

Caribbean

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West Indian Nations, A New History — Philip Sherlock — Macmillan Jamaica Publishing House — 362 pages £4.95 U.K. IN HIS LATEST BOOK, "West Indian Nations" which has as its sub-title, "A New History", Philip Sherlock sets out to help, it would seem, the Caribbean peoples in their search for an identity, that phrase so popular today. But the phrase should not be dismissed as mere jargon. Its use serves a purpose and this book, concentrating on the new Caribbean man, shows the events, and the purposes which caused those events, which have moulded him, from slavery to independence.

The 'West Indian nations' include not only the English-speaking Caribbean, including Belize and Guyana, but also the islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the French and Dutch islands and Dutch Surinam. The other countries which touch the Caribbean, in Central and South America, are omitted. This may puzzle these unfamiliar with the region but is obvious to the West Indian as those latter countries have a continental Latin-American destiny whereas it is possible that all the others may one day find it convenient to come closer together, economically and politically, and their background and history have many similarities. But it is noted in the book that Venezuela and Colombia have made moves in this direction — with the Caribbean Development Bank — though they are not 'West Indian' nations.

It is clearly not easy to treat all these nations in a not over-large book without appearing to dwell too much on one of them (this seems to be so with regard to Jamaica) and perhaps neglecting others. But this is a bias which will not be minded by Jamaicans for whom this notice is being written. The emphasis in the book is on the factors which have influenced Caribbean man and examples are given of these throughout the region. Due weight is given to the fact that the black man had a culture of his own and did not begin life as a slave on this side of the Atlantic, as old history books have implied.

The faults of the book, minor ones, should be noticed first as not to leave an overall impression of dissatisfaction with the book as that would not be true: while most of what is told is probably well known to most thoughtful West Indians the overall picture is interesting given, often in memorable sentences and this is commendable.

The difficulty of writing a popular history and yet backing up statements with facts is one which has not been entirely overcome. There are many paragraphs which will appear to the reader to be drowning him in statistics. But maybe he can skip the statistics, leaving them to the student. There is certainly a mine of information in the book.

BUT IT IS A HISTORY BOOK and there are far too many typographical errors in it where names of places and people are concerned. If it is used for reference as well as for the statistics mentioned above the reader may well be led astray. Here are some of them. Granada in Spain appears (p.11) with an 'e' in place of the first 'a', like the West Indian island; Tenochtitlan (p. 18 and the index) is given a 'c' in place of the 'ch', a mistake which also changes the pronunciation so that it is much more important than what might appear in English as merely the dropping of a letter; as accents are used in the book it might also have been given the accent it needs on the final vowel; the Philippines appears with a double 'l' and a single 'c' twice in the text (p. 36 and 273) but the index has it right. Dr. Louis Leakey of Olduvai fame (p. 59) appears with this spelling and, on the same page (!) without the second 'e' while the 'Louis' is Hispanicised into 'Luis'; The Mexican Cuauhtemoc (p. 19) appears minus the second and fifth letters of his name, a simplification not previously seen. President Guillaume Sam of Haiti appears (p 318 and in the index only as President Guillaume.

Perhaps the fact that the book was printed in HongKong may have something to do with these errors, annoying to find in a book of this type. Should a second edition be brought out the publishers would do well to have things checked more carefully.

On other points it is noticed that the author states that the solution for the Netherlands Antilles (p. 306) of membership in a kingdom with Holland providing autonomy and a considerable measure of security was acceptable to the Antilleans. This year's demand for independence in the Netherlands Antilles suggests that the word 'acceptable' was premature. Comparison is made between the Kingston metropolitan population of 203,000 in 1943 with that of 1961, 376,000. This might well have been brought up to date to show that the same trends continues as the 1970 figure, admittedly with a slightly larger area, is 502,000. On Federation this author writes that the Federal Government was weak, not having the power to raise taxes, and then that the 'immediate cause (of the break-doubtedly correct but mention might have been made of up) was the decision of Jamaica to withdraw' which is un-Grantley Adams' 'threat' of retroactive taxation which frightened many Jamaicans against Federation.

WITH THOSE OBJECTIONS out of the way it can be said that the book makes a very good job of telling an oft-told story and includes therein many interesting facts, perhaps not so well-known in the English-speaking Caribbean, about slave risings not only in the region but outside of it, as for instance, the Brazilian uprising in the 17th century which, long before Toussaint and Christophe, led to the founding of a black republic, that of Palmares in Brazil which survived for nearly half a century. This, though far removed from the Caribbean, is kept with showing that the black man, who could look back to a past of his own with widespread empires in Africa could, and did, do things for himself, not meekly submitting to slavery. Sir Philip also mentions, in passing, that one of Balboa's company that reached the Pacific was a negro Olano, by name.

At the same time the author emphasizes that the African notion that Europe altogether imposed the slave trade on Africa is without any foundation in history as the slave trade could not have flourished without the Africans selling their own people into slavery. He also stresses that the problem was not racial but social and economic. "The money that could buy a white servant for ten years could buy an African for life".

The author has therefore done a good job in showing that the black man has a background of which he can be proud and at the same time in demonstrating that one ought not to make the mistake of thinking that racial prejudice caused slavery.

The memorable phrases mentioned above include, with reference to the Arawaks who had lived a settled life for centuries before the coming of the Spaniard, "Suddenly without warning, a hurricane of culture broke upon them", or "nowhere else in the archipelago do the walls and buildings breathe such a sense of the past as do the stone houses and narrow streets of old Santo Domingo and the forts of Santa Barbara and San Gil".

Flying Saucers B.C.

The Gold of the Gods—Erich von Daniken — Souvenir Press — 216 pages \$5.80

"The Gold of the Gods" by Erich von Daniken, which came on the best-seller last Sunday is almost certainly unlike anything which the readers of this page have ever come across. It is true that the publisher's blurb on the jacket assures readers that his two previous books have been "massive best-sellers" and that one of them ran up sales of nearly three million copies in 27 countries. But this book, and the two previous volumes are not the normal type of bestsellers, with or without sex. Not to put too fine a point on it this one reads like some of the publications put out by one of the well known religious sects.

von Daniken has some interesting things to tell, for instance, of tunnels running for hundreds of miles under the soil of Ecuador and Peru and it may be that they do exist. But his account of them would be more impressive to readers if he didn't stress that their construction and that of carvings therein, as well as gold ornaments, quoting a Roman Catholic Father living in Ecuador "are older than the Flood". Also he discards the carbon-14 method of dating when it doesn't agree with his beliefs and uses it when it does.

von Daniken's theory is that these findings are 'proof' that men and women in space-ships visited the earth many thousands of years ago and were indeed the ancestors of the human race. Representations of beings in what are generally regarded as ceremonial masks, etc., are, to him, clear indications that they depict people dressed like the astronauts of today. Similar proofs are to be found in China and in the Caroline islands.

Science fiction is great fun but one ought to know where to draw the line between fiction and assertions of real happenings.

One reader did not find von Daniken's assertions at all convincing. The most remarkable thing about his books is not the possibility of these visitors from outer space having come to earth but that so many millions of people have read his books. Maybe Barnum was right.

—G.P.

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