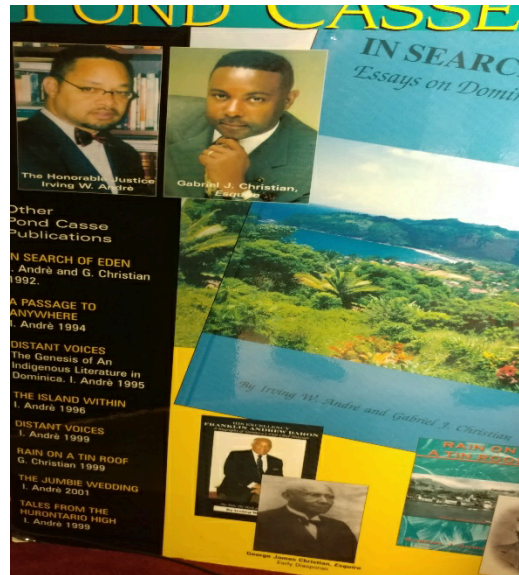


Making the Record: Pont Casse Press & Publishing Our History

By

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***Early Pont Casse Press Poster from the 10th Anniversary Celebration
held at Bowie, MD in the summer of 2002***

While Pont Casse Press was founded by Irving W. André and I on or about June 12, 1992, its genesis, however, had its roots in an earlier meeting between us. We had met in 1975 - Or thereabouts, - at the Roseau Public Library. The library, initially called the "Roseau Free Library," had been a donation to the colony by Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. It was housed within a handsome Caribbean-style bungalow with spacious verandas and large jalousie-clad windows. Those windows allowed for the free flow of sea breezes or cooling mountain air, which drifted down from the thickly forested Roseau valley at the lip of which it resided. Perched on a steep rise of earth and rock, the library rose about 50 feet above the Caribbean Sea, which fronted Roseau's harbor. Grey volcanic sand and smoothed basalt stones adorned the abbreviated beach which proceeded from that rise to the froth-flecked waves which lapped at the shore. So it was often the case that one's nostrils savored the sea spray which

was suffused into the warm air of a Saturday afternoon spent reading on the veranda which looped around three-quarters of the building.

And it was on one such afternoon that I spotted Irving. Slender in build and of French Creole origin, I had perhaps no more than a passing acquaintance with Irving at my high school. He was an upper-class man at the prestigious Dominica Grammar School (DGS) and resided at its hostel with other students from the country; Irving was from the second town of Portsmouth.

Founded in 1893 as a high school for the island's colonial elite, the new Grammar School building was only ten years old when I enrolled in 1972. The new school building occupied a piece of land overlooking the Roseau River to the West, the humming works of the L. Rose & Company lime processing plant to the north, the stately Botanic Gardens to the east, and the Josephine Gabriel & Company Coca-Cola factory to the south, right next to the Merry Go Round amusement park with swings, seesaws and slides.

Patterned on the old British public schools like Eton and Harrow, its students had in the recent past worn brown woolen blazers, brown and gold striped ties and a crest adorned with a sailing ship, against the background of the sun, and a motto strip beneath which read: Mens Sana In Corpore Sano; Latin for: A healthy mind in a healthy body.

Latin had been ditched by the time of my admission to the DGS and so too the blazer and tie. The rise of the independence movement in the British West Indian colonies such as Jamaica and Trinidad had proceeded with a vigor which touched our island's shores. With it came a desire to favor dress more in keeping with our climate and academic subjects more in keeping with the modernity we associated with statehood; so no more woolen blazers for us, nor the study of Latin.

The socialist inclined Dominica Labour Party Government of the day favored the Guayabera - or what we called "Shirt Jack" as national dress. A loose-fitting shirt, worn without a necktie, it came with two pockets at the bottom and one on the left breast within which to fit a pen.

The Shirt Jack was now standard wear for our first local Premier, Oliver Edward Leblanc. A poet and one who sought to carve a specific Dominica-centered national identity - with new respect shown to the African and Carib aspects of island history, he supported African liberation and sought to emulate those leaders of the developing world, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jawaharlal Nehru of India, who had brought independence and progress to their nations.

Leblanc would henceforth make the Shirt Jack, and a more formal rendition of it called the "Bush Jacket," national wear for men. His simple idea was that it was much too hot on the island to be throttled by a necktie, which had its origins in the neck scarf worn by people in countries with winter.

We would go bareheaded also, as the straw hats were given up. The identification for our school would be a strip of tie cut from the old school tie - or a tie strip. This was national identity hurtling along pell-mell and the niceties of high fashion, with all its filigree and sheen, could wait; the point was being made that we were new people and our value systems were being briskly baked in that oven of cultural transformation.

Coupled with the changes in dress, occasioned by self-government, which came to Dominicans in 1967 with associated statehood with Britain, was a government eager to ensure we wrote our own history. The government under Leblanc's stewardship had produced three editions of ***Dies Dominica*** - and a soft cover history magazine titled "Aspects of Dominican History." Those publications were the platform for our new intellectual class, which had graduated from the University of the West Indies or that post-World War II cohort from Cambridge University, or the London School of Economics.

Those publications by the government came coupled with poetry and short story contests at National Day, which was held every 3rd November. Not only did we now have our own anthem "Isle of Beauty" with music by Lemuel M. Christian and lyrics by W.O.M. Pond, we now marched before our own Premier, not just the Governor or Administrator who resided at Governors' House as local representative of Queen Elizabeth II. True, Sir Louis Cools Lartigue

was a local French Creole, but dressed in white, with a white pith helmet fittingly plumed with peacock feathers, he spoke to an increasingly distant imperial externality.

We were now learned enough to move beyond a curriculum restricted to works on Oliver Cromwell and William Shakespeare; this was a time when our intellectual development fostered an introspection grounded in local works of literature which spoke to the local condition. No more musing about swallows flitting above snow-flecked meadows we had never seen but had only heard about. Now we could speak of mango trees, our hauntingly beautiful forests, the lilt of island Creole lingo, azure expanses of the Caribbean Sea which embroidered us seashore; places which made up our reality; places we had seen. We were ceasing to be mimic men and women; we were making the record.

And so it was in the midst of that ferment I met Irving. We would have been busy poring over encyclopedias, works of world literature and magazines from around the world - but mostly British and US periodicals like *The Economist*, *London Illustrated News*, *Time*, or *Newsweek*. We were ravenous in our search for knowledge of a kind that could not be assuaged by that which reposed within the four walls of the modest DGS Library. The Roseau Public Library was the biggest on the island, and Irving and I, on many a Saturday, would stay until closing time; frantic in our effort to soak up as much information as could be gleaned before the librarian shut the doors and shooed us away at closing time.

What drove us? It may be a cliché - but life proves that children are what they learn. My dad had been a member of the London Book Club before WWII and was a news hound; my mother was learned and had served as a pupil teacher. There were always books and magazines around the house, including a thick tome called the "*History of Civilization*." Dad's brother, Uncle Henckell, was Minister of Education and had attended London University for training in education, and Uncle Lemuel had the Christian Music School and was the local agent for the London Chamber of Commerce Exam. Dad's sister, Aunty Floss, held a diploma in education from the University of the West Indies (UWI) and had taught my sister Esther and me at the Roseau Mixed Infant School. When they visited our house, or we visited theirs, information whirled around at

breakneck speak and we lapped it up. Having served in the British Army, Dad was a big student of Churchill and knew all about the Lend-Lease program by which President Roosevelt aided Britain in the war. And by 1972, my brother Wellsworth had brought home the book *Guerrilla Warfare* by Che Guevara, and my other brother Lawson had brought home Dr WEB Dubois' *The Soul of Black Folk* and Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*. With Samuel joining them, we tackled the big philosophical issues of the day such as: why did black people not have any power on our island or in Africa? How could we advance in science and technology? We were eager to examine the intricacies of what disaster had befallen our race.

Irving was no less fortunate in those roots which informed his intellectual bent. His father was a senior customs officer, well read and highly educated by any standard. When I worked with Allan Buntin of Smith & Lord in 1976, the Rotary Club to which Allan belonged had received a donation of books from the United States. Smith & Lord was close to the customs department where Irving's father worked. His father had walked over to Smith & Lord, where we were unpacking the books. I had seen him poring through the shipment of books as he told Allan he needed some of the books for his family. Andre, the senior, had also graduated from the elite Dominica Grammar School (DGS) before the war, a high achievement in those days when entrance to the DGS was restricted to a privileged few. After the DGS, his quest for fulfillment had taken him to the oil refineries on Curaçao, which refined Venezuelan oil. There he held an administrative position in the refinery's lab, a vocation which further enhanced his knowledge. Andre the elder returned to Dominica with a young Irving and his siblings in tow - accompanied by a substantial library and jazz record collection. The collection of books at the Andre residence had merely whetted Irving's appetite for more, and the regular trek to the library was one way to satisfy that yearning to pry open new doors of learning.

