

Paul

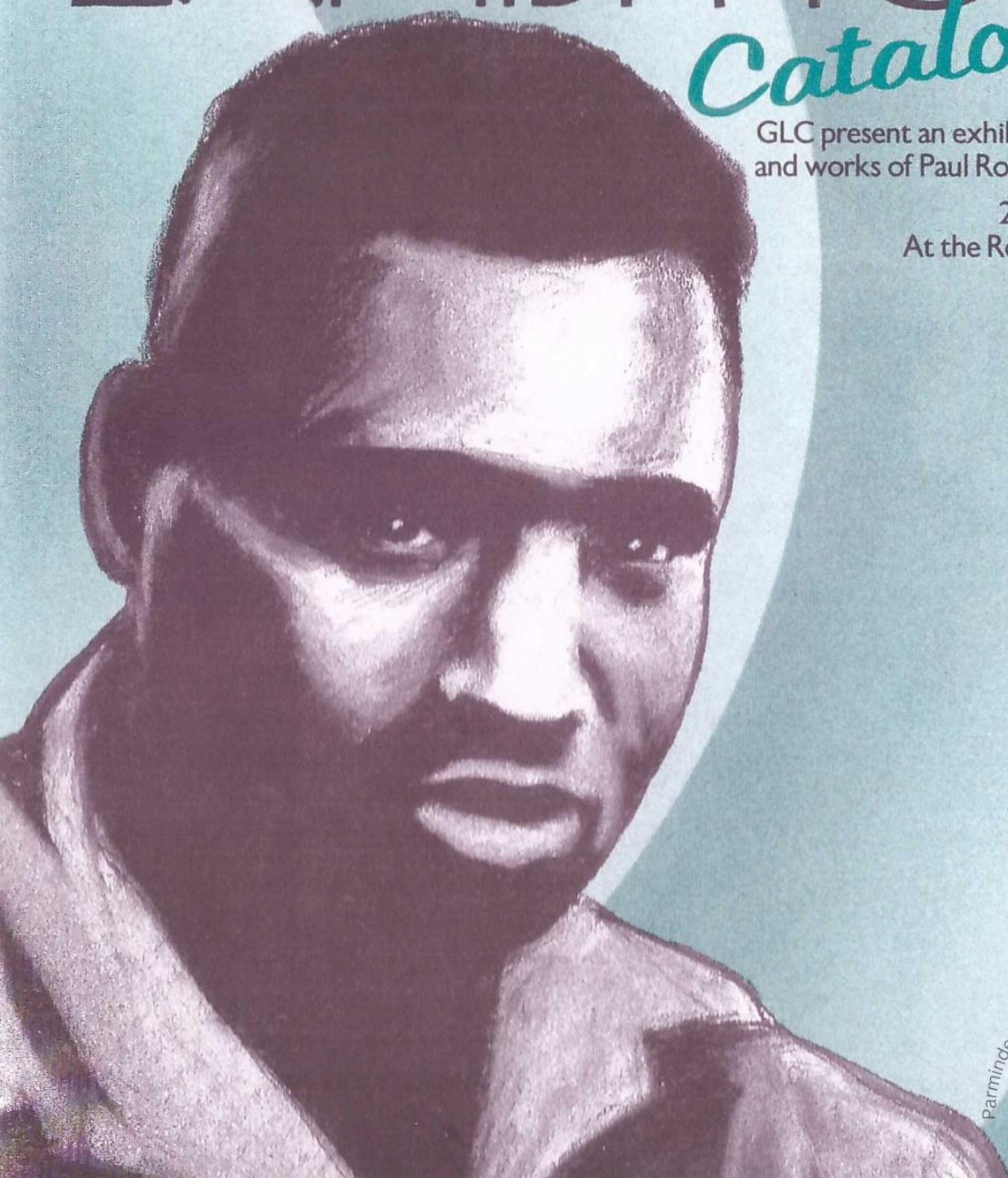
ROBESON

EXHIBITION

Catalogue

GLC present an exhibition on the life
and works of Paul Robeson (1898-76)

24 April-16 May
At the Royal Festival Hall



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FOREWORD BY KEN LIVINGSTONE LEADER OF THE GLC

It is indeed fitting that the G.L.C. should be staging the Paul Robeson Exhibition. Paul Robeson's association with London goes back to the early twenties when he came here to appear in the play TABOO. A few years later when he settled in Britain, it was London that he choose as his home base. Also it was here that he received some of the most glowing acclaim of his artistic life.

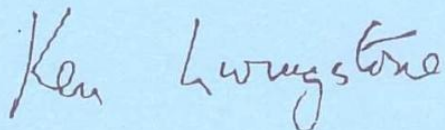
Paul Robeson's fight for the freedom of oppressed people all over the world is legendary. He was a man of the people who gave so much of himself where others could easily turn a blind eye.

Paul said "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative". This to me sums up Paul perfectly.

This exhibition is of particular interest in the rediscovery of a man who was put under "house arrest" in the 1950's, whose achievements were removed from the record books, and who was ostracized because his name had become synonymous with the protest against the continued subjugation of colonial people throughout the world.

Paul Robeson transcended his time, his race and his own person to join that select group of people who speak for all humanity.

On behalf of the G.L.C. I would like to welcome you to the exhibition on the life and works of one of the greatest men of the twentieth century.



Ken Livingstone

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MESSAGE BY RT HON NEIL KINNOCK MP LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

Paul Robeson was one of the great men of this century, a man of brilliant creative abilities, intellect and accomplishment in theatre, film and on the concert stage. He was a man who gave pleasure and inspiration and I had the great privilege as a boy to hear and see him at one of the many performances which he gave in South Wales.

What marks Robeson out from so many other gifted artists is the way he *used* his great talents in support of the poor and the oppressed throughout the world and, in particular, for freedom for the Black people of America. Robeson once pointed out that whilst he had achieved great fame many of his cousins still could not read or write. As he put it 'I have had a chance. They have not. That is the difference'.

I warmly congratulate the Greater London Council on their imaginative decision to present this exhibition. It will, I hope, revive interest in Paul Robeson and encourage a greater appreciation of his talents and of his values.

Most of all I hope that it will lead to renewed support for the cause to which he made such a tremendous contribution: the cause of the liberty of working people, black and white, throughout the world. Robeson dedicated his gifts to that end throughout his life because, as he wrote in his political testament, *Here I Stand*, he had learned from living in Britain that: 'the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and the common people of all nations are truly brothers and sisters in the great family of mankind.'

It is a message that must sound loud and clear, a principle to be looked for and applied by each generation.

Neil Kinnock



The extraordinary achievements and impressive nobility of Paul Robeson (April 9, 1898–January 23, 1976) have made an indelible imprint on the history of the twentieth century. His unshakeable belief in the oneness of humankind has inspired people all over the world. My fathers accomplishments as an athlete, scholar, singer, actor and fighter for the freedom and dignity of all people are a dramatic reminder of the universality of the African-American cultural tradition.

