

Jamaica's history

INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA
WEST INDIA DEPT.

fact and fiction

New Day — V. S. Reid — Heinemann—344 pages, \$2.50.
In Old St. James — compiled by Joseph Shore; ed. John Stewart
 — The Bodley Head — 118 pages, \$2.00.

Two books about Jamaica have recently been re-issued and make a most welcome addition to the growing number of books dealing with our country, written by Jamaicans for Jamaicans and, of course, for the wider world of English-speaking people. One is Vic Reid's *New Day*, the first of the post-war novels, and the other is *In Old St. James*, a book of parish chronicles which first appeared in 1911, was reprinted in 1952, and now has come out again in a new edition. Both re-issues are due to the enterprise of Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., which firm is listed as being 'in association with' the publishers. They will certainly be popular with a new generation.

NEW DAY tells in fiction, but sticking close to the main facts, the story of the Morant Bay 'rebellion' of 1865 and the coming of the new constitution of 1944 giving adult suffrage and internal self-rule to Jamaica, the prelude to the independence which came in 1962. It is ingeniously told through the mouth of John Campbell, who was a little boy living in rural St. Thomas in 1865 and survived to see the dawn of the new day when some of the things for which two of our National Heroes, Bogle, whose statue now stands in front of the court-house at Morant Bay, and George William Gordon died.

More ingeniously, the author succeeds in having the story told for the most part in a kind of inverted speech which is not Jamaican dialect (though it contains a few words of it) and yet gives the impression of being so. This makes it easy for the reader of standard English to understand it (not that that concerns most Jamaican readers!) and yet give him the impression that he is reading dialect.

Also, Vic Reid makes the story understandable and of great appeal to the Jamaican child of the country as well as the town. The difference is perhaps less marked today than it was twenty-one years ago when the book first appeared but it is worth noting as it marked a big step forward in Jamaican writing as a change from DeLisser who was much more on the outside looking in rather than inside the minds and hearts of the people, particularly the country folk.

The book is one which all Jamaicans should read, and keep, and, much more importantly from the critic's point of view, it is very enjoyable, particularly the first half of it which deals with 1865.

In Old St. James is of a different part of the island and an earlier period, that of slavery. It includes passages on two topics of more than usual interest, the family of the Barretts (with some references to Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and the legend of Rose Hall and the notorious Mrs. Palmer.

Apart from these two subjects which are calculated to arouse interest in readers there are short pieces on Arawak remains on the estates in the area and the history of the ownership of the estates as well as snippets from the *Journal of Rose Hall* telling of life on that property in the early 19th century, both with reference to slaves and to the English book-keepers.

This is a pleasant little book with a Victorian, rather than Edwardian flavour in some of the passages — Joseph Shore says that the descriptive passages are the work of the editor, John Stewart — as, for instance, "It is the hand of time, therefore, which has cast its glamour over hill and glade, over cane-field and pasture-land."

The mix-up between the two Mrs. Palmers—Annie and Rosa — is set out in detail and this part is certain to attract attention among visitors to Rose Hall which is now a show-place after its reconstruction. In fact it should be on display there for sale — but no doubt this has been thought of already.

The family of the Barretts, and the Moulton-Barretts, is traced in considerable detail, perhaps too much detail for the average reader but there are many interesting anecdotes about various members — and this is true throughout the book — which make reading about them worthwhile.

—S.T.

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