Once we felt comfortable in the love we shared for learning, we scoured the city for what else could be had in the way of literature. Bernard Wiltshire, UWI Extra Mural Tutor, had a bit of a library, and we shared what he was willing to part with. I visited with Dominican-born US citizen and former Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria, Ron Green, who had returned to the island with boxes of books and left-wing newspapers such as the *Militant* and *Guardian*. And I visited

the Movement for a New Dominica (MND) Library on Canal Lane in Goodwill. Finally, we even tracked down a small used bookstore operation run by a young lady called Tecla next to the Old Dawbiney Market. She was fond of Irving and so – perhaps because of that affection for Irving - we were able to stock our own growing collection of books for a price which suited the modest purse of the students we were.

By 1977, with the return of the legendary independence advocate, socialist and Pan Africanist Rosie Douglas, I had become a founding member of the Popular Independence Committee and Dominica Cuba Friendship Society. When Rosie returned to Dominica, I was Deputy Head Boy at the DGS, and we soon founded a pro-independence study group called Cadre # 1 on the inside to our members, but Sisserou Youth Movement to those on the outside. True to the clandestine culture of left-wing organizations in a colonial state, we did not want it to be publicly known that we were really an affiliate of the PIC led by Douglas. Douglas had been deported from Canada for his radical politics and leadership role in the famous Caribbean student uprising at Canada's Sir George William University in 1969. He was linked to people like radical poet Leroi Jones aka Amiri Baraka, and Angela Davis, who had been the object of an FBI nationwide search. Rosie had chaired the Black Writers' Conference of 1969, attended by Dr Walter Rodney. Rodney had authored the groundbreaking work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. To have associated with Douglas in a manner which was too overt was seen as dangerous, and so we met with him and held meetings within the private confines of Hilarian Deschamps' drawing room in Pottersville.

Deschamp was a St. Mary's Academy graduate and a bachelor. He was a follower of the old MND and had transferred his allegiance to Rosie Douglas' PIC, as it had opened links to Cuba, seemed more dynamic, and had a clear vision on how we could attain independence and proceed to building socialism. Yes, the reading that Irving and I had done had exposed the seamy underside of slavery and colonialism. We felt that such backwardness as we lived under, after 200 years of British colonialism, was abhorrent and could only be alleviated by the application of scientific socialism.

How could socialism be built? Well, with science and the study of society. We believed that mass science-oriented education of our population, plus electrification, using our solar and geothermal power as a source of clean energy, was the way to go. We also believed that we needed to process our raw agricultural products into consumer-ready value-added products: bananas into porridge; cocoa into chocolate; oranges, limes and grapefruit into juices, etc. In that approach, we felt we could earn more income and broaden our productive capacity via factories to do such things. We spent many a night engrossed in such discussions. It must be noted that our colonial-era miseducation did not allow for discussions of Pan-Africanism, African history, the history of Dominica (except from the biased viewpoint of the colonizer), nor did we delve into development studies in any of our subject areas in school. We were being prepared to be loyal servants of the colonial state, and little, or nothing, had ever been taught us as to how to extricate our island from being a mere producer of raw materials or agricultural products for further processing in England. In essence, we were to be hewers of wood and carriers of water in perpetuity.

Research and its techniques were not taught at our schools. We learnt by rote and critical thinking was discouraged. Our immersion in the Roseau Public Library's collection and the Cadre changed all that. We saw the paucity of information on our island and aimed to change that. We were literally *unpersons* – *people with no face, no past and a dim future worthy of a vanquished race*. Our history was not taught, and nowhere could one find a book on the heroes who worked for our freedom from slavery - except on Englishmen like William Wilberforce.