An article titled 'Ten Greats of Black History,' published in the August 1972 issue of Ebony, included Paul Robeson among the ten most important Black men in American history. The panel of Black historians who chose him said, in part 'When his (Robeson) scholarship is better known, he will win recognition as the finest ideologist of Black nationalism since Sidney of the early 1840's. His writings will also reveal him as one of the century's most perceptive commentators on the cultures of the East, the West and Africa.'

Let me end with a poem written by my son, David Robeson, which closed my eulogy at my father's funeral service.

*'He is not mine.
I may give him my love
But not my thoughts.
He passes by me,
But he does not pass from me,
For although he was with me in some
ways and will stay with me in others,
He does not belong to me'.*

This is an extract from a paper delivered by Paul Robeson Jr. President Paul Robeson Archives at the National Symposium of Black Bibliophiles and Collectors, Moorland-Springarn Research Centre Howard University, Washington, DC. 30 November, 1983.

INTRODUCTION

MARTHA EDWARDS

Martha Edwards was born and educated in the Rhondda Valley and South Wales. She can remember her early memories as a small child growing up in poverty during the terrible years of depression in the coal fields following the 1926 General Strike, and of the hunger marches from the Rhondda to London in which her father and uncles participated.

It was after such a march that she made her first contact with Paul Robeson who, having completed performances in *Show Boat* at the Drury Lane theatre in London, had become one of England's most popular and sought-after artists. He had also by this time befriended many of the most outspoken radicals and political thinkers of that time, including George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Dr. Hewlett Johnson, and others who were active in South Wales, like Aneurin Bevan and Jennie Lee, but, above all, with the miner's leader, Arthur Horner.

It was to be the beginning of a wonderful friendship with the miners and their families in South Wales which lasted until his death in 1976. He compared the early struggle of the coal miners with that of his own folks back on the cotton plantations of South Carolina.

When Paul Robeson became a freedom fighter for the cause of the Spanish Loyalists, it was from the valleys of South Wales that he received tremendous support, and it was back in the Rhondda that he acted in his most famous film, *The Proud Valley* (1940).

He loved the Welsh people very much, sang at their musical festivals, and visited their homes. He even learnt the Welsh language. So it is only right to think of him as an Honorary Welshman.



Martha Edwards

KEN GOODLAND

As a lad of 14 years, when he attended his first concert at The Colston hall, Bristol, Ken Goodland was captivated by the stature, artistry and warmth of Paul Robeson but, above all, by Robeson's dignity and willingness to talk to youngsters like himself.

Ken was to become one of Paul Robeson's greatest fans, saving every penny towards records, and following his idol's every journey around the world from press cuttings, magazines and reviews. He wrote to him two years later, when he had started as an apprentice on the Railways. Ken was also deeply involved in the Youth section of the Labour Party and the Unions. Paul Robeson was, of course, delighted with this news and, over the years, sent Ken interesting literature and private recordings of songs and speeches.

It was in 1981, following a BBC interview, that Ken Goodland and Martha Edwards came together to pool their resources and memorabilia with Ken's aim to present an exhibition on the life and career of Paul Robeson.

A great deal of work went into preparing and arranging items for the first presentation in Cardiff, and subsequent exhibitions in South Wales. Sadly, Ken became ill with cancer and died in 1983. He never saw any of the exhibitions. He would have been proud if he were alive today to see how his idea has grown and is admired and appreciated.



Ken Goodland

BEGINNING

In trying to understand Paul Robeson, what he did and why he took certain steps in his life, we have to look at his early life. William Drew Robeson, Paul's father, was born into slavery on 27th July 1845, on a plantation near North Carolina. At the age of 15, William Robeson freed himself from slavery, three years before Abraham Lincoln was coerced into the Emancipation Proclamation. By 1876 William Drew Robeson had managed to work his way through University. Two years later he married Maria Louisa Bustill. Paul Robeson, their fourth child, came into the world on 9th April 1898.

At the Factory in West London, (a well known Community and Arts Centre) there is a collected painting of Black heroes. There is a good balance of male and female figures, Africa, the West Indies and America, are well represented. Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Mary Seacole, Martin Luther King and many others have been able to create a sense of pride in Black cultural heritage. Day by day these individuals long dead but not forgotten are being rediscovered. One face that is sadly missing is that of Paul Robeson. It is one of life's ironies that the face of the man that should most definitely be there is missing. In Russia there is a mountain named after him, in Berlin a museum, in Pennsylvania a film festival and in Poland a street bears the name Paul Robeson. The American conspiracy to make Robeson a 'non-person' has had a certain amount of successes. There is a poem that goes:

*My hero
was a leader
I was never told of in school
His feats
Accomplishments, sufferings and
punishments
Were never seen in books
His name, his face, a distant haze
Shrouded, clouded, in a secret
conspiracy*

*That I should not know,
And shows the tainted white of their
eyes
My hero will live
Not die
And survive their contradictory lies.*

J.D. Douglas from his book *Caribbean Man's Blues*.



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Before he showed any ability as a singer or actor, Robeson had proved himself as one of America's best ever football players. He first showed athletic prowess at Somerville High School. For the most part things were peaceful, save for the racism of the school's principal, Dr. Acherman, who was tortured by Paul's success and did all he could to make Paul feel inferior.

It was the second decade of the twentieth century, some fifty years after slavery had officially ended. Yet Blacks were still struggling for parity and recognition in a country whose warped vision would never allow them to accept anything other than a 'separate and unequal' society.

In 1918 he was named as one of the players on the All-American Team. Years later when he became a thorn in America's way of thinking, his name would be removed from the Sports history books. The path of football glory was painful and tough. Robeson actually suffered physical damage that would last him for the rest of his life.

One of Robeson's greatest achievements in sport took place off the field. The date was 3rd December 1943. Before 1943 Negroes were not allowed to play baseball for any of the major league clubs. At a meeting in New York with the High Commissioner of Baseball, the major league owners and a delegation of Negro publishers. Robeson appealed to the gathering in the following words.

'This is an excellent time to bring about an entry of Negro players into organised baseball. The time has come that you must change the attitude of the entire country.

To me the most indicative thing that has happened in the fight against racial discrimination is the reception that I've been given in Othello. I was told before the play was produced that America was not ready to accept me on such a delicate theme, but I've never

appeared before a friendlier audience. Baseball is a national game, it is up to baseball to see that discrimination does not become the American pattern. I come here as an American and former athlete. I urge you to decide favourably on this request and that action be taken this very season.'

After the meeting the baseball magnates agreed that there should be no barrier to participation of Negroes in organised baseball.

STAGE ACTOR

According to Marie Seton in her biography of Robeson, in 1922 Robeson's wife, Essie, coaxed him into the Harlem YMCA's production of *Simon the Cyrenian*. The story goes that while Robeson was a law student at Columbia University, he had little or no interest in acting at all. Times were hard in Harlem, and the promise of a weekly salary lured him to the production of *Taboo* by Mary Hoyt Wilborg. The play was a success, and the production came to England under the name of *Voodoo* in 1922.

