

# 'Edna Manley prepared herself for her role and place in history

On Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Edna Manley's biography, *The Private Years ... 1900-1938*, written by Trinidadian poet Wayne Brown, and published by Andre Deutsch was launched locally.

Journalist John Maxwell delivered the main address at the function at Olympia Hotel, near the University of the West Indies.

The following is the text of Mr. Maxwell's speech.

"Anyone foolhardy enough to attempt a biography of a living subject, yet not content to play the part of a ghostwriter, is, whether he knows it or not, on a collision course with blasphemy."

That is from Wayne Brown's introduction to his biography of Edna Manley. Some people of course would say that it is not blasphemy, in Edna's case it is *Leŕe majeste* ...

*Leŕe Majeste* because a biography is something like the journal of an exploration and Edna Manley is a continent of the mind, and in which there are many countries and many climates.

So it would be presumptuous of Wayne Brown or of any of us to pretend that this is the definitive book on Edna Manley, because like Africa, she will be the subject of exploration and re-discovery for a very long time: because she is a most important historical and pivotal figure in this country and the world of art, a wife and a mother to Prime Ministers and a prophet in her own right.

In Wayne Brown's book, or Wayne Brown's and Edna Manley's book (because she is

more than the subject of this book) we are presented with a highly personal picture of the first 39 years of her life and of her passionate love for the love of her life, Norman Manley.

They were momentous years in themselves to her, but whether she knew it, a mere preparation for even more momentous years of trial, of tragedy, of triumph and of intense loneliness.

I say whether she knew it, but I have no doubt that she knew it, because there is enough evidence in this book to assure me that she had prepared herself thoroughly and continued to prepare herself, for her life and her role and her place in history.

There is evidence from the start that Edna Manley was going to be a very unusual woman.

Her teacher, Miss Hanna, said of her at 17: "... She can hold her own against all comers ... she possesses great adaptability ... she is original ... and does the unexpected or the unsuspected ..." and, most important "... conventions are light and airy things to her, capable of destruction at a moment's notice..."

So it is no surprise to watch her as a young woman training herself in her art, moving from art school to art school as she exhausted their store of what she wanted to know, or that she has defied classification and convention throughout her long life.

Nor is it a surprise to deduce her absolute certainty that she knew where she was going, with Norman, and for herself in her own career, or that she was the wife of a Prime Minister and that both of her sons are

engaged in some of the most thankless and demanding work available in the world today.

In this volume — *THE PRIVATE YEARS* — we read how Edna Manley not only conceived and undertook her own heroic role in the birth of a recognisably Jamaican way in the arts, but how she comforted and supported a man who was far from the arrogant self-sufficient man he is sometimes supposed to be, but a great man, often unsure, tortured by dragons of self-doubt, and it would seem, painfully shy with most people.

Of course she made mistakes, about people, about herself, about Norman. But for most of us mistakes of this kind have either been forgotten, suppressed or unconscious. That she has chosen to tell it as it was, to give Wayne Brown and ourselves access to her most personal and passionate life is not only brave but of inestimable value to all of us.

Because all of us walk in myth, like mountains in the cloud, the myths we have created ourselves and the myths we have had created about us like snog. Some myths are more powerful than others, some more important and some of us have no lives beyond myth, no mountains behind the cloud, because we have invented it all.

And when the time comes to write the histories, and that time is all the time, it will be vital to truth and to the integrity of all of us that we get as many facts as right as we can.

In that way and only in that way can we understand and make sense of our past and of our

great and tragic occasions, and of our great and our tragic men and women, and of our great and tragic mistakes.

Otherwise, we shall repeat the mistakes more easily.

There are people today who are not only intent on creating myths for the future but are intent on falsifying history and making heroes out of rogues.

Those who would falsify the past will destroy the present, if we let them, and fit us all into Procrustean beds of their own alien design.

That we all have a place in this society today is in no small measure due to Edna Manley and her men. Many people before now have recognised her crucial role, and some have abused her for it, because they wish that history were a bandwagon on which they should be able to hitch a ride.

Her genius is that at the crucial time she was one of the very few who understood that a people must make their own mistakes if they are to make their own destiny, and that to make their own destiny, their own future, they must prepare for it, they must comfort and counsel each other, must disagree with each other and sometimes contradict themselves, they must work for it, perhaps compromise for it, fight for it and above all be always prepared to live for it and if necessary to die for it.

So it is that we see Edna Manley still here today, still vitally involved in the life of her country at a time of some crisis, still tempting fate and the critics with her work, still courting physical exhaustion by continuing with her work, refusing to be idle, still the catalyst though perhaps on a less extravagant scale. And it is my case that she knew it all along, that she prepared and

steeled herself and prepared and steeled others as much against disillusion and despair as against the temptations of the power and the glory, as much against the psychopants as against the abusers and the detractors.

Some of those she helped may forget, others will remember with gratitude and love.

And just in case I may be accused of making Edna Manley out to be the sole begetter of the process I have described please be assured that I know that this is not so. But perhaps she was more of a prophet than most, that perhaps she saw with a deeper intuition and passion, and trusted her intuition and her passion in her marriage to her cousin, in her training, in her work in which her prophetic imagination is most clearly revealed and in her two sons. She has been the centre of gravity of her family, as well as the centre of levity and fun, and the centre of responsibility and duty.

Which is why I think, Douglas and Michael are doing what they are today rather than making piles of loot in land development or something else and why Norman is not alive today and retired wealthy and carefree in Bermuda.

It isn't blood that will tell, it is integrity and dedication and hard work; it is a devotion to duty and a commitment to the cause of a people for which there are no decorations for valour or for much else ...

Only inadequate histories and very little gratitude.

And so as I salute Edna Manley today I confidently expect that I shall be accused of glorifying her. And I say, "so what" ... make the most of it .... and prove me to be wrong."