

# **MANILIUS REGINALD OYEDELE GARBER**

**OR; BA; LLB; B.C.L.; B.L.**

Manilius Reginald Oyedele Garber – MRO as later in his life he was commonly called by his friends, was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1927 – the fourth of five children to Mr. Melbourne Akinremi Garber and Hettie Amelia Garber nee Fyle the daughter of the reputable Methodist Minister Elkanah Theophilus Fyle – “the pupil giant” of the Methodist Conference of the nineteen-twenties up to the nineteen-fifties.

Manilius had his primary education at the Boston Boys School up to standard six completing the primary cycle of his days before going on to the Prince of Wales Secondary School. His choice of the Prince of Wales was considered strange by members of the Garber male clan; who all went to the C.M.S. Grammar School where his uncle J. A. Garber was at that time one of the Latin tutors.

His academic records throughout his secondary cycle showed a consistent outstanding performer, excelling especially in English Language, English Literature and Latin. One of his classmates Lemon Johnson used to observe that try as they would time and time again, no one in the form was ever able to wrest the first position in English from him. Manilius himself had often boasted of the high average standard of many of his classmates – Willie Priddy, Lemon Johnson, Afiz Gabisi etc. never forgetting to add that their class of pupils made an unprecedented record at the Senior Cambridge examinations in the country in their year 1945 by gaining six Division One results and exemption from London Matriculation. (In those days – the number of pupils in classes at that level ranged only between ten and fifteen).

During the period of the forties and fifties, the Prince of Wales was the only secondary school offering pure science subjects on its curriculum and offered the science course up to Higher School Certificate, as the later “A” Level course was then called. It was not surprising therefore that many products of the Prince of Wales during that era were attracted to science based careers like Medicine, Dentistry, Geology etc. For a second time, Manilius astonished all concerned by choosing a different line from his peers. Whereas the other successful school leavers of his year continued in the science programme he decided to go to Fourah Bay College to pursue the Humanities. At that time the school year ended in December whereas the college session started in October. During the short period of waiting to enter college, Manilius had a bash at journalism and took up a temporary appointment at the then “AFRICAN VANGUARD” run by the reputable E. N. Jones alias LAMINA SANKOH. His high standard of English Language made him an asset to the establishment.

Manilius started his course at Fourah Bay College in October, 1946. He was a founder member of the fraternity called ‘AREOPAGUS’. Some of the other founding members being – Cyrus Rogers-Wright, Berthan Macaulay, Jonas Richards, James Eman Mahoney, S. Philip Hazeley. This group soon outshone other fraternities by its high standard of debates and literary activities. For many years membership was kept restrictive and the number also kept at eight. Manilius completed the B.A. course in 1949 and joined the staff of his alma mater – the Prince of Wales where he taught English Language and a bit of Latin. One of his pupils who has always extolled his brilliant command of the English Language and his effective teaching of the same is Professor Vidal E. Godwin – now Head of the Department of Physics, Fourah Bay College.

When Manilius joined the Prince of Wales as a teacher in 1949, the salary scale for teachers in force in this country was £18.00 (eighteen pounds) for male graduates. It is little wonder that quite a few Sierra Leonean graduates were cajoled to go over to Nigeria and the Gold Coast to teach. In Nigeria the post World War II development in all sectors was in full swing, and new secondary schools sought graduates frantically from other countries. When Manilius arrived in Lagos in 1950, he had no problem in getting employed.

The Principal of the Methodist Boys High School – Mr. Bandele Oyediran who was in later years after independence to become Nigeria's first High Commissioner to Sierra Leone called on Manilius in person to offer him an appointment. "When I learnt that you are a graduate of Durham University I knew we have something in common", Oyediran opened his discussion with Manilius, and engaged him on the spot.

Manilius joined the staff of the Methodist Boys High School and the beginning of a fine friendship with Oyediran that was to be mutually complimentary especially during Oyediran's tenure as High Commission in Sierra Leone was soon established.

At the Methodist Boys High School, Manilius introduced the Literary and Debating Society and made his mark as a Language teacher of no mean order.

He later joined the administrative staff of the newly opened Ibadan University as Assistant Registrar in training. There he met another Sierra Leonean, the young Dr. Davidson Nicol, who had taken up the post of Medical Pathologist in the Medical School. This meeting was in later years considered as divine intervention. After two years at Ibadan, Manilius was invited by Mr. T. Adetola, an eminent businessman from Ijebu Ode – an area about 250 miles from Lagos who had elaborated development plans for this native town, to help open a Secondary School. Manilius was to be the Vice Principal to Mr. J. D. Awopeju a native from the area. Manilius found this experience of living in a very rural area – no electricity, means of transportation mainly the bicycle etc. – very challenging. Again, he found himself in a pioneering role as he had been in Ibadan. He always looked back on the experiences he gained in this remote area with fondness. Notwithstanding the success of his contribution to this endeavour, Manilius still longed to embark on the profession of his choice and so in 1955, he left Nigeria for England to pursue the Law course.

