

C. Everard Palmer

The boys' ideal story-teller

ARTS PROFILE

By George Panton



C. EVERARD PALMER

WHAT STARTS one off on the path to becoming a writer? Is it the dream of being able to work only when, and if, one wishes even though it is obvious that this can be achieved only by those who produce monumental best-seller. Or is it the overpowering belief that one has something important to say to the world? The story is told of one lady who after reading a book brought home by her husband tossed it aside and declared that she could write a better story than that. Challenged to do so she launched herself on a writing career which produced some 29 novels including one very famous success entitled *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Yes, she was Baroness Orczy.

Not many writers can claim such a sudden decision to enter on a writing career but one of Jamaica's most prolific writers does say that he read a western in 1952 which appealed to him so strongly that he was determined to become a writer. It was fourteen years, that is in 1966, before C. Everard Palmer, had his first hard-covered book, *The Cloud with the Silver Lining*, brought out under the imprint of a well-known publisher, Andre Deutsch. But in the meantime he had been working towards such an achievement. He had written short stories and produced two adventure tales for the Ministry of Education of Jamaica, while the Pioneer Press had, in 1960, published his story for adults, *A Broken Vessel*.

In the eight years since 1966, C. Everard Palmer has had no fewer than seven more books published, all by Andre Deutsch. With them he has firmly established himself as a first-class writer of children's stories, stories for children of all ages.

Other Jamaicans have written good children's stories after

achieving fame with books for adults and the names of Vic Reid and Andrew Salkey immediately come to mind. But, unlike them, Palmer has concentrated on children's stories and has written twice as many as either of these two.

All the books (the review of the eighth of them will appear on this page next week) have been very favourably noticed on this page but the local comments have not attained the heights of enthusiasm which have been accorded to Palmer in Britain.

The Times Literary Supplement put it this way: "This is a voice that seemed to have gone out with E. Nesbit, Mark Twain and Stevenson. Mr. Palmer is surely a find." C. E. J. Smith, writing in The School Librarian had this to say: "Mr. Palmer is a joy. . . Richness of character, dialogue, style, atmosphere, humour, suspense, romance. More please." Jamaican Andrew Salkey was also delighted and while he may be thought to have been proud to extol a fellow-Jamaican his comments appeared in the prestigious Times Educational Supplement. He wrote: "He is a master of the rural Caribbean tale for any readership, adult or juvenile."

Most West Indian writers who settle overseas turn, after a time, to making use of their new locations for the ideas and the settings of their novels. But not so with Palmer. It is as if his rural homeland laid such a mark on him that he will not, or cannot, let it go. And it is very fortunate for his readers that this attitude persists, be it from nostalgia or from the disinclination to forsake a good wicket. Palmer has been able to portray most vividly the activities and interests of young Jamaican boys in what may now be a vanished countryside. But even if it now exists only in Palmer's memories it is made sufficiently alive and interesting on the printed page to enthral readers.

Palmer sets his hero, or heroes, because sometimes there are two of them, in the village of Kendal in Hanover (though it was called Boswell in the first book) and has him or them, who are always young boys, engaged in doing things that such youngsters would do. This may be the wrong tense because it is doubtful if rural Jamaica is still the same country which C. Everard Palmer knew before he migrated to Canada. They make fishpots, are left in charge of cow which produces a calf and then sell milk, and eggs from their hens too, and even run a

stall at a fair to make enough money to buy a buggy — all this from the first book. In the second book when the village is, and henceforward in all the books, called Kendal they cut cenes, boil sugar and drive a mule-cart to market miles and miles away.

In "A COW CALLED BOY" Palmer gets his hero into the schoolroom but this is not the usual stern school because his bullkin follows him to school and there is a great deal of humour as well as the normal tales of village life. In his latest book, "BABA AND MR. BIG", he has a town boy (from Sav-la-Mai coming to Kendal and doing something which the country boys can't do — catch a hawk alive. This is not because he is so clever but because he makes friends with an old man who is as wise as he is friendly.

But while Palmer is most skilful in portraying youngsters he can also deal very effectively with telling about adults. One meets the village womaniser and a corrupt District Constable (in *The Sun Salutes You*), a busha, a village drunk and an obeaman (in *The Hummingbird People*) an adult rogue (in *The Wooing of Beppo Tate*) and an ambitious woman and a kindly, generous man (in *My Father, Sun-Sun Johnson*) to name only a few of the very typical and very much alive adults to be found in his books.

Also, what is most important in Palmer's stories, there is an excellent relationship between his young heroes and their parents, particularly their fathers, something which may not be quite as common in the real Jamaica.

Good always triumphs over evil in Everard Palmer's stories, but this is just what happens in boyhood's dreams whatever may be the case in real adult life, and to mention this is not a criticism of his stories but a proof that he tells the stories that children, of any age, want to read. Their popularity demonstrates this.

The *Cloud with the Silver Lining* has gone through three impressions and the two next, next in order of time of publication, are both in their second impression. *A Cow Called Boy* which is the most humorous of the lot may well, in time, outshine all the others. All the stories are likely to live for many generations because of their universal appeal and their vividness. Boys, and not only Jamaicans or West Indian boys, can easily put themselves in the

place of the heroes of the stories and they probably do exactly that.

C. Everard Palmer has been living and teaching in Canada for several years now but not only has he not forgotten Jamaica but Jamaica has also not forgotten him. The Jamaica Reading Association has given him a Certificate of Merit for his contribution to Jamaican Children's Literature.

His stories should be in great demand among the new literates in rural Jamaica, not because they are for children but because he tells of things which must have been a part of their lives when they were children and which now appeal to all, even the town-dwellers who never caught a jangga.

C. Everard Palmer is an excellent example of the truth of the saying that a writer, if he has skill, can write of what he knows, however narrow a life it may appear to be, and keep readers of any country interested. It is to be hoped that there are many more tales of rural Jamaica still to come from his pen.