In 1924, Robeson got the major break that launched his artistic career with a new zeal. The playwright Eugene O'Neill wanted him for the part of Jim Harris in his new play, *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*. The fact that Robeson was being cast opposite a white woman, who would kneel at his feet and kiss his hand, brought a considerable amount of pre-production publicity. The same thing would happen six years later when he played the role of Othello for the first time with Peggy Ashcroft.

After the production of *All God's Chillun'*, he appeared in another O'Neill play, *The Emperor Jones*. He played the role of Brutus, an ex-pullman porter who builds a corrupt empire in the Caribbean, and is later deposed. A simple plot, but like the other Eugene O'Neill play that he starred in, it would later cause controversy.

In 1928, Robeson returned to Britain to appear in the London version of the musical, *Show Boat*, at the Drury Lane theatre. After his subsequent success in *Othello* in 1930, he went on to appear in the London version of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1931) and *All God's Chillun'* (1933), co-starring Flora Robson. He later joined the Unity Theatre in 1935 to appear in *Stevedore*.

Toussaint L'Ouverture can be said to be the greatest Black man who ever lived. When we consider the conditions of Black

people and the might of the European Nations in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it would be difficult to take issue with the above statement. Yet Toussaint rose above it all and eventually defeated Napoleon. To date he still stands as the only man who has defeated both the British and French on the battlefield. It is no surprise that Robeson jumped at the chance to play the role. The year was 1936 and the playwright was no other than C.L.R. James. It is no secret that Robeson would have given his right arm to play any role that brought some dignity to the roles that Black actors were asked to play.

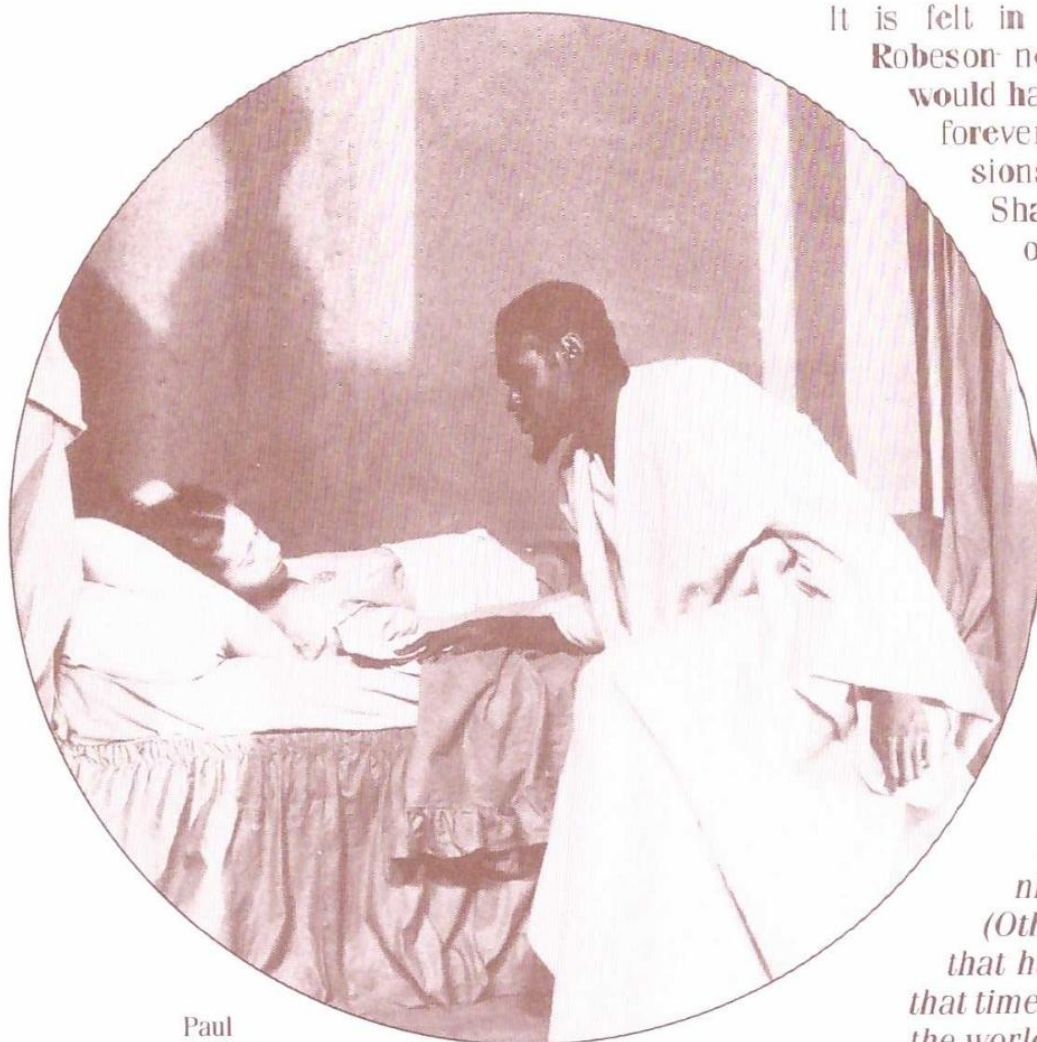
In 1938, Robeson turned his back on the West End and joined the left-wing Unity Theatre again, near Mornington Crescent. In doing so he took a huge drop in salary. He appeared for the company on this occasion in the play, *Plant in the Sun*, by Herbert Marshall. The play made a strong dramatic appeal for trade unionism. This was a topic that was dear to Robeson's heart.

Early publicity shot of Paul Robeson



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OTHELLO



Paul Robeson and Peggy Ashcroft in the 1930 production of *Othello*, London

The first Black actor to play the role of Othello was Ira Aldridge in the 1860's. The first Black actor to play the role in the twentieth century, not once but in three different productions over twenty years was Paul Robeson. He first played the role in 1930 with a young Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona. In 1930 Robeson observed:

'Othello in the Venice of that time was in practically the same position as a coloured man in America today. He was a general, and while he could be valuable as a fighter, he was tolerated, just as a negro who could save New York from a disaster would become a great man overnight. However as Othello wanted a white woman, Desdemona, everything was changed'

It is felt in certain quarters that had Robeson not played the role, the play would have been lost to Negro actors forever. There were heated discussions on what manner of man Shakespeare intended – an Arab or Negro. In a very scholarly statement Robeson saved the day saying:

'In Shakespeare's time, I feel, there was no great distinction between the Moor and the brown or black ... In Shakespeare's own time and throughout the restoration, notably by Garrick, the part was played as a blackman. This was not changed until the time of Edmund Kean, about the middle of the nineteenth century, when he (Othello) became brown. I feel that had to do with the fact that at that time Africa was the slave centre of the world and people wanted to forget the ancient glory of the Ethiopians.'

It took another twelve years before Robeson could play the role in his native America. It first opened at the Brattle Hall, Cambridge Massachusetts, and in the following year 1943, it opened on Broadway. The run on Broadway broke all previous records of a Shakespearean play.

