

This Day in History... February 17, 1914

Birth of Julia de Burgos

Poet Julia de Burgos García was born on February 17, 1914, in Carolina, Puerto Rico. A poet, civil rights activist, and Puerto Rican nationalist, de Burgos defied convention before feminism was accepted in her culture.

The oldest of 13 children, de Burgos was the daughter of a farmer and member of the Puerto Rico National Guard. Her family moved to Rio Piedras in 1928, where she earned a scholarship to University High School. De Burgos then went to the University of Puerto Rico to study to become a teacher.

After graduating from college at the age of 19, de Burgos taught at Feijoo Elementary School in Naranjito. De Burgos also wrote for a children's public radio program, but was later reportedly fired for her political beliefs. Her work was strongly influenced by those that came before her, including Luis Lloréns Torres, Mercedes Negrón Muñoz, Rafael Alberti, and Pablo Neruda. She later wrote, "My childhood was all a poem in the river, and a river in the poem of my first dreams."



Many of de Burgos's works reflect her love of Puerto Rico.

De Burgos left teaching after getting married in 1934 and joined the Puerto Rican National Party. She was also elected secretary general of the Daughters of Freedom. De Burgos had some of her earliest works published in the early 1930s in several journals and newspapers. She also published two books during her lifetime, both of which she promoted and distributed herself, traveling around Puerto Rico to deliver readings. A third volume of her work was published after her death.

De Burgos moved to Cuba in 1939 and briefly attended the University of Havana. She then relocated to New York City where she was a journalist for *Pueblos Hispanos* and worked other jobs to support herself, while continuing to write.

Considered one of Latin America's greatest poets, de Burgos's work reflected her love of Puerto Rico – and her mounting anguish as she battled depression and alcoholism. She lived life with passion, was fiery and independent, yet the pain she suffered in three broken marriages is revealed in her verse. Among her most important works are "Poema para Mi Muerte (My Death Poem)" and "Yo Misma Fui Mi Ruta (I Was My Own Path)." One of her final poems, "Farewell in Welfare Island" (1953) was one of the only poems she wrote in English.

On June 28, 1953, she departed the home of a family member in Brooklyn with whom she'd been staying. She didn't say where she was going, and wasn't seen for days. Then on July 6, she collapsed on a Harlem street and died shortly after at the age of just 39. Without identification or a family to claim her, she was given a pauper's burial. Weeks later, her friends traced her whereabouts and returned her remains to Puerto Rico, where she was given a funeral befitting the national hero she was.

Respected for her literary accomplishments, de Burgos is also greatly admired by Hispanics and Latin Americans, who have named many schools, women's shelters, landmarks, and cultural centers in her honor in the US and Puerto Rico.



De Burgos was the 26th honoree in the Literary Arts Series.



De Burgos was a member of the Nationalist Party, which pushed for Puerto Rican independence.

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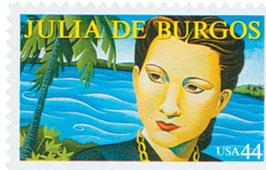
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