

ERIC AND JESSICA HUNTLEY

Ordinary people - extraordinary impact

Eric Huntley and his wife Jessica Huntley, who has sadly now passed, are two Guyanese activists. They founded the radical London-based publishing company Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications (BLP) in 1969 as well as a bookshop in 1974. They named the business after two Caribbean liberation fighters, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Paul Bogle.

The company began operating during a period in Britain when books written about authentic black histories or by black authors weren't widely available or in circulation. BLP was one of the first black-owned independent publishing companies in the UK. It has been described by the Guyana Chronicle as "a small, unorthodox, self-financing venture that brought a radical perspective to non-fiction, fiction, poetry and children's books". The business originally began and operated from Eric and Jessica's living room and then eventually transitioned into a fully-fledged office and shop. They specialised in supplying books from publishers in the Caribbean but also extensively stocked books from and about Africa and the Global South. It also effectively served as a place for guidance and support in regards to studies, racism, employment and teaching. Both Jessica and Eric regularly organised meetings, talks and readings at their bookshop with the participation of such eminent writers as Ntozake Shange, Louise Bennett, Farrukh Dhondy, Andrew Salkey, Sam Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, Merle Hodge, Petronella Breinburg, Cecil Rajendra, and others. However, following changes in the publishing industry in the 1980s, when small independent publishers and booksellers faced often insurmountable competition from large multinational conglomerates, the bookshop was forced to close in 1990.

FURTHER READING

- Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche
- Girl, Woman, Other by Bernardine Evaristo
- White Teeth by Zadie Smith
- Mother Country: Real Stories of Windrush Children edited by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff
- Our Stories About Growing Up as People of Colour by Gal-dem



WHY WERE THEY IMPORTANT?

Creating an oasis in the desert of West London

I actually had the honour of meeting Eric Huntley about a year ago whilst attending an event at the London Metropolitan Archives and he shared information, along with a lot of other Caribbean activists and citizens, about his life and experiences. He is an incredibly knowledgeable and intelligent man who holds a pivotal place in history in regards to the circulation and promotion of African and Caribbean literature and theoretical works.

Both Jessica and Eric sacrificed a lot for the knowledge that is nowadays more readily available. In 1977-79, the bookshop was targeted and attacked by racist groups with abusive graffiti repeatedly daubed on the windows and doors, National Front literature delivered to their home, and excrement pushed through the letterbox. Their windows were broken repeatedly and they also personally received threatening calls from various individuals and groups including the Ku Klux Klan. Both Jessica and Eric campaigned against this and created posters which stated 'We Will Not Be Terrorised out of Existence'. Along with other organisations, the Huntleys formed a "Bookshop Joint Action" group to raise awareness of the attacks through producing leaflets, holding public meetings and picketing the Home Office, which eventually resulted in national media coverage that forced the police to take action.

They fought for intellectual openness and literary knowledge for all, and so many of us owe our current understanding and rich literary knowledge to companies like BLP. They encouraged authors of Caribbean, South American and African heritage to write, read and learn in ways that the British state didn't.