

D. G.

- 1 AUG 1976

A National hero in verse

By George Panton

PHILIP SHERLOCK, that prolific writer who, while carrying out full time duties as a university vice-chancellor and later as a secretary-general of an important group of institutions of learning, appeared to have stopped writing.

This hardly seemed possible to anyone who knew him but it was a considerable time since a book of his had appeared. Those who have enjoyed his histories and his stories for children as well as those who admire him as a poet will now all be relieved to learn that his literary talents have not been allowed to lie idle. He had been busy on a full-length poem, or a drama for voices as the publishers put it.

The book has now been published, by MacMillan Caribbean, and should shortly be available locally if, indeed, it is not so already. Entitled **Shout for Freedom** it combines Philip Sherlock's poetic talent with his historical perception and it is, as he puts it, a tribute to Sam Sharpe, recently placed in our local Pantheon of National Heroes.

Taking the known facts of history about the 'Slave Rebellion' of 1831 and the real people in it, such as Daddy Sharpe, Thomas Dove, George Taylor, Guthrie, Tharp and others, Philip Sherlock has depicted the events in poetic language

through the mouths of these participants and two fictional characters, both of whom were moved by the preaching and teaching of Samuel Sharpe.

The result is a most successful record (didn't Jung teach that myth might be truer than history?) of an attempt to achieve what, more than a century later, Gandhi and, later, Martin Luther King Jr., were to gain, namely freedom through non-violence. It must not be forgotten, and this is stressed by Philip Sherlock, both in an explanation preceding the book proper and in the actual verses, that Samuel Sharpe hoped to attain his ends, the abolition of slavery and the right of the slaves to be free to sell their labour but not their persons, by non-violent methods, namely, the withholding of their labour. Not surprisingly a few whites were killed in the 'rebellion' but this was never Samuel Sharpe's intention and, also not unexpectedly, the slaves did not follow his plan of refusing to work. It is interesting to remember in the light of

today's violence how peaceful were Sam Sharpe's intentions. He based his firm belief, that all men should be free, on the Bible and had no thought of killing and forcible taking-over of property, though he advocated, and for obvious reasons, burning the cane-fields to "destroy the mammon that the backra love."



SIR PHILIP SHERLOCK

Using 'voices' off-stage (and later members of Daddy Sharpe's 'class meeting') as a sort of Greek chorus to explain or emphasise the salient points the drama begins with Sam Sharpe being inspired by the thoughts of Moses and how he led his people to freedom. Sharpe hears how Moses "whispers, whispers all the time / sows the words like when you sow peas and corn grain in the earth, words he threw at Egypt's king, Pharaoh let my people go." These words he transposes to "Backra, let my people go."

Sharpe passes on the word to those gathered for the message and this is effectively reinforced by the demand of the 'chorus' "Give the message, give the message, bring us into Jesusland ... shout for freedom loud and clear." The repetition of the idea in the first line is impressively used throughout and sometimes, even Sharpe himself. "Father Moses, Father Moses / stay beside me in the sunhot."

Sharpe's message is plainly given as he was inspired, he tells the people, by Jesus himself. "dear Brother Jesus come to me / all shining in his blackness, beautiful." He advises, "for when the holidays are done / the people must not to their work return, / when all the people stay away from work / then slavery done".

Skilfully, the poet does not attempt to describe the actual rebellion but has William Knibb prophesying that "blood will flow and death will come" and then the various persons tell of the tribulation time and then we find Sam Sharpe in prison. There Sharpe sets out things plainly for the Rev. Henry Bleby saying how easy it is to preach that one should obey authority "and though we know you love we, you is free, / and you is white, / and slavery sun-hot never burn your skin."

In addition to the simple, and accurate, information of the happenings there are some very memorable passages such as Sharpe's in prison, "I miss the sunshine and the night, / the sky like indigo, the stars, the moon / and all the little things that talk to we, / the purple of the little leaves, / on mango trees at Easter time..." Or the move final words of Sam Sharpe which include, "...I watch the gallows tree, / the hanging tree, / for you the freedom tree, / and whether it be hanging tree or freedom tree, / bear this in mind, / ...let this be in your mind, / when hard times come; I rather die, / than be a slave."

For obvious reasons Jamaicans have not had the opportunity to glory in their history but our heroes have been real. It is only that we have not been able, or have never been given the opportunity, to see how heroic they were. In this poetic drama, Philip Sherlock has taken a major step forward in removing that lack from us.

Shout for Freedom - Philip Sherlock - MacMillan Caribbean - 68 pages 60 pence (UK).

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA