

OFF the CUFF

...by John Patmos

B/N SHERLOCK
Mr. Phillip

MR. PHILIP SHERLOCK the new Vice-Chancellor of the U.W.I. may be best described as a West Indian who is very much of a Jamaican.

A poet and a historian, Mr. Sherlock was of that group who understood clearly that the political awakening of 1938 had to be followed and supported by a breakthrough on the cultural front. He shared the view, so well expressed by Bertrand Russell that the only valid nationalism is a cultural one. The poems that he wrote in this post '38 period blazed a trail which has been followed by a younger generation not only of Jamaican but of West Indian poets.

In the context of the times these poems were far in advance of the general climate of thought and feeling. For in his successful poems what Philip Sherlock captures is a whole new world of sights and sounds and rhythms and landscapes which had rarely before been expressed. This world was, and is, our world. And he had to grope for forms to express what he saw and heard and what the majority of Jamaicans had been long conditioned to ignore.

One remembers from his poems rhythms that suggest the clapping of hands and the ritual of revivalist service, pungent phrases like 'the harsh insistence of the wind' and 'trees in robes of living light sang hallelujah ceaselessly.' Like the Afro-American poets he too was involved in the conjecture and enquiry about the despised, suppressed world of the greater part of his cultural past. In the poem 'The Jamaican Fisherman' he tries to establish a connection between himself and a 'mythical' Africa and writes of a man who carries all that came before-history, traditions legends. — imprisoned in his limbs:

Across the sand I saw a black man stride
To fetch his fishing gear and broken things,
And silently that splendid body cried

Its proud descent from ancient chiefs and kings...

Some time has passed since these poems were written and the cultural 'awakening' of which Philip Sherlock was at once a forerunner and active participant failed to widen out into a national mass movement. It remained harnessed to a small circle of the 'intelligentsia' and became embedded in platitudes like a fly in amber. But by this time Professor Sherlock had left the practice of poetry for the craft of history. His standard book on West Indian History written with Professor Parry helped to take our past out of its anonymous twilight and to make it a living and accessible reality to the West Indian student. And this was only part of his general pioneering work in the field of textbooks specially designed for a people and written out of their particular circumstances.

An end to isolation

Mr. Sherlock then brings to his new post a deep identity with the needs common to all West Indians and perhaps his contribution to the University might very well lie in those urgent provinces for which his non-Jamaican and non-literary predecessors were unfitted. The first is that he will be certain to take a more than normal academic interest in any 'cultural renaissance' of the campus and in the island which might begin under the stimulus of independence.

The second is that as a Jamaican who is very much a part of the Jamaican society outside the campus he might help to bring about the bridging of the gap between the inbred and shut-in world of the UWI and the world outside. A social and intellectual liaison between the staff and the students of the U.W.I. and the society around them is a prime necessity.

More effort should be made to involve expatriate staff more deeply in the problems of the community in which they work so as to avoid the extremes of indifference or a romantic' partisanship. The West Indian staff, too tend to be affected by the ivory-ebony-tower attitude with the result that they play a far less significant role than their training and wide interests has equipped them for.

The results on the students of this too-splendid isolation is that of reinforcing a feeling of privilege rather than of dedication. The thinking elements amongst them seem to be aware of this and individual group of students do remain firmly attached to their society. Perhaps the solution to this might be a lessening and relaxation of rigid residential rules, a change to a more easy going casual non-residential atmosphere. And a change in curriculum to put the accent on aspects of public affairs, of the daily round seems called for.

During a recent series of lectures arranged by the U.W.I. on the campus, a series which were interesting and original, which centred about Foreign affairs, Culture, Political affairs, The Concept of Law etc., the students of the U.W.I. were conspicuous by their absence. Many members of staff were there, amongst them many expatriate staff. Many of the lectures were given by these members of staff. The public who attended came from outside; some of them were Rastafarians travelling all the way from down town Kingston.

But the students were largely uninterested.

It might very well be that Vice-Chancellor Sherlock's foremost challenge, for which he is particularly equipped, will be that of igniting the spirit of enquiry, interest and involvement which was the hallmark of his '38 generation, the young peoples who will be called upon to be the leaders of independent West Indian societies.

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