

An appreciation of

'Edna Manley...

THE STAR, Thursday

...The Diaries'

By Pam O'Gorman

ON TUESDAY, Heinemann Publishers launched "EDNA MANLEY ...The Diaries" at the Creative Arts Centre in Kingston. The following appreciation of the book, edited by Rachel Manley, was given by a longtime friend, Miss Pam O'Gorman.

To read Rachel Manley's tender and insightful introduction to these Diaries is to render my job superfluous. With the verbal economy and precision of the poet, she has captured in a few pages the essence of what this book is about. And as the reader is drawn more and more deeply into the diaries he will no doubt return to Rachel's introduction time and again for a better grasp and comprehend this vast work. Her grandmother —the writer and poet —would indeed have been proud!

I vividly recall Rachel describing to Glynne Ewart and me that passage in the diaries that made such an impression on her when she first read it and that she felt was the key to understanding her grandmother's life. She does not refer to it in the Introduction, preferring no doubt to allow the reader to make his own discoveries; but I cannot help but quote from it, for it IS the key both to the diaries and to Edna's whole life.

It is the description of an experience she had in her youth, in Cornwall:

"I see two paths inextricably bound to each other, and yet in some curious way almost irrelevant to one another..."

"These two paths travel through country. One country is full of people, people seen objectively and people seen subjectively, people in relation to myself, where the image is vivid, where the music is loud, sometimes overwhelmingly loud, and where the vision is nearly always distorted like a face seen reflected in the back of a spoon...Those are the people who have made you, carved you, produced you,

"But the other path passes through country that is without sound or sight or contact. It is a world of twilight and in it something grows...that creature that is the inner you, that is there whatever people and things and sets of circumstances come and go..."

"One is a world of natural phenomena, of light and rain and people passing down the roads, of things happening, of excitement and peace and of music ending. The other is nothing, yet everything. Nothing happens, nothing comes, only a growing in the dark and a state of being..."



Ms. Pamela O'Gorman.

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P 12, 13 + 16

Edna
Manley

THE DIARIES

EDITED BY
RACHEL MANLEY



The cover of the book.

Book of journeys

This is a book of journeys along those two paths. On the first, a dazzling number of people pass — Heads of State, politicians, artists, writers, poets and musicians, teachers and scholars, journalists and family friends and the simple people with whom she empathized and whom she understood so well. On this path, also are the myriad events of her life, so many of them of monumental significance not only to her, but also to Jamaica.

The second path is the spiritual Odyssey which was her Inner life and which constitutes the heart of these diaries. It is here that she confides those spiritual beliefs and the faith that were to her more real than the unceasingly active and outwardly glamorous life of the successful artist, wife and mother who found herself so often at the apex of the country's political life.

She constantly ached to be able to retreat to the second road. In 1941, soon after the diaries were started and she was caught up in the political ferment of that time, she wrote, "I want an icy silence, an icy stillness and an icy loneliness." It was a cry from the heart; but it was seldom to be answered.

As Rachel says, in these diaries a book is written and a life unfolds. It is a fascinating mosaic of the present and the past. The really big events — even the momentous events — in her life go unremarked at the time, only to be referred to sometimes years later. She prized her artist's detachment and she rarely, if ever, subjected any event to anything but the analytic judgement afforded by time or to a desultory reference that placed it in its proper perspective in relation to her own inner journey. She once described herself as "someone with a purpose and a passionate need for spiritual values" and that purpose and that need did not embrace material or worldly success or the raucous and often confusing babel of the first road.

Gift for prescience

In 1955, she comes back again to contemplating the second road and this time she describes it as a creative path —

"Out of the hurt and confusion you make something new, something other than, something different. You make order out of confusion, you make peace out of hurt... and the two roads in that hilly field of emotion way back in that youthful Cornwall have welded into one."

"And remotely I have detached myself from the process and now I see it all."

I mention these two roads for another reason: it is the first of several entries that betray a gift for prescience — an ability to intuit the future, which so many artists express through the heightened awareness of their art, often quite unconsciously and enigmatically. She expressed it both in her art and in the diaries and it is an aspect of her work that I hope will one day be the subject of a special study.

It is not without considerable thought that I submit that this book which will be opened to the public tonight is a priceless accompaniment to understanding not only the work of Jamaica's greatest artist, but also the origins of Jamaica's modern history. As such it is surely a national treasure such as few countries anywhere have been privileged to own.