In 1959 he played Othello for a third and final time. Never before or since had such an illustrious cast been assembled for a production. Peter Woodthorpe played Roder, in the cast were Sam Wanamaker, Albert Finney, Ian Holm, Julian Glover, and the late Angela Baddeley. Vanessa Redgrave and Diana Rigg could only make the crowd scenes. This production was presented at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Most people don't know that Paul Robeson was the leading concert singer in the world for most of the 1930's and 1940's and that his singing career spanned thirty-five years from 1925 through 1960, winning him unprecedented world wide popularity. His concert career began in 1925 in New York, it was the first ever concert programme which consisted of Negro music. The 'New York World' music critic wrote:

'All those who listened last night to the first concert in this country made up entirely of Negro Negro music ... may have been present at a turning point, one of those points in time in which a star is born and yet not visible – the first appearance of this folk wealth to be made without deference or apology. Paul Robeson's voice is difficult to describe. It is a voice in which deep bells ring'

There is no doubt that if anyone had to list the ten greatest concert singers of the twentieth century, Paul Robeson would be in the top three.

Paul Robeson Jr. said: 'Most books on concert singers published after 1949, give Robeson a one line mention, in passing, or he is referred to in the footnote. For instance the book *Famous Negro Music Makers* by Langston Huges does not even mention Paul Robeson. A man of whom Benny Green wrote:

... 'Running like a fine thread through the texture of the times is Paul Robeson's incomparable voice. I accept all

over again the immutability of Robeson as a great artist, and I am reminded that the late Alexander Woolcott's comparison of Robeson with the redwood trees of California was particularly appropriate ... It is apparent to us all ... that Robeson is one of those all too rare people who can, through some miraculous alchemy of the spirit, reach out and within the scope of a single gesture or phase, touch the hearts of both the galleryites looking for a good time and the intellectuals probing for the message. When he sings I hear the unsullied expression of the human spirit.'

Paul Robeson's voice lives on today through his recordings. It's amazing that once hooked the voice is never forgotten.

Paul Robeson, St. Paul's Cathedral, when he sang to 5,000 people inside and 5,000 outside



PREJUDICE AND PRIDE: THE FILMS OF PAUL ROBESON

Paul Robeson was the leading Black actor in films of the 1930s, but he probably suffered more disappointments than any other screen artist of his generation. Black characterisations in American films of the 1930s and 1940s rarely moved beyond Al Jolson's blackface routines, and the slow-witted buffoons played by Black comedians like Stepin' Fetchit. For Robeson, an intelligent and progressive actor, there were few roles available to him other than the stereotypes White audiences expected to see him play. In his British films, although his characters were generally more dignified, Robeson often found himself in conflict with an industry which glorified the colonial vision of Africa. Even so, in all of his films, Robeson succeeded in bringing to his characterisations intelligence, strength and, what contemporary writer Richard Dyer has described as 'passive male beauty.'

In 1924, Robeson made his screen debut in a silent melodrama called *Body and Soul*, which was directed by the independent Black American film-maker, Oscar Micheaux, and in 1930 he took part in a Swiss-made experimental feature called *Borderline* with his wife, Eslanda. However, it was in 1933 that he acted in his first major film, an independently-produced version of Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*. It was in this production that Robeson gave what is generally regarded as his most accomplished film performance. He starred as a pullman porter who proclaims himself ruler of a Caribbean island. Even so, Robeson was not happy with the film, and criticised its stereotyped treatment of Black people.

If there were any offers from Hollywood at

Paul Robeson in *Show Boat* (1936), photo courtesy of UIP



this time, Robeson did not accept them. In 1933 he said:

Hollywood can only visualise the plantation type of Negro ... it is absurd to use that type to express the modern Negro as it would be to express modern England in the terms of an Elizabethan ballad.

Like several other Black American performers of his generation, Paul Robeson found European audiences less hostile towards him, and in the 1930s he made his home in England where he hoped to create a positive screen image.

In 1935 he agreed to play the African tribal chief, Bosambo, for producer Alexander Korda, in the adventure-drama, *Sanders of the River*. Robeson was attracted to the idea of playing an African as an intelligent human being, and by Korda's promise that the film would offer a sympathetic view of African life and culture. Nothing could have been further from the truth for the film stereotyped African people as 'savage' and 'exotic' figures and, without Robeson's knowledge, it was altered at Korda's instructions in the editing process to make it a glorification of the British Empire and imperialism. Robeson was hurt and angered by the version of the film that was released to the public, and he later made an unsuccessful attempt to purchase the rights and all the prints in order to prevent its distribution. He publicly disowned the film, and explained his reasons for doing so in an interview he gave in 1936:

The twist in the picture which was favourable to English imperialism was accomplished during the cutting of the picture after it was filmed. I had no idea that it would have such a turn after I had acted in it. Moreover, when it was shown at its premiere in London and I saw what it was, I was called to the stage and in protest refused to perform. Since that time I have refused to play in three films offered me by that same producer.

Needless to say, despite Robeson's objections to it, *Sanders of the River* was popular with White audiences. Thirteen years later he declared: 'I committed a *faux pas*. I did it in the name of art . . . I hate the picture.'

In 1936, Robeson made his first film in Hollywood when he agreed to repeat his stage role as Joe in the musical, *Show Boat*. He sang what has come to be accepted as his 'theme' song, 'Old Man River', and his relaxed performance is one of the best in the film.

Despite *Sanders of the River*, Robeson continued acting in British films for several years because he believed that film-makers in this country would treat him more sympathetically than those in America. In the films he made here between 1936 and 1940, his gifts as a singer and actor were well-exploited, but his politics were carefully avoided by the studios.

In *Song of Freedom* (1936), Robeson played John Zinga, a London-born docker who goes in search of his African heritage. He becomes a famous opera singer, and is told by an anthropologist that he is a descendant of an African kingship. The second half of the film took Robeson and his wife, delightfully played by Elisabeth Welch, to an island off the West Coast of Africa where the other descendants of the kingship live. However, despite the film's stereotyped treatment of African people – which was not far removed from that of *Sanders of the River* – and its highly improbable plot, the film was important to Robeson because it was the first, he said, 'to give a true picture of many aspects of the coloured man in the West.' In 1950, Kwame Nkrumah, who was soon to become the first prime minister of independent Ghana, chose the film to open the annual celebration of Ghana's independence.

Elisabeth Welch later joined Robeson in a second British film, a light-hearted musical called *Big Fella* (1938), based on the novel *Banjo* by Claude McKay; a noted



Top: Paul Robeson and Edward Rigby in *The Proud Valley* (1940), photo courtesy of Columbia-EMI/Warner

Below: Elisabeth Welch, Paul Robeson and Esme Percy in *Song of Freedom* (1936), photo courtesy of Raymond Rohauer collection

Black writer of the Harlem Renaissance. They made an enchanting team and, throughout their association, Elisabeth was conscious of Robeson's increasing involvement in left-wing politics. She later said: 'Some people take up a political cause out of vengeance and some out of love – and I think that what impelled him was love.'

