

# Caribbean Elections Biography | Dr. Walter Anthony Rodney

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## Dr. Walter Anthony Rodney

Former Academic and Politician, Guyana

Dr. Walter Anthony Rodney (23 March 1942 – 13 June 1980) was a prominent Guyanese historian, political activist and preeminent scholar, who was assassinated in Guyana in 1980.

## Early life and education

Walter Rodney was born in Georgetown, in the then British Guiana (now Guyana) on March 23, 1942. His was a working class family-his father was a tailor and his mother a seamstress. After attending primary school, he won an open exhibition scholarship to attend Queens College as one of the early working-class beneficiaries of concessions made in the field of education by the ruling class in Guyana to the new nationalism that gripped the country in the early 1950s.

While at Queens College young Rodney excelled academically, as well as in the fields of athletics and debating. In 1960, he won an open scholarship to further his studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He graduated with a first-class honors degree in history in 1963 and he won an open scholarship to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Rodney earned a PhD in African History in 1966 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, England, at the age of 24. His dissertation, which focused on the slave trade on the Upper Guinea Coast, was published by the Oxford University Press in 1970 under the title *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800* and was widely acclaimed for its originality in challenging the conventional wisdom on the topic.

## Career

Rodney traveled widely and became very well known internationally as an activist, scholar and formidable orator. He taught at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania during the period 1966-67 and later in Jamaica at his alma mater UWI Mona. He was sharply critical of the middle class for its role in the post-independence Caribbean. He was also a strong critic of capitalism and argued for a socialist development template.

On 15 October 1968 the government of Jamaica, led by prime minister Hugh Shearer, declared Rodney *persona non grata*. The decision to ban him from ever returning to Jamaica because of his advocacy for the working poor in that country caused riots to break out, eventually claiming the lives of several people and causing millions of dollars in damages. These riots, which started on 16 October 1968, are now known as the Rodney Riots, and they triggered an increase in political awareness across the Caribbean, especially among the Afrocentric Rastafarian sector of Jamaica, documented in his book *The Groundings With My Brothers*.

In 1969, Rodney returned to the University of Dar es Salaam, where he served as a Professor of History until 1974.

Rodney became a prominent Pan-Africanist, and was important in the Black Power movement in the Caribbean and North America. While living in Dar es Salaam he was influential in developing a new centre of African learning and discussion.

### **Later years and assassination**

In 1974 Rodney returned to Guyana from Tanzania. He was due to take up a position as a professor at the University of Guyana but the government prevented his appointment. He became increasingly active in politics, founding the Working People's Alliance, a party that provided the most effective and credible opposition to the PNC government. In 1979 he was arrested and charged with arson after two government offices were burned.

On 13 June 1980, Walter Rodney at the age of 38 was killed by a bomb in his car, a month after returning from the independence celebrations in Zimbabwe and during a period of intense political activism. He was survived by his wife, Pat, and three children. His brother, Donald Rodney, who was injured in the explosion, said that a sergeant in the Guyana Defence Force named Gregory Smith had given Walter the bomb that killed him. After the killing Smith fled to French Guiana, where he died in 2002.

It was, and is still widely believed - although technically hard to prove - that the assassination was a set-up by then President Linden Forbes Burnham. Rodney's ideas of the various ethnic groups who were all historically disenfranchised by the ruling colonial class, working together, was in conflict with Burnham's maniacal need for control.

### **Personal life**

Walter was married to Dr Patricia Rodney and the union bore three children- Shaka, Kanini and Asha.

### **Academic influence**

"Rodney's most influential book was his magnum opus, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, published in 1972. In it he described an Africa that had been consciously exploited by European imperialists, leading directly to the modern underdevelopment of most of the continent. The book became enormously influential as well as controversial. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was groundbreaking in that it was among the first to bring a new perspective to the question of underdevelopment in Africa. Rodney's analysis went far beyond the heretofore accepted approach in the study of Third World underdevelopment.