Diaries are unique

Every country has its chroniclers who describe the events which will later become history; but few countries have been blessed with an Edna Manley — an extraordinary visual artist with an extraordinary literary talent and an extraordinary spiritual vision and insight — who lived at the very hub of fifty of the most momentous years in a country's turbulent and often painful history. In this respect, I believe that these diaries are unique.

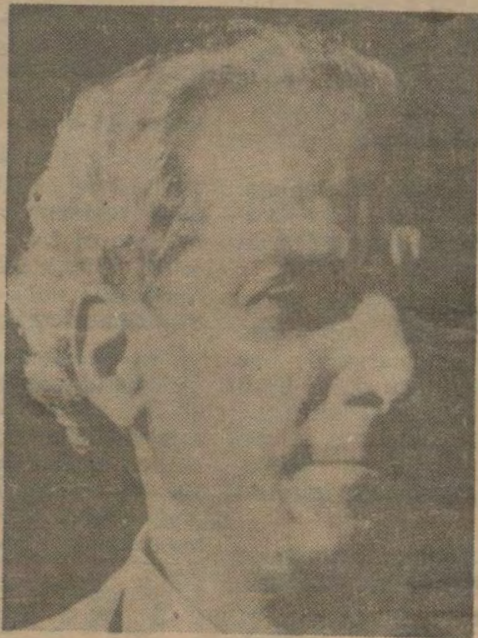
She started them in 1939 at the age of 39 when Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante had embarked on the political struggle that culminated in Jamaican self-government. In the first diary she paints a fascinating picture of those days when Norman travelled the length and breadth of Jamaica, explaining to the people the whole concept of political independence. Her artist's eye, her insight into human nature, her total identification with the country and its people, bring alive those early days in a way that will probably be a revelation to those who know only the facts of Jamaica's political history.

She paints an unforgettable picture of Norman at Pompey's Shop in the hills of St. Andrew:

"When... Norman was called upon, he was standing on the rock just behind Isaacs, swaying on his hips in that way he has, with his face turned up to the night. Lit faintly by the moonlight and with the mighty peaks behind him, he looked a quiet, impressive figure.

"When he stepped up, the storm lantern threw its uneven yellow light up under this face, making the hollows in his cheeks look carved and his eyes enormous."

What an unforgettable picture!



The Rt. Excellent Norman Manley, National Hero, husband of the Hon. Edna Manley.

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Memorable anecdote

And for those younger generations that might never really understand the monumentality of the task that lay before Manley and Bustamante at that time, there is the memorable anecdote of a time spent travelling through the silent mountains round Hall's Delight and Westphalia in 1944, culminating with Norman speaking on a tiny ridge to an audience of 21 adults and 5 children in the dim light of a storm lantern followed by the descent into town to a mass meeting at Race Course where over 20,000 people, cheering and singing, waited for him to appear before them.

Reading these diaries, we come closer to a true understanding of the superhuman efforts that went into setting this country on a path that has culminated in its becoming one of the most stable Third World democracies in the world today. And of the deep humility and integrity and personal sacrifice that lay behind Norman and Edna Manley's involvement in Jamaica's political life.

And it is important that we know this. For far too often we hail our leaders for their deeds and their palpable achievements. Seldom do we realize the pain and sacrifice which are the constant companions of dedicated leadership, no matter what party the leader belongs to...

In 1972, she remembered Norman thus:

Loved life

"It was as if Norman accepted his fate that he had to be a symbol, an image and that therefore it was important that he should be absolutely true to HIMSELF, and out of that whatever contribution he could make arose. Norman didn't drown himself in work — worked like ten men, but the residual bit of himself was conscious of his family, his friends, the personal problems of his colleagues, his own spiritual and emotional growth."

(How well I know that. I shall never forget, on the occasion of hurricane warning sometime in the 'sixties, when Norman, busy as he was, drove into my yard, emerged from his Benz with a saw and a machete in his hand and proceeded to limb the mango tree.) And she goes on: "He was never a desperate man. He once talked to me about the discovery of detachment. I will never forget it." (And she quotes him) "You will never grow up until you learn a degree of detachment in the face of your problems, a sort of inner acceptance and peace."

And she never did forget those words. She strove constantly and mightily to put them into practice!

She loved life — and she lived it with every fibre of her senses. Her diaries are constantly illuminated by her awareness of sights, sounds and smells which the reader will want to stop and savour not just for the sensuous pleasure they evoke, but most often for the sheer poetry of the writing:

From Arthur's Seat in 1940: "The old toad is rolling his drum down at the foot of the hill, and the crunch, crunch of the cows is near to my window over the barbecue."

