

**Selected praise for Lorna Goodison's memoir,
*From Harvey River***

'[A] captivating memoir ... Being introduced to the cast of *From Harvey River* is like sitting down at the family dining table. You'll stay for the day and then on into the evening as each new character pulls up a chair.

You could not be in better company.'

New York Times Book Review

'Luminous ... Beautiful is the life Goodison evokes from the far-distant past: Jamaica as paradise ... This is Goodison's tribute to her mother, but more than that, it is a window that opens on to a society that most of us will never know.'

Washington Post

'Goodison makes lyrical exposition sing with dulcet island patois in this homage to her mother ... Richly textured ... Steeped in local lore and spiced with infectious dialect and ditties, Goodison's memoir reaches back over generations to evoke the mythic power of childhood, the magnetic tug of home and the friction between desire and duty that gives life its unexpected jolts.'

Publishers Weekly

'Goodison unveils intimate worlds teeming with all the local flavor and poignancy of a Zora Neale Hurston novel ... A tender, thoughtful portrait of four generations, prompting hopes that the author's first full-length prose work won't be her last.'

Kirkus Reviews

‘Goodison understands that life struggles are inevitably and inveterately struggles of history as well as struggles of language to memorialize everyday or extraordinary realities and dreams. Goodison’s prose creates memorable characters ... and captures them at memorable moments, managing to remain intimate while simultaneously expanding the family history into a mythology of a distinct place and time ...’

Globe and Mail

‘Lorna Goodison delivers a memoir so exquisite it stands as an example of the possibilities of the form ... A feat of history, imagination and artistic achievement ... [It] is a sumptuous montage of landscapes, portraits and anecdotes—sepia-toned period pieces—that impress vividly upon the mind ... Goodison’s voice, her tone and choice of language, brilliantly reflects the mingling of African and British culture ... to bring the memoir into the tradition of Edwardian letters, and to bring a marginalized time and place into the mainstream of world history.’

Toronto Star

Redemption Ground

Lorna Goodison



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*In memory of my sister
Carmen Rose Goodison*

*and to
Ellen Seligman*

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1

‘The Song of the Banana Man’ and ‘The Fiddler of Dooney’

ONE DAY IN the spring of 1972, my friend Helen and I found ourselves in the city of London, walking along Marylebone High Street. After a few minutes we spotted up ahead of us two policemen proceeding at a slow and stately pace, surveying everything around them as they went. We were young and swift of gait, we soon overtook the two coppers, and as we passed them we noticed one of the ‘bobbies’, as the Brits used to call them, pointing to a clean, brightly painted tea shop which he proceeded to refer to as a ‘tea ‘ole’.

Seriously, my friend and I had been walking along looking for a place to have tea on Marylebone High Street when we overheard a policeman say to this other policeman: ‘Whassis then, a new tea ‘ole?’

Helen and I were not the kind who would pass up the chance to have tea in an ‘ole’, so we went in and ordered a pot of tea and two bath buns. We ordered bath buns

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because we'd been taught about them in history class at St Hugh's High School for Girls in Kingston, Jamaica where the curriculum was then heavy on all things British and European, and we were taught a great deal of British social history, much of it from a tome authored by G.M. Trevelyan, whom I later found out was a big-shot Professor of History at Cambridge University. What I remember most about that textbook was that it came bound in maroon-coloured linen.

Helen and I had been taught a lot about 1066 and all that, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, Boadicea, the Princes in the Tower, Inigo Jones and Capability Brown, and about the Tudors and Stuarts, including a song that was supposed to have been sung by one of the four Marys who were ladies-in-waiting to Mary Queen of Scots:

*Last night there were four Marys, tonight there'll be
but three,
There was Mary Seaton, and Mary Beaton, and Mary
Carmichael and me.*

We were taught about the Gunpowder Plot, Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel (who I found particularly fascinating because, as I understood it, there was a kind of cake, a Simnel cake, that was not named for him), the Industrial Revolution, the spanner-in-the-works Luddites, the Wars of the Roses, O white rose of the House of York and blood red rose of the House of Lancaster, Culloden and Flodden and O, the battle lost at Killiecrankie, and the fact that James I nicknamed the Duke of Buckingham 'Steenie', after St Stephen who was said to have had the face of an angel. We were also told that Charles II was so dark-skinned that he was called 'the Black Boy' and that his dying words

'The Song of the Banana Man'

were 'Let not poor Nelly starve', this in reference to Nell Gwynne who rose from selling oranges at the theatre to being one of the king's most favoured mistresses and was paid a stipend from the public purse. Miss Kingdon, who was also in charge of what was then one of the best school libraries in Jamaica, encouraged us girls to read the works of writers like Anya Seton, Rosemary Sutcliff and Mary Renault, which further added to our store of esoteric knowledge.

So that day in the tea shop, Helen and I chose to order bath buns which, as we had been taught, were not buns you ate as you bathed, but rather fruity cakes baked with a lump of sugar inside and sprinkled with more sugar on top when they came out of the oven – and, having written that, I cannot resist saying something about how countless Africans were stolen, enslaved, brutalised and sacrificed in order for sugar cane to be cultivated, so that others could have bath buns with sugar within and without. Anyway, in honour of our history teachers Glory Robertson and Ethel Kingdon, Helen and I ordered bath buns, and, because we were both in possession of a great mine of useless information about such things, we touched our knives to the buns when they arrived and declared them Members of the Order of the Bath Bun and ordered them to rise before we proceeded to demolish them.