In *King Solomon's Mines* (1937), Robeson humanised the stereotyped character of the African chieftain, Umbopa, and in the adventure-drama, *Jericho* (1937), known as *Dark Sands* in America, he played one of the first Black heroes on the screen. He was cast as a soldier under sentence of death who escapes from wartime France to North Africa, where he settles and lives as a sheik.

In his last British film, Ealing's *The Proud Valley* (1940), Robeson gave a memorable performance as David, an unemployed stoker who is befriended by a working-class mining community in South Wales. They offer him a job as a miner, and he later joins them in their fight against the closure of their colliery. Based on an original story by the left-wing writers, Herbert Marshall and Alfreda Brilliant, the film was notable for emphasising the solidarity of the community, and their acceptance of a Black man. Directed with great passion by a promising young director, Pen Tennyson, it revealed some of the harsh realities of life in South Wales in the 1930s, such as the effects of unemployment on the community, and had Robeson at the centre of the action throughout. The presence in the cast of Welsh actors, such as Clifford Evans, Rachel Thomas and Jack Jones, who was a former miner turned writer who contributed to the script, and the location work in the Rhondda Valley, helped to give the film its feeling of authenticity. For Robeson, however, making the film proved to be a rewarding experience. He was accepted by the Welsh people as one of their own during the filming. Marie Seton later said in her biography, *Paul Robeson*, published in 1958: 'They took

him into their homes, fed him and wrapped him around tight and close in the intimacy of warmth and humour, and in the aspirations of a people in whom a national spirit had never died.'

One person who was deeply impressed by *The Proud Valley* was David Lloyd George, the first Welsh Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922, who wrote to the film's producer, Michael Balcon, in 1940: 'It is one of the most moving and dramatic films I have ever seen . . . I must congratulate you upon producing such a work which, apart from its artistic merits, has a real educational value.' Needless to say, in Britain, the film's popularity was harmed by newspaper magnate, Lord Beaverbrook, who objected to Robeson's left-wing politics, and banned mention of him and the film in his newspapers.

The Proud Valley was revolutionary in that it projected a Black working-man as a human being, and not a stereotype, and for Robeson, who had struggled for years to find a suitable film role, this was 'the one film I could be proud of having played in.'

In 1942, Robeson accepted another offer from Hollywood. He agreed to play the role of a sharecropper in an all-Black segment of *Tales of Manhattan*, but it was a decision he deeply regretted making. Various Black groups attacked the film's patronising treatment of Black people, and criticised Robeson for accepting what they felt was a role which demeaned their race. Robeson stated publicly that he 'wouldn't blame any Negro for picketing the film,' and volunteered to join some protesters outside cinema's where it played. 'It was the same old thing,' he said, 'the Negro solving his problem singing his way to glory. This is very offensive to my people. It makes the Negro childlike and innocent and is in the old plantation tradition.'

Tales of Manhattan was Paul Robeson's last film as an actor. Said Thomas Cripps in his book, *Slow Fade to Black* (1977): 'Forced to choose between long-standing

loyalty to cinema and his faith in the politics of the left, he chose the latter and blasted the picture he had liked enough to appear in and fight to change.'

Criticism of Robeson's films came from several influential sources, and one of his most outspoken critics was the Jamaican Philosopher and revolutionary, Marcus Garvey, who is credited with inspiring Black consciousness on an international scale. In the late 1930s, while he was living in Britain, he led a campaign against Robeson's films, objecting most strongly to the roles Robeson played. When the actor left Britain for Hollywood in 1935 to make *Show Boat*, Garvey announced: 'He is gone there to make another slanderous picture against the Negro.' In 1937, Garvey complained to the British Moving Picture Board about Robeson's films, which he felt demeaned Black people, and later that year he published a pamphlet denouncing them.

Throughout his career, Robeson was pursued for several film projects which never materialised, and two of the most interesting of these were in the Soviet Union. While Robeson was working on *Sanders of the River*, director Sergei Eisenstein planned to star Robeson as the Haitian revolutionary, Toussaint L'Ouverture, in a production called *Black Majesty*. Robeson's biographer, Marie Seton, arranged a meeting between Eisenstein and Robeson in Moscow in 1934, but their plans to make the film were not realised. In 1955, Robeson accepted an offer from Sergei Yutkevich, director of the Mosfilm Studio, to act in his film version of *Othello*. 'The most important thing to me,' Robeson said, 'is that here is a wonderful opportunity to participate in a major artistic work, the most important screen role I've ever been offered.' However, Robeson's application for a passport to enable him to travel to Russia to make the film was refused by the U.S. State Department.

In 1974, Paul Robeson was inducted into America's Black Film-makers Hall of

Fame, but in 1978 there was some controversy in Hollywood when the Chamber of Commerce turned down a request by the Actors' Equity, and the Screen Actors' Guild, to place a posthumous star in Robeson's name on Hollywood Boulevard's 'Walk of Fame'. The Chamber's selection committee said Robeson had been rejected because he 'lacked sufficient professional achievements,' *not*, they stressed, because of his political beliefs. They changed their minds, however, following protests from Equity and other groups, as well as individuals such as Lena Horne and Paul Robeson, Jr., and on 10th April 1979, Paul Robeson had a star, bearing his name, placed in Hollywood's 'Walk of Fame'.

In 1981, Robeson's grand-daughter, Susan Robeson, said in her book, *The Whole World in His Hands*:

My grandfather challenged the inherent racism of the film industry to its foundations, for which he paid a price perhaps greater than that of any artist in American history. He did so proudly, as a matter of principle and with no regrets.

PAUL ROBESON: A FILM TRIBUTE

Sunday, 5th May
Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank SE1
3.00 *The Proud Valley* (1940) £2.00 (£1.00 for school children, students, senior citizens, unemployed).

4.30 *Lecture on Paul Robeson*. A lecture will be given by John Akomfrah, from the Black Audio Film Collective, on *Paul Robeson, Film and Politics*, in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. (Admission free, no pre-booking).

7.00 *Jericho* (1937) and *Song of Freedom* (1936). These films are made available by kind permission of Raymond Rohauer. £2.00 (£1.30 for school children, students, senior citizens, unemployed).

Tickets available from Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank, Belvedere Road SE1. 928 3191 (Credit Card Hotline 928 8800) or by post from Box Office, Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 8XX.

