

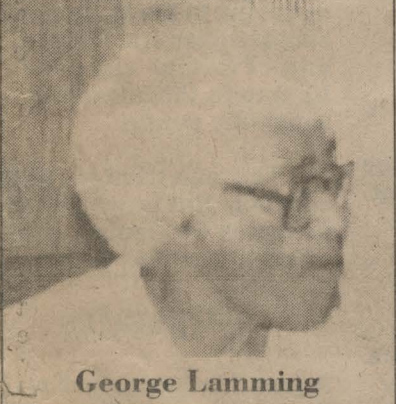
Edna Manley: 'She

stayed with us

to the end; and she

is still here'

Jamaica Record. June 3, 1990, page 7A.



George Lamming

The following is the text of a speech by George Lamming at the opening of the Edna Manley Retrospective Exhibition at the National Gallery of Jamaica on May 30, 1990

Jamaica has been familiar territory for me ever since my first visit in 1955. But I cannot think of any previous visit which could have brought more joy or a deeper sense of fraternal participation than the invitation to be with you this evening. And I want to thank you most sincerely for the honour and privilege of sharing this embrace of Edna Manley's spirit.

The exhibition is a superb anthology of her life and work; but anthologies do not put themselves together, and that is why I would like, without delay, to pay the warmest tribute to the skill and generous devotion of David Boxer, who has put us all in his debt.

He has brought an impressive combination of scholarship and taste to the conception and organisation of a life time's work. And those of us who have had to deal with him would experienced a remarkable quality of patience and grace. Here or in any part of our region he would be an extremely difficult act to follow.

On the second of March, 1937, an exhibition of the work of Edna Manley opened at the French Gallery in London; and the speaker of that occasion was the novelist Hugh Walpole. He was somewhat apologetic about his role, and made a comment which you

may think very relevant: "It seems superfluous for someone who is not a painter or a sculptor to open an exhibition of this kind - it is only justified for the strongest reasons..."

I have no doubt in my own mind about the choice of being here and in this role. If you think of the word 'generation' in other terms than a literal chronology of dates; then Edna Manley and I, separated by more than a quarter of a century, were of the same generation.

We were generated by the same cycle of concerns, engaged in the same struggle to give name and meaning to a landscape which had been told and often believed that it had neither.

Whether it be Barbados or Jamaica, 50 years ago, the environment was hostile to those who set out to do what is the major justification for any human existence; set out, as Norman Manley would say, "to find ourselves in the wrestle with our own problems. ... to dig deep into our own consciousness and accept and reject only those things of which we, from our superior knowledge of our own cultural needs, must be the best judges ... and to create work that will simply and naturally reflect the life, thought, struggles and problems of our own people and our own country."

She worked in wood and I with word, but the enterprise was nourished by the same intention: to initiate and consolidate a tradition of confidence in self and an awareness of the landscape of place and people who had shaped that self.

Cultural history of a people

From the early and overwhelming figures of "The Diggers", "Prophet", "Negro Aroused" through the melancholy stillness of the journey to the turbulence of "The Voice", the tragic agony of "Ghetto Mother" and the triumph of "Lazarus" leaping from his tomb, we can trace the evolution of a private vision which also becomes the cultural history of an entire people ... It is an astonishing achievement.

It is an achievement which returns us to the fundamental challenge which Rex Nettleford raises in his book, *Caribbean Cultural Identity*.

For the questions that are to be asked are: whose and what cultural values must be preserved, and for whom and what must they be developed? What do we mean by development, and how do you measure a people's development? In this connection I think it is very dangerous to listen to people whose thought is based exclusively on statistics.

We measure a people's development by their capacity to recognise the collective basic needs of a society; and by their capacity to acquire those skills of intellect and imagination which enable them to address those needs; and to do so within the constraints of our resources.