Our study of the world around us revealed a people who had been mobilized to produce sugar or limes for the empire; or whose resources had been marshaled to support the empire's military. Only now were Dominicans being asked to focus on their needs and disabilities. But to inspire a people to greatness in action and to mobilize them, they have - of necessity- to believe that greatness resides within them. To rise, any people must jettison self-loathing, any externally imposed, or innate inferiority complex. To ascend, any people must have a strong dose of self-confidence and self-knowledge. The cultures that have a strong belief in themselves ascend. Those beliefs are formed, become second nature itself, where they are relentlessly engraved on the psyche of a people via the written word. The spoken word and unlearned, idle chatter will

never suffice. That reality can become manifest only when a people begin to write down the history of their own reality and organize centers of learning, publish works of literature, create their own art forms, master the scientific methods via research institutions created for that purpose; and build museums and libraries to perpetuate their national story.

That history, passed down in written form, creates that national mind upon which national construction can take shape. Science and arts do not proceed in a vacuum; they reside in careful record-keeping where the scribes have been so dutiful to make the record. One could not even begin to conceive the idea of British common law without first having a tradition rooted in the history of the case. When the periodic table of the elements was written down for all to see, humanity took a quantum leap forward in the mastery of science. To that end, we must thank the early alchemists who kept copious notes, and their successors - the Russian scientist Dmitri Mendeleev and the French scientist Alexandre-Emile Chancourtois who framed the basic periodic tables we know today. Science requires that research be organized and committed to writing so it may be evaluated, critiqued and/or improved upon – such commitment to organized information resided in the periodic tables of the elements. It is also that written history which creates the common law precedent by which learned judges can take their bearings. And until the Dominican and/or West Indian intellectual begins to craft great works of scientific and/or artistic inquiry to so plumb the depths of the societies within which we live, we shall continue to wear borrowed clothes - both literally and metaphorically.

So Irving and I made the record first by issuing the first edition of "***Vanguard - the Voice of the Dominican Working People***" in 1977. Many a night we cut Stencils with styluses, labored over the old-fashioned manual typewriter at the DGS, and borrowed the old Gestetner mimeograph machine; a type of printer which preceded copy machines. We would fit the stencil on the drum and roll out the pages from the ink-filled drum, which saturated the stencil along the cuts made in it by the type or stencil. The ink seeping through the letters or artwork cut into the stencil was imprinted in that process on the blank sheets of paper spat out from beneath the drum at every complete turn we made with the handle.

Our newsletter banner was presumptuous where we said we were the “*voice of the working people*”, in that we were still students, not working people. However, we felt we had enough interpretative power to observe and opine on that which ailed the masses of Dominicans in a colonial state. There were other socialist newsletters - three from Grandbay alone where LeChelle, led by the likes of Pierre Charles, Marcel Fontaine and Paul Alexander, ruled supreme among youth groups in that area. Earlier, the MND had brought out its own paper “*Twavay*” – French Creole for work. We read the local papers such as “The Chronicle,” “*The Star*,” “*The Educator*” and “*The Herald*.” A history of newspapers being published on our island for about 200 years was now coupled with Lennox Honychurch's “*The Dominican Story*” - the first comprehensive history of Dominica ever attempted by anyone. That Lennox was a Dominican instilled even greater pride in us, as he was a well-known artist and actor. The book was derived from a radio show by the same name and riveted local audiences with its recall of history of which we had been totally ignorant. We were eager to emulate Lennox's effort, which showed that Dominicans too could rise in the world of publishing. The 1970s therefore represented a flowering of local talent, and more Dominicans were now able to read and write what we could produce. The songs we listened to also played a huge part, stimulated as we were by the liberation theology in music of bands such as *Exile One*, *Grammacks* and *Midnight Groovers*.

We wanted a socialist state where our people controlled the banks, electric and phone companies and the estates. The Soviet Union had defeated the fascist hordes of Nazi Germany. Germany under Hitler was a country possessed of the most advanced military. It had defeated France and had expelled the British Expeditionary Force from mainland Europe in 1940. Yet, Nazi Germany – after some early victories - had been crushed by the Red Army after it had invaded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1941. After being the primary force behind the defeat of German Nazi aggression in Europe, the USSR had assisted the rise of the independent nations in Africa and Asia. In Latin America, the USSR aided Cuba and was friendly to those seeking to control their natural resources for their national priorities.

By 1957, just twelve years after World War II, the USSR was the first nation in space when it launched the Sputnik satellite. We were impressed by that fact -especially when one considers that Russia had for centuries been considered among the most backward and feudal of all

European nations. Now it was ascendant and had not been complicit in colonialism and slavery; that fact further endeared the socialist bloc to us.