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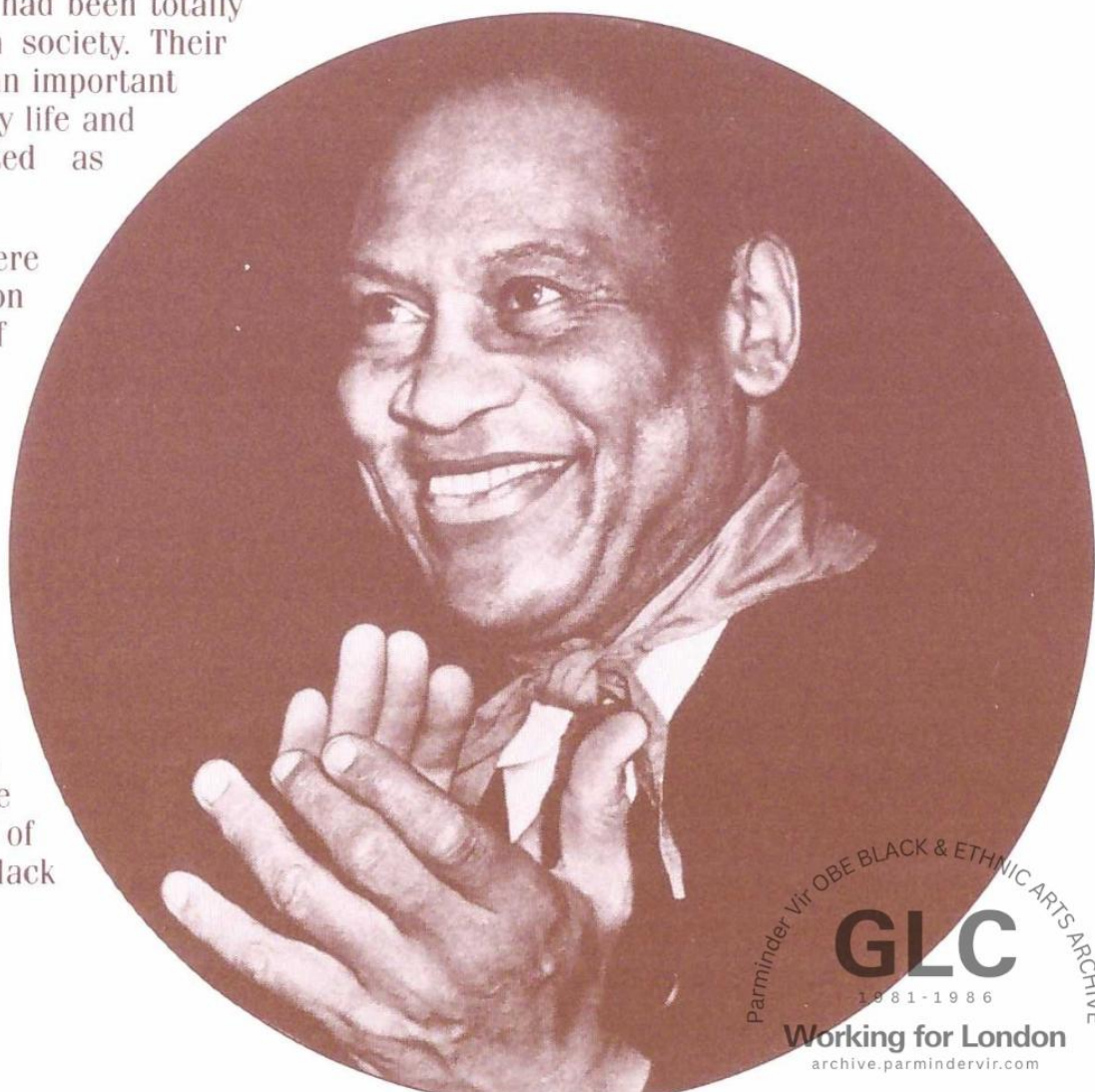
Robeson's association with the Soviet Union has been discussed long and hard while he was alive and after his death. There are some people, who while admiring most of what Robeson stood for cannot forgive him for having so warmly embraced the Soviet people and their government. Marie Seton in her biography of Paul Robeson advances two reasons in an attempt to understand Robeson's attachment to the Soviet Union. First she claimed that he had read about the Yakuts who lived in the eastern part of the U.S.S.R. They were classed as a backward race. To Robeson and many other people their lifestyle and culture closely resembled the people of East Africa. Robeson had wondered whether socialism could eradicate the racism of the Russian people. 'What would happen to people like the Yakuts now that they had gained freedom from colonial oppression?' Paul and his family visited Russia many times and within five years he saw how the Yakuts had been totally integrated into Russian society. Their art and culture played an important part in Russia's everyday life and they were not treated as second-class citizens.

In America there were places that he Robeson could not go because of the colour of his skin. In England in 1929, he was barred from entering a hotel. The irony is he was about to attend a party in his honour. (The issue was later raised in the House of Commons) Robeson could always point to the Soviet Constitution and the provisions of Article 123 of Chapter X as import to Black people.

'The equality of the right of citizens of the U.S.S.R. irrespective of their nationality or race, in all fields of economic, state, cultural, social and political life, is an irrevocable law. Any direct or indirect restriction of these rights, or conversely the establishment of direct or indirect privileges for citizens on account of the race or nationality to which they belong, as well as the propagation of racial or national exceptionalism, or hatred contempt, is punishable by law.'

Such a document struck right to the heart of the problem that faced 14 million Black people in America.

Robeson also had strong artistic connections with the Soviet Union, he understood the Russians and he not only spoke their language, he was very attached to it. He sang in Russian, and his son Paul Robeson Jr. was educated in Russia.



ROBESON AND WALES

The title of **Honorary Welshman** is apt for the man who was born the son of a former slave, and felt at home with the Welsh people. Robeson's association with the Welsh people began back in 1928 when he was appearing in the stage musical *Show Boat*. (See the section under films).

Robeson visited the Rhondda Valley between the great Wars when runaway inflation and the disclosure of unshared war profits brought on more than the usual labour unrest. Fortunately for the miners, the period produced its own daring union leadership in such men as William Paynter D.D. Evans and Dai Francis.

