

# Edna Manley: 'Ahead of all the politicians'

By Michael Reckord

TWO recent functions at the National Gallery on the life and work of the late Edna Manley (one May 30, the other June 5) really opened my eyes to the greatness of that lady. I now believe it could

well be true that 'when the history of Jamaica of the last 50 years comes to be written, Edna Manley's contribution may be put ahead of all the politicians' as far as our acceptance and understanding of ourselves is concerned."

I am here quoting Ms. Jean Smith, the Chairperson of the second function, a symposium entitled "Edna Manley and the social, cultural and political life of Jamaica." The first function was the current national Gallery exhibition of Manley's artistic

works, "Edna Manley: Sculptor, A Retrospective."

The exhibition, the largest one-person show I have ever seen and, I'm certain, the largest ever mounted in Jamaica is spread over five or six rooms. I'm not sure why it has the title it does. For the 200-odd works (only some of her art, by the way) which covers 65 years of production, does not confine itself to sculpture and carvings. Also there to delight the eye and stimulate the mind are Manley's paintings, sil-screen prints, bronzes

and drawings.

This retrospective will be critiqued and discussed by the regular art critics, and I shall not dwell on it, except to further say that anyone interested in Jamaica's art and culture should — over the next few months try to see it, at least once. Let me turn, then, to the symposium, at which the speakers were Prof. Rex Nettleford, Pamela O'Gorman, Margaret Bernal, Gloria Escoffery, and Prof. Edward Baugh.

The symposium was organized by the Gallery's Education Department as one of the educational programmes designed to accompany the retrospective. Its objectives were "to generate a greater awareness of Edna Manley's contribution to the different areas of Jamaican life and to stimulate further research on the subject."

Prof. Nettleford, the first speaker, dealt with Mrs. Manley and the Jamaican dance. Unfortunately, I missed most of his talk and must here quote from the programme provided at the function which stated: "He will focus on the cross-fertilization between the iconography of Edna Manley's work and certain dance works from the NDTC repertoire, and he will illustrate his lecture with a videotape of Edna M." choreographed by Bert Rose. The

dance, Rose's masterpiece, is, of course, based on the life and work of Mrs. Manley.

## Mrs. Manley's life

Ms. O'Gorman's topic was "Music in the Life of Work of Edna Manley." We heard from the music scholar and former Director of the Jamaica School of Music that music was central to Mrs. Manley's life: "she and Norman Manley were intense listeners," and the couple held weekly two-hour long music sessions at their home in Drumblair. Music helped the artist to concentrate on her work, Ms O'Gorman said, and she would use particular musical pieces as "points of departure" for some of her own pieces. Mrs. Manley's Diaries make frequent references to music.

Mrs. Bernal looked at Mrs. Manley as "nurturer and artist," pointing out that as committed family supporter and as artist she had a lifelong conflict because of the pull of family in one director and the demands of her muse for privacy. Mrs. Manley's role as supporter of Norman Manley in his political years has yet to be properly assessed, Mrs. Bernal said. She also spoke of the artist's openness to 'national moods and changes,' her "acute social conscience," and her catalytic role in a young artistic movement in Jamaica.