

## jamaica independence feature

## Struggling to rise above the injuries of slavery

Sir Philip Sherlock — educator, historian, consultant to the vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies — interviewed by Gilbert Dunkley about Jamaica's independence, at UWI Mona, June 10, 1997.

**GD: What has independence meant for Jamaica?**

PS: I'm more interested, you might say, in the cultural and social developments that have taken place, and I think that when you pause for a moment and step back to the 1940s, 1950s, and then look at what happened since — and not just so much since independence — so much (has occurred) in the cultural revolution that would have taken place whether there was independence or not.

**GD: What have you seen in that revolution?**

PS: One example is the increasing importance of Africa, not necessarily the

Africa that we're looking at today, with its strife and troubles and so on, but Africa as the motherland, and the change came about partly through Garvey, but very largely in the 1940s and 50s through the Rastafarians. And this is a very profound cultural change, because up to today the tendency is to look at Europe for the models.

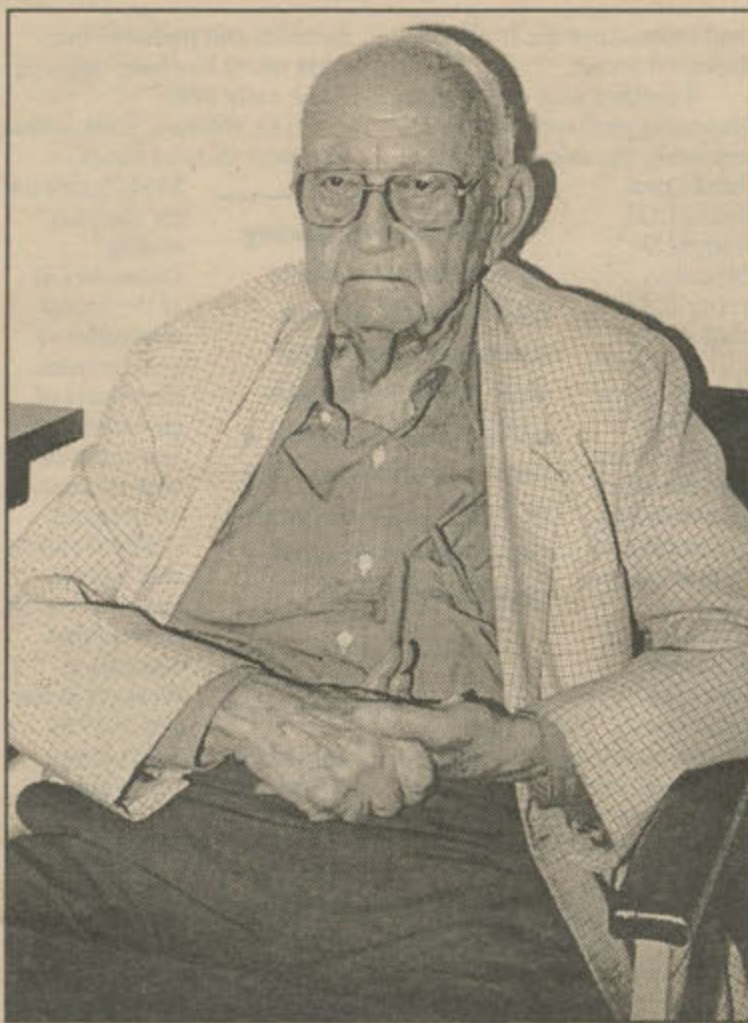
As a boy I knew the names of pretty well all the railway stations on the great line from Bristol to London. We knew about Europe; we knew about Raleigh and Nelson and Rodney and the rest of it. We knew practically nothing about Africa, and we despised what little we knew. In fact, the editor of *The Gleaner* at the time, HG Delisser, emphasized that Africa was the land of savages. If he had turned to the Old Testament he would have found a remarkable record of early Africa with Mesopotamia and the great rivers and the valley of the Nile and the extraordinary ferment of scholarship that came with the Muslim revival later on.

