

Sir Philip Sherlock redefines the new millennium

Margaret Bishop interviews the former vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies and noted historian and writer.

Education Observer (EO): Sir Philip, the cover blurb of your recently-published history of Jamaica co-authored with Hazel Bennett calls you educator, historian, poet and storyteller. Which do you prefer to think of yourself as?

Sir Philip: I spent three years in Trinidad a long time ago. I was doing a lot of work then on folklore and folktales and I learned a great deal from calypsonians I talked to about the art of storytelling. Recently, it is true, I have been more interested in history and in education. But what is occupying me greatly at the moment is this thing we call The New Age.

EO: Tell us about that.

Sir Philip: Well, this is our thinking on The New Age. Sometimes we seem not to understand that the calendar is a recorder, not a record, and that the new age is a creator — fascinating and also overwhelming. Take this period we are living in. We have this wonderful anniversary coming up — the new millennium. This has led me to thinking, what is it that's going to spark off the creativity of the human mind? But if you look carefully at it you'll find that we have been in this new age since about 1950, with the discovery of atomic energy.

EO: Oh? How's that?

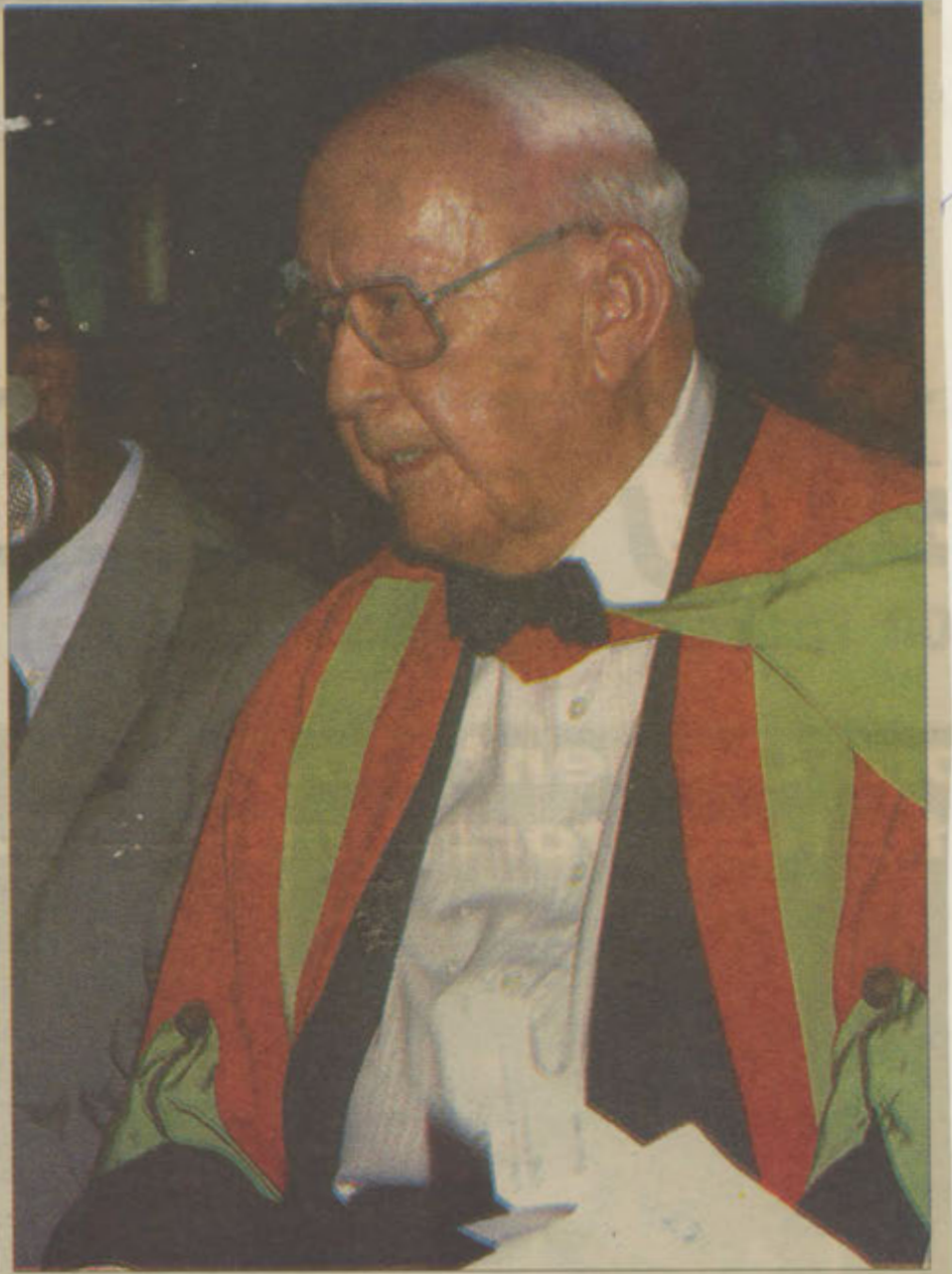
Sir Philip: Well, it's atomic energy that's shaping the minds of all of us today.

EO: But it's a word you hardly hear any more.

Sir Philip: You're right, the word has passed out of our consciousness, so to speak; but atomic energy is really more active today than it has ever been. The release of atomic energy began in the mind of somebody, like steam did for Watts — a simple event in a human life. But that wasn't the end. From the 1800s, the attachment to science began to grow until the atom literally captured the mind and imagination of a New Zealander, British-born in 1871. By 1908 the Nobel prize winner in science was Earnest Rutherford; he earned it for his work in the structure of the atom. You might say he was recognised in a prestigious way for it but he just couldn't leave it, it took over his life and completely fascinated him. I think it was in 1919, Rutherford led a team that discovered a great deal more about the atom and ways to activate it. The dates are very interesting. He died in 1937. In 1939 after Hitler's invasion of Poland, Britain and France made an agreement to help Poland protect her borders and so the Second World War began, so called because it was active throughout the world, except that Japan wasn't involved. It was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour that opened up all of that.

EO: Most children today have never heard of Pearl Harbour.

Sir Philip: Yes, you're right. On August 3, 1945, US bombers destroyed a Japanese city — using atomic bombs — and it was devastating. Three days later they destroyed another Japanese city, Nagasaki, and the effect of those two raids caused Japan to throw in the towel; it had no atom bombs. But when the Second World War came to an end, so did the dominance of Europe. And not just the dominating power of Europe but the ideology of imperial Europe, white dominance, the superiority of the white race and, by extension, the inferiority of all that was not white. So with the gruelling interest in this terrible weapon, the atom bomb, came the rivalry with the US and the world being divided up between two great powers. It would be amusing if it weren't all so frightening, a lot of our thinking in Jamaica is based still on things European, like the thinking about education — that's one of the crippling things. Class, colour and so on, they are all still here, though the age of Europe died so long ago — 50 years ago. But at the peak of their power, without any warning to Africa, European powers just moved in and between 1880 and 1912, they partitioned Africa, colonised whatever of Africa had not been occupied or developed. France, for instance, grabbed about 400 million of the 1100-million acres that had not been grabbed by anybody else. By 1914 — and this is why I believe history deserves a lot of study — by 1914, what we call the first European civil war started ... it's also called the First World War ... and the slaughter of young Europeans was devastating. The attack on



SHERLOCK ... seek knowledge and spirituality in this new age

Africa and on other races, led to a strong reaction or anti-action. By 1920, because of that, a lot of the young people were anti-white, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and that applied also to capital, to market forces. Market forces and capitalism took care of the liquidation of Europe, because she pushed them too hard. They didn't call it that then but it was market forces without regulation, greed in action. That was the first world war. Then from 1920 to 1933 came the world wide slump, the Depression. By 1945 Europe was no longer effective and the Second World War came to an end with an absolutely weakened Europe. Do you remember Sputnik?

EO: Oh, yes.

Sir Philip: ... unmanned, launched by the Russians with instructions from the earth station. About two years later the US launched Apollo, also unmanned. And by 1964 came the orbiting of the Moon and soon there was Neil Armstrong walking on the Moon. Later they started collecting samples, and they sent space ships to orbit the other planets — a tremendous exploration of space. But the amount of scientific knowledge gained in those 40 years was probably more than man had gained in the whole history of Mankind up to that time.

