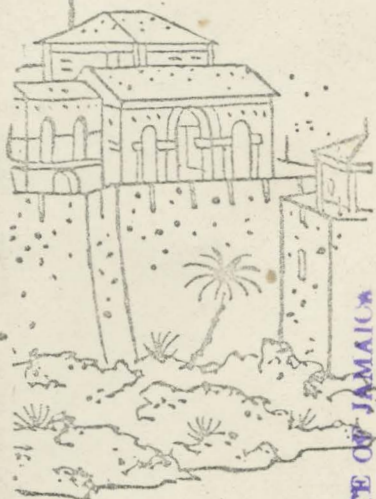


VICTOR REID'S NOVEL

A Memorable Experience

Says PHILIP SHERLOCK

INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA
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READING Vic Reid's novel for the first time was a memorable experience. The past, our past, came to life and the Dead Hundreds were beside me; on my face the breath of those who have passed; my eyes made fours with the eyes of those men and women who yesterday were warm flesh and blood.

Through the evening darkness came the voices of the singing folk, of the folk singing "Onward Christian Soldiers". It was 1944 and the new constitution would bring in a new day. But tonight, old John Campbell listens and the years melt away and these are Deacon Bogle's men singing "Break down the walls of Jericho."

So with the boy John Campbell we live through the Morant Bay rising of 1865; know Davie and Naomie and the father John Campbell as if we had been with them in the flesh; see Lucille Buboiss and Custos at the door of the Parish Church; hear Pastor Humphrey preach in the crowded church while Bogle's men at the window groan their disapproval. These things I lived through. I was a part of the mob which faced the custos, and heard the cowhorns talk of wartime and the hunt.

"Lived through"—those are the right words, for Victor Reid has brought the past to life and made us brethren with John Campbell and the others. These people are alive, full of the hopes and frustrations that we know, people whose courage helped to make the New Day. Their story is told with conviction and compelling power.

"Sweet Cedars"

AND VICTOR REID has done more, much more. The Morant Bay rising was a local incident; it has had meaning for us who belong

to this land, but it remained local, small in scale, limited in scope. The story of this rising might easily have been limited in appeal and parochial in spirit. Not so with New Day. This local incident has universal validity and meaning, because the forces that meet in conflict are universal forces, and because the qualities revealed in that conflict are not those of a class or of a race but of humanity.

Yet there is no sacrifice of the local or individual. These peasant people seeking justice are at one and the same time typical people of their parish and representative of

man's age-long protest against oppression.

The landscape is that of Jamaica. At the very beginning of the story the scents that come to us are those of the shrubs on the mountains: Cerasee, mint, mountain jasmine, maqui, there are peahba and sweet cedars. There are the occupations of daily life, the making of starch from the cassava, and a boy eating number eleven mangoes in the way they should be eaten.

Description and narrative run together, and the writer finds his imagery in the sights and sounds of the Jamaican landscape: the singing all around me, beating up under my nostrils, a push against my breast. Like the morning swell in Morant Bay and white water foaming round my ears." And there is Deacon Bogle, "a John Crow a-hover over Cuna Cuna Pass", and Pastor Humphrey's long neck shooting out and then drawing back into his cassock "like iguana in stonehole." The book abounds in these quick vivid pictures, in rich imagery, and in the treatment of the tropical landscape with a natural, loving and effective particularity.

are shown against the background of a country slowly finding itself; slowly leaving behind it the darkness of 1865 for the New Day.

And this led me to meditation on this question? Have subject peoples ever created anything artistic except by way of protest or of escape? This book itself may have been the result of creative forces generated by a new feeling of dignity and of responsibility; instead of frustration satisfaction; instead of deep-buried resentments an open assumption of responsibility and a frank acceptance of the past as a preparation for the tasks of the present.

So, to those who want an exciting and well-told story I commend New Day! Those who wish to understand the West Indies and West Indians can do no better than turn to Victor Reid's fine novel, New Day. Those who, like myself, are West Indians and who believe in the New Day will find in this novel beauty and inspiration. Thank you, Victor Reid.