Far from being a land of savages, it was one of the earliest places to be in touch with cultural development, and two of the earliest centers, Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley (with) the civilization of the Pharaohs, so that this is a strange thing — the gap between the colonial view of Africa and the actual facts.

**GD: How does the foundation of the Jamaican society in slavery affect the nature of the society now?**

PS: I would prefer to think of two societies. One was the ruling society which was white and the whole goal and purpose of that society was to make money. Nothing to do with culture. Nothing to do with education. And indeed the guiding principles of that culture — what you might call the plantocracy — was division, not unity. Nothing like a society. If you were black, you belonged to the outcasts and not only that, you were restricted to a plantation.

(The governing class) saw



Gilbert Dunkley photo

Sir Philip Sherlock, at the Assembly Building, UWI Mona

Jamaica as having a small ruling class and a labor force that was African and was also racially inferior. So you had a real split between the two societies. The dynamics of the society came not from the ruling class but from the people who rejected the principle of racial inferiority, rejected the principles of slavery. It came out of the mass of the African-European people, and one of the big cultural changes that has come about — this is why I refer to the growing importance of Africa — was the sudden realization that the history of the Jamaican society that we know today did not begin with Columbus but began in Africa centuries before with the whole cultural growth in African society itself and the multiplicity of societies. When Sam Sharpe issued his call for the end of slavery in 1832, there were two societies that were deeply, deeply split. And black society provided that dynamics because they wanted change. White society did not want change.

**GD: Given these facts and this history, what is your feeling about the state of Jamaica in 1997 and the prospects for Jamaica?**

PS: In one sense it is quite remarkable, very remarkable, because in the last 40 years, two black Jamaicans have become world leaders — Garvey and Marley. What

other developing country in the world with a population of three million can point to that kind of extraordinary change? And it bears out what I've been saying, that there are elements in the historical experience of the Jamaican people particularly — because the Eastern Caribbean is much more multicultural — because the experience of the African-Jamaican in resisting the controls of colonialism prepared him for entry into these new attitudes. But not all, because some of the Jamaicans who were black or colored inherited the attitude of white planter society and therefore you had the emergence — not in any large numbers, but significant — of black backra.

George Beckford, in his analysis of planter society in Jamaica, made the point that poverty persists because of the persistence among the educated and the cultured of some of the values that dominated (planter society). So there is a split and a very significant split. What I think is worth noting is that the split excludes a large section of the mass of the Jamaican people. What I am really saying is that the planter section, the colored and black, some of the professional groups and so on, took over the attitudes of white planter society and took over the attitudes also of the exclusion of the mass of the people.

**GD: How does that division in**

**the society play into the current state of Jamaican society?**

PS: What it does is that it confronts the Jamaican nation today with the fact that it will either go for national unity in the true and real and democratic sense or it will continue the plantation culture that still dominates it. And this is the key question. It's the key to the whole thing. I get the feeling that a number of people in Jamaica, including middle class people, who have lived through the period of violence, are beginning to realize that if they do not create one society, they will continue to have the crime and the violence and the drugs and possibly a split like you get in Haiti.

**GD: Do you think the slowness of sociological evolution might be part of the problem in Jamaica: of the persistence of a way of thinking and a way of dividing the society even into this time, when the idea seems clearly anachronistic?**

PS: I don't think that the society itself realizes the sharpness of the division between the great mass of the people and those with privilege and power. I think what they're beginning to realize is that it's not going to continue, because either they change or events will change them. We've been going into schools down in some of the violent areas, and you can't want a sharper picture of social division and discrimination than you get. This to my mind is the single greatest threat — it's not economic — that stands in the way of everything else.