That is why I'm so interested in it. In 1950, another kind of activity began, this time spiritual, religious. In 1984 the general editor of the Oxford Book of Prayer began his preface by saying that people had been greatly impressed by the growth of interest in religion, not only Christianity but also the eastern religions.

EO: A moving away from materialism...?

Sir Philip: Exactly, that was it ... that was why I mentioned the materialism growing in Europe. But look what happened to Europe. It was almost as if God was saying the sins of the fathers were being visited on the second and third generations. It was also a sudden realisation of the wonder of the creation of the universe, of the planets. The astronauts felt it ... Armstrong said when he came back that he had made a small step for man but a huge step

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for mankind. And now the two big forces at work in the age of atomic energy are on the one hand, the tremendous scientific triumphs and increase in knowledge and along with that, spirituality.

So perhaps the movement is away from an empire-type civilisation to a global civilisation. And you realise, that means the end of racism. You cannot have whites preaching superiority over other races; the Japanese for one, or South Korean or Indian. But Indian education is now exporting Indian advisors to other countries. The human mind is more marvellous than the atom bomb. In the history of Jamaica up to, say, the time of the nationalist movement, the end of the 1920s, the value of the black man was muscle power. The working force was very largely made up of black Jamaicans. Today it's mind power. There has been a study in the US, in a book called *Megatrends*; it shows that the major trends directing our lives come from the human mind. It says: Don't tie yourself to the past; tie yourself to tomorrow, whether it be in business, or banking. Investors, in Florida for instance, know this, they study what's happening all round the world and run it through their computers. So we have to use tomorrow to shape today.

EO: That's a marvellous line! But I want to take you up on something you just said. It seems to me that the Indian advisors you talked about were probably educated in First World countries, not India, and that they cleverly assimilated all that those countries had to offer; they became more British than the British, more American than the Americans ...

Sir Philip: Of course, quite so. They had the potential, but not the means, in their own country. There's a study by one of them who became an advisor to the US president, a book called *The Last American Frontier*. He felt knowledge was the big industry. In Jamaica's case what we should be doing is bringing equality of education to all, everybody is a mind. In five years or so, every Jamaican should have access to a superb education. That's what Japan has, but we don't have to look so far away, in Barbados they have over 90% literacy, they have a high degree of equality of opportunity, and that gives them the highest returns from education in the English-speaking Caribbean.

EO: That means we're really behind ...

Sir Philip: Yes, and not just that, but when it comes to national unity and social cohesion, we haven't got there at all ...

EO: Why do you think this is so?

Sir Philip: Oh, for many reasons, it's not a simple matter at all. But I think things are beginning to change. If you listen to the utterances of the minister of education, you'll find the emphasis is much more on the mind than it was before. But the minister can't do everything. It's got to be the people who say: We're falling behind. And that's what frightens me. We need to get a programme going with the UWI and the US and even other developing countries, including Africa. I think the development people are not as up-to-date as they should be on the impact of the atomic age and the growth — and the desire — for spirituality. Those are the two big forces for today. This really is the point of what I want to say. The Jamaican experience in history taught them, as Sam Sharpe put it, to see human beings as the children of God. You couldn't find a more appropriate statement from anybody, anywhere in Jamaica today. Our history and the experience of the black Jamaican in the resistance of oppression opens up a new world, the world community, a world community in which planet Earth is our only spaceship and our ship has no escape hatch, so you can't afford war. And when you consider the vast sums that the very developed countries have spent on armaments and weapons, the implications are tremendous.

If what I've said is to be of any use, I would urge all Jamaicans to begin to take a deep interest in the imperatives of the atomic age.

EO: But your last word is that there's still hope for Jamaica despite all the gloom and doom.

Sir Philip: Oh yes, there's a lot of hope. We know it, because some of the senior people in international organisations are Jamaicans. There has been Lucille Mathurin and there's Angela King in the United Nations, and we have Don Mills ... and many others. Jamaicans have a great deal of talent and potential.

EO: Thank you, Sir Philip.