

New biography of Jamaica arts icon Louise Bennett

“Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture,” a new biography by Professor Mervyn Icon, is scheduled for release this month.

The biography spans half a century and covers Bennett’s multi-faceted career as a poet, performer, storyteller, singer, actress, writer, broadcaster and children’s television show host. According to a release from Kingston’s Ian Randle Publishers: “the book is brief and affordable, and captures the life of a woman whose actions and life’s work instilled pride in Jamaicans in their language and culture.” Born in Kingston on September 7, 1919, Louise Bennett was the daughter of a seamstress and a baker and went on to become the doyenne of modern Caribbean literature. In 1945 she was awarded a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in England and hosted her own radio programme, “Caribbean Carnival,” on the BBC. She also worked for the BBC on “West Indian Guest Night” and with various repertory companies. In 1953 she moved to New York and co-directed “Day in Jamaica,” a folk musical at the St Martin’s Little Theatre in Harlem. The following year she married Eric Winston Coverley, impresario, actor, radio personality, and calligrapher. In 1955, the couple returned to Jamaica where Bennett was the Drama Officer with the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission. Continuing her studies of Jamaican folklore, she wrote poetry and stories often in Creole, had a weekly column in the Gleaner, pioneered the Jamaican annual Pantomimes, lectured at the University of West Indies, and appeared on numerous radio and television shows. She was also the author of many books and recorded many albums. Bennett was the recipient of many awards and honours including the MBE (1960), the Silver and Gold Musgrave Medals (1965, 1978), the Norman Manley Award for Excellence in the Arts (1972), the Order of Jamaica (1974), the National Black Arts Festival’s Living Legend Award (1992), the Gabriela Mistral Commemorative Award from the Chilean government (1996), Hon. D. Litt from the University of West Indies (1983) and York University (1998), and the Jamaican Order of Merit (2001). In 1990 she was appointed Cultural Ambassador at Large by the Jamaican government. “Miss Lou” died on July 26, 2006 in Toronto. Although she and her husband had moved to Canada in 1987, she never forgot her homeland, and their bodies were interred together in Kingston.