



You speak good English  
Little brown girl,  
How is it you speak  
English as though it belonged  
To you?

## UNA MARSON

Visionary, pioneer, activist

Una Marson was the BBC's first black woman broadcaster and, on top of her work in journalism, was also a talented poet, playwright, feminist and anti-imperialist activist. She also spoke openly about her experience of poor mental health.

Born in Jamaica in 1905, Marson became assistant editor of the political journal Jamaica Critic by the age of 21 and had published her first collection of poems, Tropic Reveries, by the age of 25. She then moved to South London in 1932 where her experiences of sexism and racism inspired much of her poetry on black female identities in England.

She at one time lived with Dr Harold Moody, the activist and founder of The League of Coloured Peoples, and regularly contributed poetry to the organisation's journal. She was also an active member of the global feminist organisation the International Alliance of Women.

In 1941, Marson was hired by the BBC to work on the programme Calling the West Indies, a platform for World War II soldiers to have their messages read out on the radio to their families. She later changed the programme to Caribbean Voices which championed Caribbean literary work and was described by poet and academic Kamau Brathwaite as "the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative writing in English".

## EXPLORE

- Film: [Hello! West Indies, 1943](#)



## WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Bringing varied experiences to the people

Clearly I've become so unfazed by blue plaques in London that I'd never noticed Una Marson's plaque just a five-minute walk from my flat in Camberwell. Even so, it shouldn't have taken a plaque to make me aware of such a seminal British broadcaster and artist.

A close colleague of T.S. Eliot and George Orwell, Una Marson could conceivably have become a household name too had it not been for the persistent sexism and racism that she faced and wrote about so eloquently.

Though I've only recently become acquainted with Marson's work, I'm struck by how effectively she used her various platforms to shed light on the black British (and female) experience to a wartime audience who otherwise may have struggled to empathise. From her accessible radio work aimed at soldiers, to her poems that mocked British ignorance (see pictured), Marson clearly tapped into the need for white people in Britain to walk in the shoes of others that didn't necessarily look like themselves.

There is still an underrepresentation of black women in certain sections of the arts and broadcast journalism, but I'd like to think that any progress that has been made is, in part, thanks to my neighbour, Una Marson.