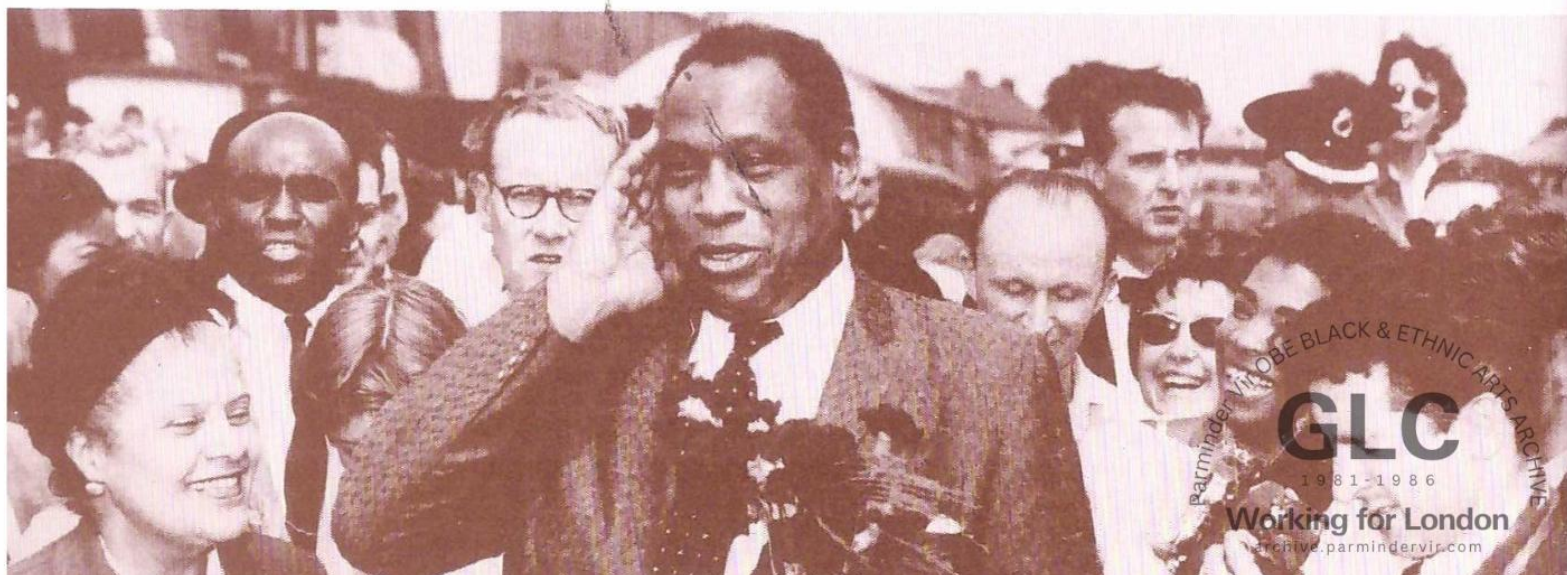
Robeson's close relationship with the Welsh miners was reflected in the film *The Proud Valley*. (The film was shot in the Rhondda Valley in 1938–39). *The Proud Valley* was completed in mid-September and then Robeson sailed for America, ending a twelve year exile in London. It is felt that Robeson's close relationship with the miners influenced his decision to return home in 1939. The poor working conditions in the mines reminded him of the intolerable conditions of his relations on the tobacco plantations in North Carolina and the mine fields in West Virginia. Robeson had a special relationship with the miners, he campaigned for what they believed was a just cause, better conditions and wages for all miners. Such behaviour alienated the mine owners but ensured a life-long

friendship between Robeson and the people of the valleys.

In the years that Robeson was denied a passport, the Welsh were certainly the most vocal and active group, who tried to get the State Department to change their minds. As early as 1953, the Miners' Union of South Wales joined with many other groups to register their outrage at the way Robeson was 'persecuted' by the United States Government. They claimed that Robeson was a citizen of the world, therefore, what happened to him was the concern of everyone.

Robeson's first invitation to attend the Welsh Miners' Eisteddfod, arrived in 1953, just before his second famous Peace Arch Concert. The Welsh again invited him to be their honoured guest at their 1957 Eisteddfod. The State Department for the umpteenth time refused him a passport. Robeson and his friends in Wales had an alternative plan. They arranged a trans-Atlantic telephone hook-up between New York and Porthcawl and Robeson sang on schedule. The American press, by and large ignored this event. Just the opposite was true in England and Europe. Thousands listened to the programme in Wales. Millions in England and the continent read about the concert in their newspapers and the miners recorded the concert for posterity.

Robeson arriving in London in 1958, soon he will be attending the Miner's Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale



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In 1938 Paul Robeson was asked by a Daily Mirror reporter what he would give up for an ideal. His answer was 'my career'. At the time when Robeson made that statement he was at the peak of his career. He had already made several films, he was in demand as a concert singer, he was feted everywhere he went and the world was at his feet. Twelve years after making such a bold statement Robeson found himself in that exact position. Robeson could have taken the money and buried his head in the sand. Instead he decided to speak out against the injustices that he saw in America. He knew that what the consequences of his aggression would be.

In defining Robeson's political activities and his role as an activist there is only one true source that can be relied upon and that is Robeson himself. First his reason for turning his back on Hollywood. This is a quote from his autobiography.

'In the early days of my career as an actor, I shared what was then the prevailing attitude of Negro performers – that the content or film scenario was of little or no importance to us. What mattered was the opportunity, which came so seldom to our folks, of having a part – any part – to play on stage or in the movies. Later I could no longer believe that the negro artist could simply view the matter in terms of his individual interests, and that he had a responsibility to his people who rightly resented the traditional stereotyped portrayals of Negroes on stage and screen. So I made a decision; if Hollywood and Broadway producers did not choose to

offer me worthy roles to play, then I would choose not to accept any kind of offer.'

Robeson made it his duty to speak out against America's interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In the sixties and seventies a large section of America voiced its indignation at their country's involvement in the Vietnam War. Years before the first GI had set foot in Vietnam, when the war was still brewing Robeson had spoken out.

Robeson was also the first Black performer to take a stand and not play to segregated audiences. Years later Nat King Cole would follow his example.



A Progressive Party rally at Madison Square Garden with Henry Wallace and colleagues

BOOKS

Through the years, discovering and rediscovering Paul Robeson has been possible through the many books written about him. The standard and variety of the books differ enormously. The first book was published in 1930 and it was written by his wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson. According to Essie, as she was popularly called, her husband was equally successful as an athlete, lawyer, actor and singer. She quotes with pride the critics verdict on his performance in his early leading roles namely *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. Extraordinarily versatile, he was able to earn a living later with his fine voice giving Negro spiritual concerts, when Black parts proved scarce. She writes warmly and passionately of Black Harlem, not the night clubs dressed up for white patronage, but the living, pulsating capital of the Black American World. The book is chatty, naively intimate, sincere and affectionate.

The Life and Times of a Free Black Man is another biography by a female writer. Unlike most young-adult biographies, the text remains unfictionalized and acquires chilling authenticity as each incident is fully documented by Senate testimony, newspaper and magazine quotes, Robeson's autobiography or texts of his wife's book. Despite the fact that it's all second-hand information Virginia Hamilton's ability to conjure up vivid images is magically presented in the book; it is a clear chronicle of dignity and determination with which all young people can identify.

Paul Robeson: All American by Dorothy Butler. The writer asserts that Robeson was one of the 20th Century's most important, but least understood black figures. As an athlete, actor, singer and political activist he influenced many thousands of lives, black and white, in the United States and abroad. His exorcism from the American body politic and American consciousness by the governmental paranoia of the 1940's and 1950's is a crime for which

America has yet to admit guilt. The consequence has been that the present generation of Americans has little sense of who or what this magnificent man was.

Big Ben by Earl Schenck Miers, is a novel that traces Robeson's career from the beginning of his college days to his first triumph as a concert singer. One reviewer has this to say about the book:

'Big Ben represents the avowed attempt of a white writer to plead for a minority group that 'dignity' of treatment is due to all human beings. The tribulations and triumphs of Big Ben have been woven into a fascinating story, which should commend to a more sympathetic understanding of the efforts of the Black man seeking a higher goal in a prejudiced white world. Nevertheless like all white authors, Mr Miers suffers from an inability to grasp the true psychology of the Black man. Big Ben innocuous reactions to the barriers of racial prejudice are, in reality, not those of the Black man but what the misunderstanding white man thinks they would be. Mr Miers is to be commended however, for bringing before the reading public a Black person – intelligent and educated – which is so consistently ignored by novelists in portrayal of Black people'.