After a while we noticed three guys sitting at the table next to ours doing what we were doing – telling each other stories and jokes and cracking each other up. The three looked over at us just about the same time we became aware of them, and the alpha male in the group smiled and said: 'Ah, you lovely young ladies are from the West Indies, are you not?'

In my broadest Jamaican accent, I said, 'Ow yu know?'

And he said, 'O, we're from Ireland, and as a young boy

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growing up in County Mayo, Sister Fidelia made me drop my pennies in the poor box to assist with the education of the suffering children of the West Indies; and I'd say, from listening to you two charming young ladies, I'd say that my pennies were well spent.'

'Oh yeah, well thank you very much; I myself have bought and paid for many an Irish potato.'

And the next thing you know we were all sitting together and drinking toasts to the colonial experience.

To the penny buns and Union Jacks we gobbled down and lifted up on Empire Day!

To the waves ruled by Britannia!

To we who never, never, never again shall be slaves!

To the Queen and all who sail in her (this from one Irish guy).

To the host of golden goddamn daffodils!

To Ted Heath and his brother Hampstead Heath (from the Irish alpha male).

And a whole lot of stupid things like that.

We also did some singing.

Helen and I sang 'Danny Boy' to prove we were familiar with Irish airs; although many years later I read that the song was written by an Englishman, whose sister-in-law gave him the tune to a traditional Irish air, though now 'Danny Boy' is widely regarded as the most Irish of songs.

In return, the three Irish men sang, in plaintive tones, 'Jamaica Farewell'.

I think the alpha guy really liked Helen because he kept gazing at her soulfully as he crooned about leaving a little girl in Kingston town, and later she said something about his eyes, which meant she'd been checking him out too. After the rendition of 'Jamaica Farewell', the Irish alpha male said, 'Yes indeed, I for one have always felt an especial closeness

'The Song of the Banana Man'

to the West Indies, not only due to the fact that I relinquished many a shiny penny to assist with the education (he pronounced it 'ed-yoo-kay-shan') of the children of your sunny isles, but even more so because I myself have a friend who owns a banana-ripening room in Peckham.'

Just the sound of those words had us doubling over with laughter. A banana-ripening room in Peckham?

To be honest, at the time I thought he was making this up. But as it turns out, according to my brother, Keith Goodison, who is a great fount of knowledge, there used to be banana-ripening rooms all over England, that is, before NAFTA did serious damage to the Caribbean banana industry. Now almost every banana in the western world comes from the giant Chiquita Dole plantations. That day in 1972, in that 'tea 'ole', we did not know that, over thirty years later, a poet named David Rudder would be moved to write a song called 'The Banana Death Song'. We did not know that the independent banana-growers of the Caribbean would one day experience great difficulty in finding export markets for what they once called 'green gold', as Helen and I gleefully recited 'The Song of the Banana Man':

*Touris, white man, wiping his face
Met me in Golden Grove market place.
He looked at m'ol' clothes brown wid stain,
An soaked right through wid the Portlan rain,
He cas his eye, turn up his nose
He says: 'You're a beggar man, I suppose?'
He says: 'Boy, get some occupation
be of some value to your nation.'
I said: 'By God and dis big right han
you mus recognise a Banana Man.'*

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*Up in de hills, where de streams are cool,
An mullet and janga swim in de pool,
I have ten acres of mountain side
An a dainty-foot donkey dat I ride,
Four Gros-Michel an four Lacatan,
Some coconut trees, and some hills of yam,
An I pasture on dat very same lan
Five she-goats and a big black ram
Dat by God and dis big right hand
Is the property of a banana man.*

And, even as Helen and I threw ourselves into an impassioned rendition of Evan Jones's great poem, I found myself thinking that the banana man sounded like a cool guy, and I wondered if he needed a wife or a girlfriend to help him farm his ten acres.

Not to be outdone; the Irishmen recited William Butler Yeats's 'The Fiddler of Dooney':

*When I play on my fiddle in Dooney,
folk dance like a wave of the sea;
My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet,
My brother in Mocharabuiee.*

*I passed my brother and cousin:
They read in their books of prayer:
I read in my book of songs
I bought at the Sligo fair.*

And I guess this made sense, because both poems were about ordinary people who were sure of themselves, sure of what they did, where they belonged, what their purpose in life was.

'The Song of the Banana Man'

And I was not sure where I belonged or what my own purpose in life was back then, even though I had trained as a painter in Jamaica and New York and I was in London on a training programme as a copywriter at one of the world's largest advertising agencies. But listening to those three Irish men recite 'The Fiddler of Dooney' that afternoon, maybe I'd thought yes, that's what I'd like to be, someone whose artistry makes people dance like a wave of the sea. If I thought that, I then forgot about it. For many years I forgot about wanting to make people feel as if they were part of the cosmic dance, in tune with life's rhythm like a wave of the sea.

That day, after the Irishmen recited William Butler Yeats's words in that tea shop on Marylebone High Street, silence fell. You know how sometimes when you are in a group laughing and talking and then suddenly everyone becomes quiet and you know that the gathering has come to an end because the spirit of the meeting has declared the gathering adjourned? We all got up at the same time and walked out into the late afternoon sunshine. We five stood around awkwardly on the pavement for a while, saying things like, 'Well, alright then...' 'You take care now,' 'Really nice to have met you,' and 'Good-oh.'

There were no addresses or telephone numbers exchanged, no, 'How about we meet up for lunch (or tea or dinner)?' Helen and the alpha male gazed meaningfully at each other one last time. Then we all turned and went off in different directions.