**GD: I have the idea that every Jamaican has a stake in what happens in Jamaica but that not everybody has equity in Jamaica.**

PS: This was the reason for the Morant Bay uprising and the reason for Sam Sharpe. We began without equity and we have not yet learned what equity means. I think two things are working together to make it quite clear that things are not going to stay as they are. History isn't history anymore in the sense of having a past. You'd better read the future. The computer and electronics and your satellite out in space have made it possible for us technically to read the future, and reading the future you find a tremendous concentration of energy and intellect in the Pacific Basin. So you have a shift geopolitically from the dominance of

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Europe and the Atlantic to the dominance of a non-white world.

If you don't become a haven for human resource development, you become a haven for the drug lords. It's a tug, it's a cosmic thing, you see. I think that with all its set ways, gradually, a lot of the middle-class people in Jamaica are beginning to understand that they are not going to be in control in the way they are. The situation is changing.

**GD: What is your impression of the state of Jamaica's democracy?**

PS: It's far more tribal than it should be. We had a democracy. The sense of national unity is not as strong as it was 20 years ago, and I think that as a society we ourselves have not been as aware as we should have been of the deep cleavages and the inequity that prevails. But I think people are beginning to realize it now, and they're beginning to understand. Every day I become more and more conscious of the pressure of coming events rather than of past events, and in the world that

we've entered into, that world will not tolerate the kind of social injustice.

**GD: What is the state of rights in Jamaica today, and what is Jamaica's perception of human rights?**

PS: This is actually the trouble; the perception is the old perception. It's extraordinary. The Act of Emancipation was an act to preserve the planter's rights to land and property and to exclude the freed people from it, because there was no provision (for them). It is fundamental to the whole thing. The picture of 1832 in many respects is still with us. The word emancipation, we got caught in the feeling that it meant freedom. It never meant freedom, because they were not free to earn and to possess in the sense that they needed to be.

The Act of Emancipation protected the planter's right to possess. There was no compensation for the people who had been enslaved. The whole thing was unjust, and that was why Morant Bay came. It was a protest against social injustice. And that was why Frome erupted in 1938. The protest

never stopped and will never stop. Some of the old generation are being repeated in the new generation. It's quite an extraordinary situation.

**GD: What is the worth of our independence?**

PS: The political developments, I would say, are not as

**GD: Where do you think we're heading as a country?**

PS: I feel hopeful still. I feel more hopeful because I think we're beginning to see more problems. I saw the economic boom between 1955 and 1960, the hotel business expanding, tourism expanding, national income rising. We never

realized that we should have invested more money in the human resources. There was a beginning at it, but too little. Today, if you go through the parts that we go to and you say to people, 'What has independence meant? What has freedom meant?', it really has meant poverty.

We need a lot of help from people in Brixton, and people in

New York and so on. It's hard to see how to do it, but there is a great deal of sympathy. I think that if it were possible to use publicity and the media to say to the private sector, not to the political parties, 'You have to pull this thing together,' because they can do it... I think

the political structure can be influenced more powerfully and more quickly by the private sector than by anybody else. If it were at all possible for you and your generation to insist on equity, now, as the priority, it could help. Otherwise, I don't see us coming out of (this situation).

**GD: We gained independence, but the Cayman Islands didn't, Bermuda didn't, the British Virgin Islands didn't, and a couple others didn't; in material terms, in social stability terms, in social justice terms, they all appear to be better off. Was it worth it for us to take the independence route?**

PS: If you are not independent, you can't determine your policies. You remain colonial, and therefore, you have to learn to be independent. I was thinking the other day that the 15 or 18 years of what was called preparation were not in fact preparation at all. It was in fact a slow transfer of power from those who had it — the British — to Jamaican local people. But most of those people to whom it was transferred were middle class, educated professionals and the rest of it. We never looked at the excluded people in the way that we should have done. ✻



Gilbert Dunkley photo

**Sir Philip Sherlock**

advanced as they were in the 1950s in the sense of strength of a national sentiment, a feeling for nationhood. The feeling for the class and the party is too strong when you put it alongside the feeling for the nation. And I think this is where we are in trouble.

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