The illustration accompanying this article is from the jacket of "New Day".

Imagery

BUT HOW are these country folk to be presented so that they will be natural and yet intelligible to those who do not know their dialect? Here was a technical problem of the first importance. Davie, John, Tamah, and the others would seem stiff and unreal were they to speak standard English; yet if they spoke Jamaican how few would understand! Victor Reid found a solution which may have been inspired by books like "How Green Was My Valley" but which is none the less original, and which is in itself a magnificent achievement. He has created a form of speech which is natural to the characters, which is easily understood, and which has extraordinary beauty. Reid has actually created a form of language which enables him to rise naturally above the limitations of dialect.

Throughout the book the level of writing is high. Words and phrases are used with economy and precision, and there are moving and memorable passages like that of the Bullhorn, or the description of the shells blowing:

"Hear the shells, how they blow! First a-moan with sadness and loneliness, of earth heavy with sorrow; then there is the swift ascension and no longer near the earth but is leaping from tree-top to tree-top, a-leap to the wild stones high on one another, and your head is twisting all about, sending your eyes up after the sound of it—"

This imagery, this way of writing, is born of intense feeling. The author writes with emotion, but not in agitation. The imagery is that of one who sees and loves the countryside; the characters take part in a struggle which moves his imagination. The rhythm and lyrical quality of the language are natural because they spring from emotion and through them we are moved and our own imagination stirred.

Message

THE FEELING which moves Victor Reid is love of country. He sees the past with its bitterness and courage, as in Davie's speech before the Commissioners. "Man was no' built for slavery. Your Honours. In him are the Image and the Likeness, and it is no' of the skin. Inside of him there is the dignity of God . . ." and the words of Garth are full of this message too.

This feeling of a new day lifts the last third of the book above the level of the merely topical. Garth, Fernandes, are political figures. Garfield the reactionary planter is in conflict with Unionism. The riots of 1928 are described. But the political leaders of today and the contemporary events

City Desk

THEY TELL the story that American G.I.s in foxholes in the Pacific islands during the last war after a time became so comfortable that they forgot all about the mud.

Just like say they had lived in mud all their lives and as if many of these men from the most modern country in the world hadn't left pent-houses to army barracks, and then barracks to these foxholes.

Humans are funny. They get used to anything bad, so long as it goes bad gradually.

Like the Victory Park Otherwise, how could you explain it? How could you explain about people living in a city like Kingston and having that dreary wasteland right in the centre of their city and doing nothing about it?

How could you explain about us allowing our city fathers to give us the big run-around in the old buck-passing game?

And — brother! How the dice is loaded! Let me tell you the story of the biggest run-around ever.

IF YOU WANT to get an answer that will sock you right in the middle and leave you dizzy and groggy, ask: Who runs the Park?

This is what you will hear:

That dreary, dilapidated dust-bowl is run by four government bodies. Yes. It takes four big government departments to do it. I asked, and I heard this:

Public Works Department looks after the fences and buildings.

The Department of Agriculture plants the trees and flowers.

The Water Commission waters these trees and flowers.

The Corporation protects the fences and buildings and trees and shrubs with police.

NOW THEN. We know how much looking-after those saggy old iron fences get. And that there aren't any flowers. And that therefore there is nothing for the Water Commission to water and anyway they don't even water what little grass there is. And since that is the case, then there is nothing for the Corporation policemen to protect. So—

THERE YOU have your Park and the big run-around which keeps it the blot in the centre of our city it is. From this desk, it seems to me that the only way to permanently improve the Park is to give it over, entirely, to one body who will be responsible for the upkeep.

Once the grass and shrubs are established, it wouldn't take an army of gardeners to keep it fresh and blooming.

Of course, this has been said over and over already, and still it remains established in dust and ragged trees.

Seems to me we've got used to our mud.