As the USSR had done, we wanted to educate our people; school them in the latest and best scientific processes and then unleash their creative powers upon the problems of our young state. We were not too concerned then with the deformities in the rule of law and democracy which were to later undermine the gains the USSR had made in human progress.

We would seize power if need be, to ensure that we could apply that socialist development theory which we thought an inevitable and natural phase after a colonial episode which had left us poorly educated and/or prepared to manage a modern state. Indeed, at independence in 1978 we had one local dentist, about eight local doctors, and our first national bank was no more than one year old. The phone company was owned by Cable & Wireless of Britain and the electric company was owned by the Colonial Development Corporation, also of Britain. Most of our bananas were subject to a British monopoly by the name of Geest Industries, which pretty much paid the farmers whatever price it wanted. Britain had taught us to be proud of Britain and its accomplishments but had done little to advance education and progress on the island. Such neglect had left a deep-seated self-loathing in our national psyche and Dominicans – inwardly – felt ashamed of our backwardness. At independence, where one were to check what we had been bequeathed by colonialism, it was a most parlous accounting in way of the lack of capacity, control of our affairs and local competence in almost all manner of things. For guidance, we mostly led via expatriate advice.

In the summer of 1978 I went to Cuba as a delegate to the 11th World Festival of Youth and Students. I was amazed at how much Cuba had done to educate its people; the Cuban Revolution had built a world-class competence in the arts and sciences. In my mind, then, the revolution was glorious and had brought a fellow Caribbean nation a grand victory over the darkness of colonial vassalage. I did not spend much time.

By independence in November 1978, we had done about four or so editions of our "*Vanguard*" newsletter until Irving resigned from Cadre # 1. He was concerned that remaining in a left-wing

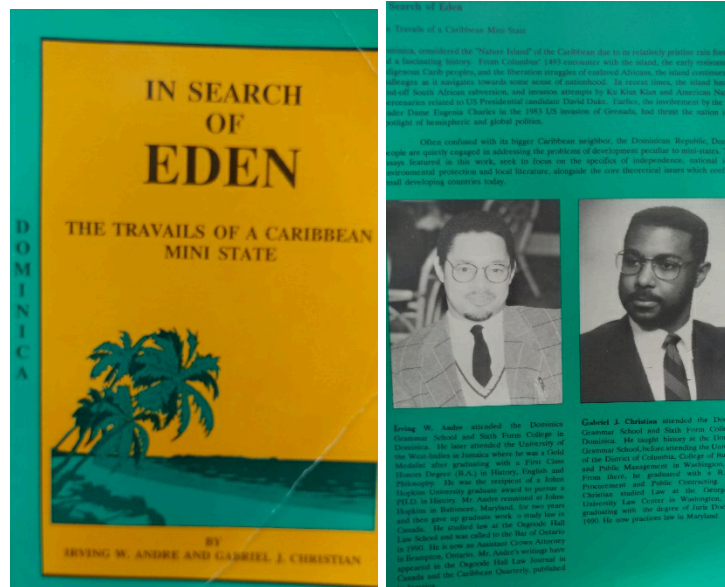
organization affiliated with a radical like Rosie would "militate" against his academic opportunities. He was soon off to the University of the West Indies (UWI) on a scholarship.

I remained in Cadre. Upon graduation, I taught at the Dominica Grammar School and prepared for law school. I was admitted to UWI at Cave Hill, Barbados, but the Government refused to provide any assistance, as was the norm. Irving was right. My decision to stand against colonialism and neo-colonialism was to result in my being blacklisted by the conservative Freedom Party once they came to power. The law scholarship which the government's own committee chaired by Jerome Barzey had decided to give me was given to someone else. At the same time, the left on the island was divided, and options which once seemed appealing were now difficult to traverse.

In 1980, my brother Samuel had entered Washington, D.C.'s prestigious Howard University Medical School to study medicine. He made a way for me to gain admission to Southeastern University to study business. By January 1982, I had transferred from Southeastern University to the University of the District of Columbia College of Business and Management. I had left the island for college in Washington, DC, determined to learn the skills necessary to advance myself and prosper my community, and the country of my birth. At that time, Irving was at John Hopkins pursuing a PhD in history - having graduated with first-class honors from the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. During the time Irving spent in Baltimore at John Hopkins, he would often travel to meet me in Washington, D.C. There we would plunge into the bowels of the Library of Congress or the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, devouring books and/or newspaper archives on Caribbean or world history as in our younger days on Dominica. By 1991 I had graduated from the Georgetown University Law Center and started practicing law; Irving was then a full-fledged Assistant Crown Attorney in Brampton, Ontario.

