

Execution Poems

George Elliott Clarke

Gaspereau Press, Kentville, NS, 2001

George Elliott Clarke turns art into history and history into art with his book *Execution Poems*. A suite of poems, *Execution Poems* tells of the lives of Clarke's cousins, George and Rufus (Rue) Hamilton and the haunting impact of their deaths on Clarke himself.

The poem *George & Rue: Pure, Virtuous Killers* outlines their background and fate:

*They were hanged back-to-back in York County Gaol.
They were rough dreamers, raw believers, set out like killers.*

...

They were clear Negro, and semi-Micmac.

...

*They had face-to-face trials in May 1949 and backed each other's guilt.
George Albert Hamilton confessed – to theft – and mated the Sally Anne.
Rufus James Hamilton polished his refined, mint, silver-bright English.
They were dandled from a gallows in the third hour of July 27, 1949, A.D.
They were my cousins, dead a decade before I was born.
My bastard phantasms, my dastard fictions.*

The Hamilton brothers were born in Newport Station, Nova Scotia. In January 1949, they robbed and killed a Fredericton, New Brunswick taxi driver named Silver. In the summer of that year, they were hanged after being convicted of his murder.

George Elliott Clarke is one of Canada's leading poets. In *Execution Poems*, his words hit as hard as the hammer that ended Silver's life. His poetry portrays the legacy of slavery through the lives of George and Rue. The brutality echoes through their lives as described in the *Childhood* poems. He uses the voices of the brothers throughout the suite of poems.

George in *Childhood I*:

*Pops beat Ma with belts, branches, bottles.
Anything left-handed. Anything at all.*

Rue in *Childhood II*:

*Everywhere I saw a Crimea of crime, calamities of houses rigged from
tarpaper and rape, windows blinded with newsprint or burlap sacks. I*

could only start the stove with sparks and fear, watch yellow terror eating yesterday's bad news.

Execution Poems reflects the continuing legacy of slavery and of its blighted offspring of bigotry, hatred, violence and poverty. It also shows that all people, Black and white, are its victims; people living in fear of poverty and violence, people taught to hate themselves or the differences in others, or people like the taximan Silver, paying the price for the fear and hate that others carry with them.

From *Public Enemy*:

*I want to muck up their little white paradise here.
I want to swat their faces til I'm comfortable in my gut.*

*I want to give them all headaches and nausea:
I'll play fortissimo Ellington, blacken icy whiteness.*

*I'll draw blood the way Picasso draws nudes –
voluptuously.*

Clarke's use of poetry to portray the Hamilton brothers' lives shows a mastery of storytelling skills. His portrayal of their history makes more of an impact than a strict recitation of facts, dates and events. *Execution Poems* is made of impressions, and in the end, all history is really a series of people's impressions.

From *Last Words*:

*Rue: Hanging Gardens of Babylon?
Nope, hanging [n-----s] in Fredericton!
We'll hang like Christ hanged.*

*Geo: The laws preach Christ, but teach crucifixion.
Folks glance through us like albino ghosts.*



Peter Meyler