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**Interesting, comprehensive**



**A to Z**

*The Book A — Z Of Jamaican Heritage*

*By Olive Senior*

*(Heinemann Ed Books, Caribbean Ltd, The Gleaner Co Ltd)*

**Reviewed by Sheilah Garcia-Bisnott**

The A — Z of Jamaican Heritage has been justly acclaimed by many who have had the opportunity of looking closely at it, for meeting a crying demand for easily accessible and digestible material on varied aspects of local culture. Already the advice is passed on: "Check the A — Z", "The A — Z should have that." But many would be disappointed if the achievement of this work were confined to its success in having filled a gap.

Fortunately, in selection as well as treatment of subjects the work achieves considerably more. A surprisingly large number and variety of topics (with obvious limits, of course) are discussed with an eye for relevant detail, an interest in historical, geographical, social context as well as an unmistakable feel for local attitudes and experiences made vivid, interesting, meaningful by a mind which evidently understands and appreciates the material which she handles.

An entry on Newcastle, looks at broad setting, local surrounding; makes contact with the Morant Bay Rebellion and Spanish-American War; and manages to involve the reader briefly with soldiers on an almost unbelievable three-hour walk from that distant camp to the Kingston Harbour where they have been summoned in an emergency.

And the Subjecty Coinage offers opportunity for comment on aspects of the history and use of Jamaican currency, as well as revives for many the "quattie", the "bit-and-fippance" and related experiences conveyed in the song of one who  
 beg Dinah buy quattie suga,  
 one big gill a coconut ile,

halfpenny pickle fish fe de brawta..."

Some readers will be surprised to read of the presence of camels in eighteenth century Jamaica; that the names "ganja", "chillum", "collie" are Indian and that "the concept of ganja as a holy weed is also a Hindu one." The entry under Kingston Industrial Garage interested me at first by its mere presence here, then by its brief almost concealed reference to certain characteristic "high-chested" Jamaican taste — of 1984 as of 1907!

But there are disappointments. In an understandable effort to be concise, the writer sometimes appear to misrepresent details. Perhaps the entry which refers to "Anancy" as "Jamaican name for spider", and that which comments that "bankra" is "Jamaican name for basket" may be considered merely unclear (at worst, misleading to the foreigner or the ignorant); but I consider it really odd that Tom Cringle's Cotton Tree is presented as "no longer to be seen, having died in the 1960's after being damaged by a truck"!

My memory supported by issues of the *Daily Gleaner* (1969 and 1971), recalls that that well-known tree fell "limb by limb" in 1971 apparently dying of old age after efforts of the Jamaica Tourist Board and Trust Commission failed to preserve it. The entry appears lacking and could be considered misleading.

I was disappointed too with the quality of some of the decidedly appropriate, potentially useful and meaningful illustrations. While the Jackfruit which appears on the front cover, and the "market basket" later in the work do stand out from the pages in their realness; and although photographs such as that on our Half-Way-Tree Square in 1900 provide interesting illustration and make for good viewing; too many sketches and photographs appear unclear, unsatisfying.

A reader may even be flustered by the fact that "St. Andrew Parish Church" cannot be found until he discovers that "Saint (St)" follows "Star" here, instead of "Sag, or Sah-" as appears to be more usual.

Such failures are happily few, perhaps dwarfish beside the remarkable achievements of the A — Z; for a work of this kind and quality imposes on itself standards with which it dares not tamper, to any significant extent.

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