"Instead of being interested primarily in the inter-relations of African trade and politics, as many of us were at that time, Walter Rodney focused his attention on the agricultural basis of African communities, on the productive forces within them and on the processes of social differentiation. As a result, his research raised a whole set of fresh questions concerning the nature of African social institutions on the Upper Guinea coast in the sixteenth century and of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. In doing so, he helped to open up a new dimension. Almost immediately he stimulated much further writing and research on West Africa, and he initiated a debate, which still continues and now extends across the whole range of African history. When teaching at the Universities of Dar es Salaam and the West Indies, he launched and sustained a large number of discussion groups which swept up and embraced many who had had little or no formal education. As

a writer, he reached out to contact thousands in *The Groundings with my Brothers* (1969) and in his influential *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)." — Remarks by Professor John Richard Gray, *History Today*, Vol. 49, Issue 9, 1980.

"When we think of Walter Rodney as a Revolutionary Scholar we are talking about two things, Radical Scholar and his revolutionary contribution to the study of History ie. History of Africa. Walter Rodney was a pioneering scholar who provided new answers to old questions and posed new questions in relation to the study of Africa." — Remarks by Professor Winston McGowan at the Walter Rodney Commemorative Symposium held at York College, USA, in June 2010.

"Walter Rodney was no captive intellectual playing to the gallery of local or international radicalism. He was clearly one of the most solidly ideologically situated intellectuals ever to look colonialism and its contemporary, heir black opportunism and exploitation, in the eye" — Remarks by Wole Soyinka, Oduduwa Hall, University of Ife, Nigeria, Friday, June 27, 1980.

## Legacy

Rodney's death was commemorated in a poem by Martin Carter entitled "For Walter Rodney," by the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson in "Reggae fi Radni," and by Kamau Brathwaite in his poem "Poem for Walter Rodney" (*Elegguas*, 2010).

In 1977, the African Studies Centre, Boston University, inaugurated the Walter Rodney Lecture Series.

In 1982, the American Historical Association posthumously awarded Walter Rodney the Albert J. Beveridge Award for *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*.

In 1984, the Centre for Caribbean Studies of the University of Warwick established the Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture in recognition of the life and work of one of the most outstanding scholar-activists of the Black Diaspora in the post-World War II era.

In 1993, the Guyanese government posthumously awarded Walter Rodney Guyana's highest honour, the Order of Excellence of Guyana. The Guyanese government also established the Walter Rodney Chair in History at the University of Guyana.

In 1998, the Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of the West Indies, inaugurated the Walter Rodney Lecture Series.

In 2004, Walter Rodney's widow, Patricia, and his children donated his papers to the Robert L. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center. Since 2004, an annual Walter Rodney Symposium has been held each 23 March (Rodney's birthday) at the Center under the sponsorship of the Library and the Political Science Department of Clark Atlanta University, and under the patronage of the Rodney family.

In 2005, the London Borough of Southwark erected a plaque in the Peckham Library Square in commemoration of Dr. Walter Rodney, the political activist, historian and global freedom fighter.

Rodney is the subject of the 2010 documentary film by Clairmont Chung, *W.A.R. Stories: Walter Anthony Rodney*.

The Walter Rodney Close in the London Borough of Newham has been named in the memory of Dr Walter Rodney.

## **Bibliography**

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- *The Groundings with my Brothers* (1969)
- *Kofi Baadu Out of Africa* (children's book) Georgetown, [Guyana]: [s.n.]
- *Lakshmi Out of India* (children's book) Georgetown, Guyana: The Guyana Book Foundation, 2000.

## **Resources**

### **VIDEO GALLERY**

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Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/svWl7rmt4D4>



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/YqfcbmncFI0>

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A Historical Class Analysis of  
Guyanese Society: Part 1 - Dr.  
Walter Rodney

A Historical Class Analysis of  
Guyanese Society: Part 2 - Dr.  
Walter Rodney

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A Historical Class Analysis of  
Guyanese Society: Part 3 - Dr.  
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## Sources

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[http://www.guyanacaribbeanpolitics.com/wpa/rodney\\_bio.html](http://www.guyanacaribbeanpolitics.com/wpa/rodney_bio.html)

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