quick decision regarding a particular issue concerning the newsletter had to be made. He reminded me graciously that I should have waited to get his input first, I explained why I felt that it had been necessary to make a decision and promised him to do better in future, and we both moved on. George clearly would not put up with anybody's nonsense, and we often converged in our view that some nonsense had gone down. But even in such situations, he was always prepared to invoke the perspective of the person or persons we were about to pass judgment on.

At heart, George was a revolutionary, a democratic revolutionary, I believe. Why else would he have named his son Amilcar Maceo? And he would have been proud – as I know that he was of his son – to see Amilcar give a loving and tender memorial of his father, which he delivered with the same grace and firmness I have known as such important character traits in George.



George was a consummate educator and researcher. We met in many spaces where our work led us both. I remember meeting him at the Schomburg Center in New York City where he was doing research on George Westerman, the renowned Panamanian journalist, editor, sociologist, historian, diplomat, community leader, and impresario. But I also recall George during our last CSA conference together in San Andrés Island, where he had set out to interview some of the local intellectuals among the so-called “raisales” (that is, the black San Andrés islanders). George clearly was tireless in his work and dedication to the projects and research he was involved with. And so, it is not surprising that until his illness earlier in the year, to the best of my recollection we never failed to meet in person to prepare the next CSA newsletter. In our last conversation he expressed confidence that before too long he would be back helping with editing the newsletter and attending CSA conferences. I believed his optimism although the weak voice at the other end of the line – a sort of weakness I had heard before – seemed to tell me something else. And because I wanted to believe his optimism, I continue to be so surprised and hurt that this time he will not be able to keep his promise, for George was also a man of great follow-up. There was no email or phone call one would send to him that he did not respond to.

The scope or summary of George's anti-racist, anti-imperial, and democratic revolutionary sentiments were captured well in one of his last major research articles, an essay written on George Westerman:

“West Indian Panamanian leadership of the 1970s and thereafter has embraced Westerman's goal of seeking unity with blacks of Hispanic descent. They are

different in that unlike Westerman, there is a realization by many of the leaders of the moderate race/ethnic based movement as well as by leaders of class/national based groups that discrimination and racism in Panama, as in Brazil and other Latin American societies, is not a product of the United States but deeply rooted in their respective national histories, and that its eradication is not a simple matter of reliance on non-black networks nor the 'Talented-Tenth' but rather involves strengthening racial consciousness without subordinating it to the cultural requirements of the State. It also requires linking the anti-racist struggle with struggles of other groups, especially with women and indigenous organizations, and the strengthening of bonds with the African Diaspora, especially West Indian Panamanian expatriates residing in the United States."<sup>1</sup>

I gladly remember that George was proud of the fact that the article had found quite some resonance back in Panama, as he would tell me more than once.

In my mind George will live on as a very humble, gentle, yet resolute and determined scholar, a colleague of great personal charm, and a teacher and mentor whose concern about social justice and equality did not stop at the edge of his keyboard, but carried over into the personal relationships with those who were lucky enough to experience it. In that sense and to the extent we can emulate his example, he's not gone.

For George Priestley  
Contributed by Patricia Mohammed

I only knew George through the CSA as a Caribbean scholar, as an Executive Council member and Newsletter Co-editor for several years along with Holger Henke. I knew that he was Panamanian and that despite his years of sojourn in USA like most Caribbean diasporic peoples, his heart and soul were Panamanian. George was not an easy person to get to know as he did not talk much about himself. In fact it was not until the conference in San Andres in 2008 which led most of us to overnight in Panama, that I realized his heritage ties were so strong - he spoke warmly about his house in Panama, his true dwelling place. It is this willingness to give to others and listen that most stands out about George, the selflessness of his commitment to the CSA. This selflessness I am sure extended to all those who knew him in other spheres of his life. He was a gentleman in the real sense of the word, his mannerisms, his politeness and the old world charm he exuded, a feeling of reciprocity and fraternity with the organization that he was pre-eminently important in without bringing attention to his importance. George's

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<sup>1</sup> George Priestley, "Race and Nationalism in Panama: George Westerman and the Antillean Question, 1941-1960," *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diaspora*, Vol.7 No.1 (Winter/Spring 2004), p.52-53.

bilingualism and capacity to shift between the Anglophone and Hispanic cultures and peoples, to understand both completely, were special, something those of us who are more linguistically challenged in the CSA keep striving to attain.

His stutter was an endearing part of his personality, as if his enthusiasms got the better of his tongue and words could not spill out in time, rather than any defect of speech. I have for the second occasion within two years had the tremendous regret that I did not take the time to speak to a friend and colleague when others around were signaling their demise. I put this down to busyness. But perhaps I am afraid to say good bye, something one defers knowing that words are paltry things when we stare resentfully at the inevitable. Perhaps by never saying goodbye in person or on the phone, friends continue to remain alive as we have known them, never drifting into another place where they cannot be reached with thoughts and memories that will continuously flit across the passages of a day. Hello George, forgive my own stutter, but may I still say that we missed you at CSA 2009 and look forward to having you there next year and every year. You remain an indelible part of the association.

For George Priestley  
Contributed by Dwaine Plaza

George was part of the “informal” CSA posse but at the same time he could rub elbows and collaborate with the “official” CSA leadership. George just got along with everyone!! George was truly a man who listened, analyzed and then spoke with confidence. George was also a very respectful person who did not ever seem to feel that he was above anyone else intellectually, spiritually or morally. For me this was evident in the way George treated the graduate students attending CSA. Back in 1994 when I attended my first CSA meeting in Merida Mexico-- George was one of the first people that I met and conversed with. As someone who knew nothing about me or my position, George just gave me the time and respect to listen to my ideas and then of course invited me to hang out with the posse of “older” CSA scholars--- that was one of his main strengths-- he was welcoming and non-judgmental of people. I think he was this way because he knew how to laugh. No one can forget George’s laugh!! George was not a man who felt he was better than anyone else or that he had to dominate and be in the spot light. George was always the guy doing the heavy lifting in the background making things work in the CSA. When he helped to take the CSA to Panama (as program chair) I knew this made him very happy in that he got a chance to take us all to his “home”, a place he very much loved. He also helped me as program chair in 2008 by giving sage advice based on what he learned about putting on conferences.

For years George kept the executive grounded and helped to make sure the newsletter was active. I will always remember George fondly in my memories of CSA meetings where I had the honor of intellectualizing with him, living with him, touring with him, partying with him, and eventually serving with him. I WILL REALLY REALLY MISS GEORGE!!