A few of his Fourah Bay College contemporaries who had gone directly to London after leaving college had by the time Manilius arrived in London completed their studies in Law or were almost there. Berthan Macauley was in fact a qualified Barrister embarking on the LL.M course. Manilius registered at the Lincoln's Inn, for the professional course and at the Kennington Polytechnic for the London LL.B course. After over a year as a full-time student, Manilius, having lost his father back home in late 1956 took up an appointment in the Registry Department of the Colonial Office at Great Smith Street.

In July, 1956 he got married to Cassandra Labor. He completed his Law studies in record time and returned home to Freetown in November, 1958. He also took the Durham B.C.L. examinations in November, 1958 just before sailing for home.

Arriving home, he set himself up in private practice, joining the ranks of the cadre of young erudite Barristers Cyrus Rogers-Wright, James Mahoney, Berthan Macauley, Livesey Luke, Abu Koroma. Unlike in previous generations when many barristers were qualified with only the B.L. from the respective Inns of Court, this group of barristers all had the London LL.B degree as well and so the standard of legal practice at the BAR became not only quite high

but also very competitive. In 1960, Ronald Beoku-Betts on accepting a Magisterial appointment, asked Manilius to take over the legal practice of Betts and Betts and so Manilius moved into the renowned chambers of 3 Upper East Street, adding this to his own clientele.

Dr. Davidson Nicol was appointed Principal of Fourah Bay College in 1960. Scarcely had he settled down in his new post when he initiated the policy of encouraging qualified and capable Sierra Leone nationals to man positions of importance both in the academic as well as in the administrative departments. In the course of the implementation of this policy he sought out and prevailed upon Manilius – whom he no doubt remembered from the Ibadan days eight years past – to take up the post of Registrar of the College. So in June, 1962, Manilius left Law practice for university administration taking over from the English Frank Hooley.

As the first Sierra Leonean to hold this post, Manilius spared no pains in establishing quite an effective registry. It was during his term that the Njala University College was opened in 1963. It was also during his administration that the University Bill was enacted in 1970 and passed into law. In these his legal training and competence helped in no small measure the collective and individual ‘in-put’ of the members of the College Council, on these two important milestones in tertiary education development.

Manilius often referred to the period he served as Registrar as his period of national service to his motherland, for he had left law practice at a time when private legal practitioners were riding on the crest of big financial briefs.

In 1971, he decided to return to his preferred career and once more he set up private practice at Oxford Street later renamed Lightfoot Boston Street. Although he accepted briefs in matters of all branches of law, yet he preferred Domestic Relations and Civil cases. He was fearless in his support of human rights and courageous in his defence of the suppressed. Thus in 1977, when some of his colleagues turned down the highly sensitive briefs of “elections petitions” by Sierra Leone People’s Party (S.L.P.P.) candidates after the General Elections he stood his ground and readily agreed to take on the role of team leader with some young Sierra Leone People’s Party (S.L.P.P.) lawyers serving in the subsidiary position of “back-up” solicitors. Even when his chambers were vandalised no doubt as a gentle hint from government supporters for him to withdraw from such controversial cause he did not flinch. His reputation as a human rights activist must have been appreciated in international circles for in 1978 he was invited by President Jimmy Carter of the United States of America to participate in the HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE held in WASHINGTON. Again in 1981, he was invited by “Amnesty International” to follow the sittings of the TREASON TRIALS in Banjul, The Gambia as an observer on their behalf.

In 1977, he was elected Chairman of the Sierra Leone Bar and Association with his resourcefulness, he instituted the format of the special programme of the Bar Association’s Annual General Meeting. In 1978, he was elected Chairman of the All African Bar Association, the first Sierra Leonean to be so selected. It was in this capacity that he travelled with the President, Dr. Siaka Stevens when as Chairman of the O.A.U., he made a tour of African States in 1981. He was appointed Chairman of the Board of the National Insurance Company by the President – a position he held till December 1985.

Several approaches were made to convince Manilius to accept a seat on the Bench, which he repeatedly resisted. He cherished his independence of actions and of speech for how else could he have with impunity criticised openly certain unconscionable clauses of the “One

Party" bill when it was in the process of enactment. Or how could he unilaterally have tackled the then Minister of Justice over the matter of the unventilated "Black Maria" vehicle being used to transport prisoners from Pademba Road to the Court Buildings and back.

Manilius was a strong advocate for updating the laws of the country. When Chairman of the Sierra Leone Bar Association, he lost no time in influencing the setting up of the Law Reform Committee. He was also on the Steering Committee for setting up the Law School.

Fate however, denied him the opportunity of seeing his efforts come to fruition. The competent arm of the government decided on October 13, 1989 to appoint him Director of the Law School and to invite him to take up the post. But Manilius died the next day, October 14, 1989 after a short illness.

Throughout his career Manilius' integrity was unquestionable. This trait was appreciated by all who came into contact with him. In fact some of his clients fondly referred to him as "REVEREND LAWYER." At his funeral service the priest in his homily commented "Brother Garber was a man of probity: What I mean is that he was an honest man, a man of uprightness and goodness."

The Prince of Wales School held pride of place in Manilius' heart. He was always ready even eager to give any support financial and otherwise, and it was a source of much pain to him if the school defaulted in any way.

Manilius was indeed as his school's Song declares an embodiment of a "truer gentleman".

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