And a critical criterion of development is self-reliance. The economy should perhaps be seen as one aspect of a total socio-cultural reality, and economic development as only part of the overall socio-cultural evolution of a people. But development, in the sense in which I intend it, cannot be bought, nor can it be borrowed. It is a process which has to be of our own making. And just

as no one can walk for you or eat for you, no one can undertake your development for you ...

As CLR James would say: "All development takes place by means of self-movement, not organisation or direction by external forces. It is within the organisation itself, that is, within the society, that there must be realised new motives, new possibilities. The citizen is most alive when he feels that he himself, in his own national community, is overcoming difficulties.... And that's why culture is of such critical importance, and the spirit of Edna Manley indispensable to any sane concept of development. For culture is not a question of refinement or erudition. It is the totality of processes which contribute to the understanding, the reproducing or the transformation of the social system. It is the foundation of all creative politics."

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA

Record
May June 3, 1990
92 7A

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA

Legendary campaigner

And that's why. I think, when circumstances seduced Edna Manley into public affairs, she would be able to make that public commitment a natural extension of her private, creative vision. The politics of her art translated into the art of her politics. She was a legendary campaigner.

And the secret of her success

in either field was, perhaps, contained in that rebel seed which she was very careful to cultivate. She was a rebel by vocation. The rebel is a voice which says 'NO' to any circumstance (be it person or event) which becomes an obstacle to its self-liberation.

There is the revealing story of her reaction to the news that certain people were 'talking her name'. The epidemic of all islands is talking people's name. In Barbados, it equals announcing the death of people who are still alive. She said:

'Well, at first I didn't know; then of course a few kindly people took the trouble to tell me I was causing a sensation; and the minute they told me I was causing a sensation, that was the end of it; after that there really was a sensation....'

This too is a portion of her legacy: the boldness to confront awkward situations head on.

She first came to my attention through her spiritual offspring. In the forties in Trinidad there was a group of young writers who gathered every Sunday to listen to the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*; and the name, above all others, we waited for was George Campbell.

We made him ours. Later we discovered *Focus* with the gifts of that very gentle man Vic Reid, and the not-at-all gentle angel Roger Mais. It would not be at all prudent to linger on Mais. Her contribution to the formation of what we now confidently call West Indian literature is not



Hon. Edna Manley O.M.

negligible.

The Diaries which are magnificently edited take us on the inside of her feeling and repeat a theme which burnt her conscience and returns us to that tumor which continues to disfigure all Caribbean life: the tumor of race and colour discrimination. First the note of identification:

'29 August, 1972. I know that my tie with Jamaica comes very strongly through my mother, as well as through Norman. Also in

a deep acceptance of being coloured...'

Then there is the devastation of recognising betrayal among those who were even her friends by the bond of class.

'14th July, 1976. It's been a terrible experience... people are leaving in swarms ostensibly for that reason (violence) which is far from the truth. Greed, love of their money, their special privileges, a refusal to face and accept colour and racial equalities... one's own friends shock

one....'

And then there was the torment over what she perceived as a new menace afflicting the arts.

'31 May, 1981. I keep wondering if one had to make a statement, perhaps a speech about Art in Jamaica then and now, how on earth would one handle the subject. Going right back to the 30's when it was all British inspired, to now when some of our artists are fighting to be free what some call oppressive nationalism... even a sentimental nationalism. This is one side of our present coin but on the other, there is this deep, passionate, savagely expressed racialism....'

Jamaica made Edna Manley one of its most resourceful daughters. "She has earned that freedom which lets her recognise the rhythm of its winds, the silence and aroma of these nights, rocks, water, pebble and branch, animal and bird noise, the temper of the sea, and the mornings at Nomdi arousing nature everywhere to the silent and sacred communion between her and the root she had made on the island. There was a bond between her and this corner of the earth which work and love had baptised with the name home...."

There is, in this exhibition, a photograph of Edna Manley at work the day before she died at the age of 87. It is, for me, one of the most moving moments in the history which goes before. She stayed with us to the end; and she is still here.