
Swanzy, Henry Valentine Leonard

(1915–2004)

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Swanzy, Henry Valentine Leonard (1915–2004), radio producer, was born on 14 June 1915 at Glanmire Rectory, Glanmire, co. Cork, Ireland, the eldest son of the Revd Samuel Leonard Swanzy (1875–1920), rector of Glanmire, and his wife, Joan Frances, *née* Glennly (1888–1975). His brothers John and Leonard were born in 1917 and 1920 respectively, the latter after the death of their father. The family subsequently moved to England. Henry attended Wellington College and won a scholarship to New College, Oxford, achieving first-class honours in modern history. In order to pursue a career in the civil service, he learned French and German, and he travelled around Europe. After four years in the Colonial Office, where he progressed to assistant principal, he joined the BBC in 1941.

On 12 March 1946 Swanzy married Eileen Lucy (Tirzah) Ravilious, *née* Garwood (1908–1951), daughter of Frederick Scott Garwood, an officer in the Royal Engineers, and widow of the painter, designer, book engraver, and war artist Eric Ravilious. Following her death in March 1951, on 22 July 1952 Swanzy married Henrietta Theodora Van Eeghan (1924–2006), with whom he had two sons and a daughter.

Swanzy began his career as a producer for the general overseas service, but it was his involvement in the radio programme *Caribbean Voices* between 1946 and 1954 that he was best known for. He encouraged writers from the Caribbean to contribute stories and poems. This fostered the careers of many notable West Indian writers, two of whom, Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul, were awarded the Nobel prize for literature. George Lamming wrote how Swanzy looked after the welfare of struggling writers: ‘Swanzy was very down to earth. If you looked a little thin in the face, he would assume that there might have been a minor famine on, and without in any way offending your pride, he would make some arrangement for you to earn’ (*Times*, 6 April 2004).

Caribbean Voices was the successor of *Calling The West Indies*, which had enabled West Indian servicemen to keep in touch with home during the Second World War. The radio programme began broadcasting in March 1943 and was produced by Una Marson, the Jamaican poet and playwright. It was on air for twenty-five minutes every Sunday afternoon and contained the work of Caribbean authors. Marson returned to Jamaica in 1946, and John Grenfell Williams, the director of the BBC Colonial Service, who had appointed Marson, invited Swanzy to take over her role. Swanzy was considered suitable for the post after having submitted a poem to the BBC about the Battle of Britain, although it was not highly thought of by the writer Cecil Day-Lewis, who was the friend of the poets Auden and Spender. Swanzy spoke of the experience:

he might have been a little less lukewarm about the poem. Thereafter, I never had sufficient confidence, as I didn’t get much encouragement, really, and I thought, perhaps out of a sort of empathy, that it would be nice to assist some of these writers from the West Indies if I could, because they didn’t get much help either.

(Schwarz, 200)

Swanzy's Irish heritage allowed him not to seem part of the colonial establishment, which could have deterred West Indian contributors: 'Because of my Irishness ... one had the sort of left-wing view of encouraging people who had had a raw deal' (*Times*, 6 April 2004). As Philip Nanton wrote, 'he brought to the programme editorial skills, considerable knowledge of Africa as well as effective promotional skills and a direct, deep and learned understanding of literature', making the broadcast popular and successful (Nanton, 65). The programme was lengthened to twenty-nine minutes after 1947, and Swanzy estimated that 150 different Caribbean writers contributed to it in the first six years. For those in the Caribbean, Britain was the 'Mother Country' and would welcome her children from the West Indies. The SS *Empire Windrush* arrived from the West Indies in 1948, heralding a new wave of immigration, and Caribbean writers also travelled to Britain with Swanzy's encouragement in the years that followed.

Whilst working on *Caribbean Voices*, Swanzy also edited the journal of the Royal African Society, *African Affairs*. He edited the material that was to be broadcast on the radio show and held informal literary meetings at his home, all of which was invaluable in establishing the careers of these writers, but he preferred not to draw attention to his involvement. As Nanton noted:

[For] the writers with whom he associated both in Britain and in the Caribbean, he adopted the role of educator, advocate and collaborator. He was as aware of the needs of those who 'shine for a season as most people do who are not pretentious and write of what they know' as he was of the needs of the stars.

(Nanton, 66)

Swanzy would also assist nascent writers by organizing sponsorship for those in financial need. He secured a contract for V.S. Naipaul to present *Caribbean Voices* in December 1954, which enabled him to continue writing. Naipaul would later say that the job 'saved my life, really. I was living more or less at the limit of despair' (French, 142). It was unusual for BBC producers to procure funds, but, as Glyne Griffith wrote, 'It illustrates ... the degree to which Swanzy appreciated the existence of an emergent cultural formation in the Caribbean which needed support' (Schwarz, 197). The *Times Literary Supplement* averred in 1955 that 'West Indian writers freely acknowledge their debt to the BBC for its encouragement, financial and aesthetic. Without that encouragement the birth of a Caribbean literature would have been slower and even more painful than it has been' (Nanton, 62).

In November 1954 Swanzy left England to accept a posting in Accra as head of programmes for the Gold Coast Broadcasting System. The Swanzy family had strong trading links to West Africa, and in 1956 he wrote an article for the *Transactions of the Gold Coast and Togoland Historical Society* entitled 'A Trading Family in the Nineteenth Century Gold Coast', detailing his ancestors' business dealings in the area. In the Gold Coast (which achieved independence as Ghana in 1957) he produced the radio programme *West African Voices* and edited *Voices of Ghana* (1958), a selection of the poetry, short stories, plays, and essays that had been broadcast on the programme. His other literary contributions included a twice-yearly review of *Caribbean Voices* and critiques of West Indian literature for literary journals.

Swanzy returned to the BBC's external services in 1958, and by 1971 he was the senior scriptwriter for central talks and features at the BBC's offices in Bush House, London. He remained there until his retirement in 1976. In 1998 he was the subject of a BBC Radio 4 programme, *What Does Mr Swanzy Want?*. The Jamaican poet John Figueroa described him in this programme as 'a very short man ... direct, honest, but he had his opinions' (BBC History).

Having lived latterly at 2 *Maple Avenue, Bishop's Stortford*, Swanzy died at Princess Alexandra Hospital, Harlow, on 19 March 2004, of a chest infection. He was survived by his second wife and three children. His personal correspondence is held at the University of Birmingham. An annual lifetime achievement award bearing his name was established at the Trinidad and Tobago annual literary festival in 2013, recognizing the service to Caribbean literature of editors, publishers, critics, broadcasters, and others.

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