Paul Robeson by Marie Seton is one of the best biographies. Published the same year as Robeson's own account of his life and thoughts. Put together over many years, Robeson was consulted and did make corrections to the final draft.

In the book Marie Seton adds much interesting material about Robeson's early life and development as an actor and singer. Because she was a personal friend, Miss Seton had the good fortune to be with Robeson at some of the most important situations in his life. The language is beautiful, but it must be said that



Robeson holding a copy of his autobiography *Here I Stand* in 1958

some parts of the book is written in the awed style of the lives of saints. Robeson does everything except float on a millstone. (This is not intended as a put down.) One gets the feeling after reading the book that Marie Seton not only enjoyed the company of the Robeson family but that she also enjoyed writing about her friend. To the author's credit almost every subsequent book on Robeson has paid tribute to her work.

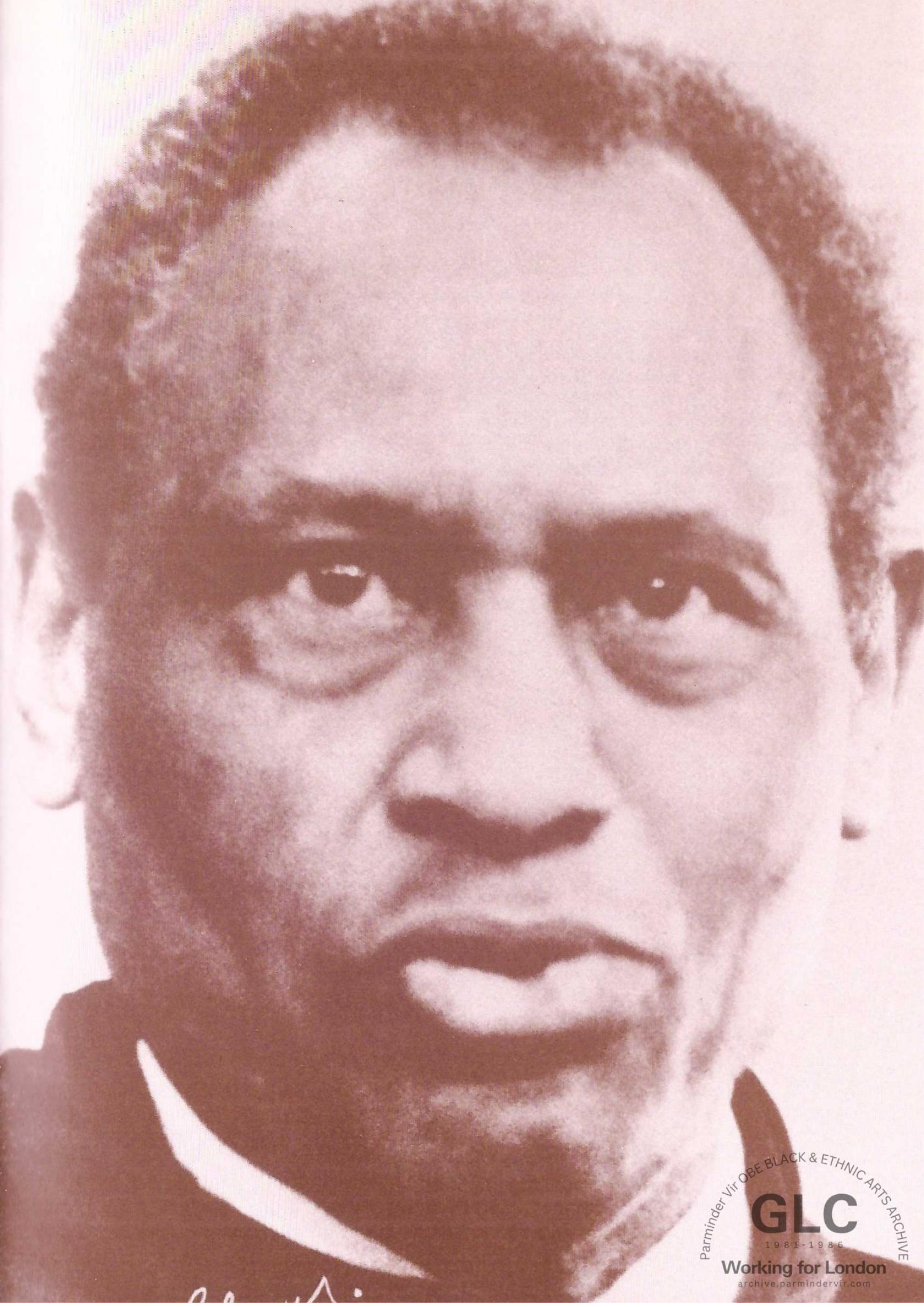
Here I Stand by Paul Robeson. The book can best be described as a moving document on Robeson's life. The book leaves the reader in no doubt, of Robeson's stance. The book begins, 'I am a Negro.'

He is a part of the Harlem community, of the 'Church where on Sunday mornings I am united with the fellowship of thousands of my people...' Winning a scholarship to Rutgers was 'the decisive point of my life' because 'I knew I was not inferior'. He traces the expansion of his horizons. This belief in the oneness of human kind ... has existed within me side by side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own race.' The book was first published in 1958 and is Robeson's account of the beliefs he held; how he came to hold them; his controversial associations and activities; the restrictions imposed against him by the US Government, which virtually wrecked his career, are all documented in the book. The book is a must for all Robeson's fans and admirers.

TRIBUTES

On 28th December 1975, Paul Robeson was admitted to the Presbyterian Medical Centre in Philadelphia after a mild stroke. On 23rd January, one of the world's best-known figures died. Tributes from all over the world poured in on the Robeson family. Newspapers on five continents carried the story of his life and death for days. There is no doubt that he was one of the most distinguished and remarkable men of our time. Perhaps the words used by Mark Anthony to epitomize Brutus can best describe Robeson, 'the elements so mix'd in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, this was a man!'





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JUNIOR DOUGLAS

Exhibition organiser to the GLC is Junior Douglas. He became involved with the Paul Robeson Exhibition at its first showing in Cardiff in 1982. While working for the Cardiff Broadcasting Corporation, he made a programme on Robeson and the exhibition. He has since worked closely with Martha Edwards in building up the exhibition. He is also responsible for introducing the exhibition to London.

STEPHEN BOURNE

Film Consultant to the GLC's Paul Robeson Exhibition is Stephen Bourne. He has been responsible for organising the Paul Robeson film tribute at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. He works as a freelance journalist, and in 1983 presented a season of films at the National Film Theatre entitled *Black Actors in British Cinema* in which he included a tribute to Paul Robeson.



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