

Jamaica's dynamic

Mr. Abrahams

by Peter Walker

He controls a budget of in excess of J\$3.5 million, the very destiny of an entire industry and an economic responsibility to the nation's balance of payments.

Eric A. Abrahams, Jamaica's Director of Tourism, then, can be forgiven for sensitivity to any allusions to his youth. It is given out generally, as if it were a dangerous secret, that he is in his "early thirties". He is, in fact, 33.

"I'm not leading a youth crusade", he says firmly. "What matters ultimately is the capacity to perform."

The key to this lies in an extraordinary academic career.

He has — among other things — gone down in the records of that crucible of statesmen the Oxford Union, not only as its President (in 1963), but as one of its giants in

debate. And his rise to the Presidency was the most meteoric in the Union's long history. The owner of countless trophies for debate (one of them in the Deep South of the US), he once spoke before the Union for an hour and fifty-five minutes to win his moot that "The Commonwealth Has Relevance in World Affairs."

He freely concedes that this experience taught him the art of lobby, as well as some of the skills of diplomacy, which he believes will be needed to fend off the challenges facing the industry he now serves.

At Jamaica College, the island's

Umpire's Association gave Eric Abrahams the unusual citation of being the "most dignified and gentlemanly Cricket Captain". He went on to the University of the West Indies — in 1968 — where he read History, English and Economics, and represented the University at various students' conferences in Europe and the Middle East. He was also, naturally, President of the Debating Society.

Graduating in 1961, he joined the staff of Jamaica college, but was later awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and departed for Oxford to read Jurisprudence.

His days as President of the Oxford Union were rambunctious, as they were at Oxford generally. Once, when singled out for an anti-colour harangue by a South African High Commissioner, he led a silent walk-out of British and Commonwealth students. Later, a run-in with the Proctors, for which he was rusticated, hurt him deeply.

After Oxford — and still only 24 — he joined the BBC's "24 hours" TV programme. The job took him throughout the world, interviewing many African leaders, some of whom were later martyred or simply bumped off. He is also one of the very few journalists anywhere to have confronted the late President "Papa Doc" Duvalier of Haiti — and the resulting programme, a major coup for Mr. Abrahams, also ranks as one of the finest pieces of television reporting of the decade.

Returning home in 1967 he was selected as Administrative Assistant to Minister of Trade and Industry Robert Lightbourne. Then he was approached by Director of Tourism John Pringle to join the Board.

At the time of accepting the Rhodes Scholarship he had personally pledged himself to public service in Jamaica, and he considered Mr. Pringle's offer favourably.

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