In 1992, Irving called me with his idea that we publish a series of essays to commemorate 500 years of the encounter between the old world and the new, as represented by Columbus' voyage to the Caribbean. We tried to get others on board, but the response was lukewarm. We decided to forge on, with the sustained assistance of our wives and constant companions, Kathy Andre and

Joan Robinson-Christian. Pont Casse was born with our first book, *In Search of Eden – Dominica the Travails of a Caribbean Mini-State* in August 1992.



In Search of Eden – Dominica, the Travails of a Caribbean Mini-State

The first publication of Pont Casse Press, July 1, 1992

So, after a lifetime of being so engaged in ensuring our people's history is not forgotten, Pont Casse Press by 2019 has published -or assisted the publication of thirty-seven books on the history and literature of our island and the wider Caribbean. Along the way, we have also engaged in development projects such as Irving's relationship to the Sisserou Club in Canada, and my presence in the leadership of the Dominica Association of Washington, DC, and the Institute of Caribbean Studies. Later, after Tropical Storm Erika, I joined with other Dominicans to found the relief organization Rebuild Dominica, Inc. Both Irving and I have been founding members and/or supporters of the Rosie Douglas Foundation and the Dominica Academy of Arts & Sciences. Those civic engagements now, as then, focused on organizing our people for productive endeavor. We recognized, by our study, that one can never build anything worthwhile without first acquiring knowledge, building organization, and then executing on a plan. Study itself taught us the imperative of teaming to attain success. Our experience teaches that - without marshaling the best minds and then organizing those minds for unified national development priorities – no operational art can be harnessed or sharpened; indeed, no civilization can rise.

We were able to first marshal our individual commitment to acquiring knowledge and then join forces - in organization - to share that knowledge, first with our kith and kin and then the world. We thought doing that was a necessary and critical duty which we should execute, lest we were to be relegated to that undignified position of a people who were unschooled, unskilled and aimless, faceless mutes. In all of this we have had the guidance and support of our wives. My wife Joan Christian has been my great support in crafting the written word, as Irving's wife Kathy Andre has been a solid pillar in her sustenance of his efforts in making the record.

History has never been kind to those who failed to educate themselves and then exhibit such education by engagement in purposeful industry. We are indeed blessed by providence to have met, and thereafter found a worthy commonality in knowledge. We used our knowledge in a vigorous effort to make the record. In so doing, we created a new reality about Dominica and our Caribbean from an entirely new and unique perspective when we founded Pont Casse Press. In recent times we have become members of the Dominica Arts & Literary Association (DALA). No longer are we oddities to be examined and caricatured by the travel writer or journalists who wash up on our shores; many with barely concealed disdain for those who do not look like them.

Let it be noted for posterity that seldom has there been a literary enterprise born of focused commitment to education placed at the disposal of national development, as with Pont Casse Press. It must be stated that our efforts have been a private enterprise, driven by an unquenchable zeal to craft a proud national narrative. We have persevered without the aid of rich benefactors or any government assistance. However, we are assured that our efforts will resound for the ages and be our eternal gift to humanity. It shall not be said that our people disappeared without a trace, where our works are preserved as some guide to meaningful action in the arts and sciences.

By that record, our people, indeed humanity, can scrutinize our society – one hundred or one thousand years hence - and know that here lived a group of people with a culture, and a degree of learning sufficient to have crafted new ideas or portrayed new realities via the written word. It was altogether fitting that we did so, and we trust that others will be inspired to tell the story of their own people and so add to the universal patrimony of knowledge in which all humanity

- not just some nations - can be appreciated as equally worthy to enjoy the fruits that progress brings. Progress which, in our view, can only begin where we have the discipline to make the record - in writing.



The founders of Pont Casse Press – Hon Justice Irving W. Andre at right and Gabriel J. Christian, Esq. at left, at the June 3, 2017 tribute to 25 years of publishing by the New York City Council at the New York Public Library