"The dark and the light have lain down in each other's arms to sleep in a bed of silver moonlight and a little shifting wind brings the scents from the nearby woodland on the other hill".

Humour

At Nomdmi in 1944:

"The house is surrounded by fog — which lies white and still on the top of the hill. Outside, the voices of the children shrieking as they chase their ball through the trees standing like ghosts in the heavy mist, sound like the disembodied spirits of all children of all epochs since the first children of man" — and in the same entry: "The road ends where the inky black shoulders of the mountains rise on either hand to tower to meet the stars, which seem to get entangled in the minute foliage of the mountain edge."

And, in 1968 — "I love Regardless — the sound of the traffic and Four Roads raising its usual racket of dogs and quite stupendous sound systems."

The lightness, the quality of her humour which her friends and acquaintances know so well is also there. She says, apropos a visit by Princess Margaret in 1955: — "May I go on record once and for all — I hate to bend the knee, except to God, and even then not too often."

Or on talking with Michael: — "Talking with Michael is like going down a water chute and finding yourself in the same swimming pool, very much at the deep end."

And of the faith which was a lifelong companion: — "Faith is real, I say — but it has to be so God awful strong to bear one up!"

And those who are aware of a certain family notoriety in relation to fast driving will react appropriately to the following entry, made when she was 71 years old: — "Driving at 80 miles per hour, I suddenly remembered Norman..."

There are so many other facets to these diaries, reflecting as they do the many sides of this remarkable woman.

Heartbreaking

There are the frequent references to music, literature, poetry and the fine arts, a fountainhead of creative ideas about which she could argue passionately and which sustained and often inspired her own work; there is her family whom she adored and agonized over yet never interfered with.

There is above all the transcendental love that she bore for Norman — what she described as “the glory and the pain of our life together” which transformed her whole life and remained part of her inner being until the day she died. Her description of Norman’s death and the aching loneliness of her life thereafter are heartbreaking.

But among the most revelatory of all are those entries that relate to her work as an artist. Not only does she describe in graphic detail the agony of creating a work of art that is a true reflection of an inner vision but she also quietly confesses the deep humility that she brought to her art.

Here is her description of her preparation for carving the crucifix for All Saints church in downtown Kingston: —

“I started work at around 9:00 a.m. I knelt and prayed — not only for guidance and inspiration in the carving, but that a new era of peace and honesty should invade my life whilst I worked...”

How many artists have been able to describe so precisely the obsessive need of the artist to create, the decision that have to be made in the constant struggle to give palpable form to an inner vision; or the inner tension that pulls constantly against the insatiable demands of everyday life? We accompany her through the planning and creation of several works — and at the end we emerge with fresh insight into visual art and the whole creative process.

She speaks of her love of woodcarving and it evokes a joyful and rare admission of her own inimitable skill: — “I know I am a minor artist, but no one, but no one is a better wood carver. No one can bully, cajole, coax, batter, trick or beguile wood like I can!”

At the age of 63, as part of a new beginning arising out of the loss of the 1962 election, she turns to clay — approaching it humbly as a beginner embarking on a new journey:

Artistic disappointments

“Alright now, we begin at the beginning again — right down at the bottom, a fresh look and a last start.

“A new medium and one that is quicker and allows of free movement...”

“So I do a little goat’s head and then a whole goat. Then an owl —

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An appreciation of...



-1978 file photo

SHARING A TOAST: Hon. Lady Bustamante, the Rt. Excellent Sir Alexander Bustamante, (centre) National Hero and Prime Minister Michael Manley share a toast.

Continued from Centrespread

And a Tiger, Tiger — and each time it must be unforced — with no striving for effect — only an attempt to understand what clay can do and to get the owliness of the owl. Nothing really matters except to find a core of simple truth.”

Several times she mentions artistic disappointments, almost laconically; so much so that it takes some time to realize how shattering they must have been at the time.

And it was all part of that striving for that “detachment in the face of your problems” without which Norman had said one could never grow.

Humble in art, she constantly strove for humility in life. In 1955 she wrote: “I believe in a state of being when, through humility and quietness, one can accept life and people as they are.”

Her whole life was, in a sense, a work of art. Where most people succumb to a fatalistic acceptance of the unfolding of their lives, she was forever trying to take hold of hers.

Here to serve others

She struggled incessantly to be a better person and her life was marked by an absence of self-indulgence that was an outward manifestation of her belief that she was here to serve others — whether family, friends or nation.

In her later years, along with Lady Bustamante, she became a healing presence in the society, helping to mend old wounds, burying past hurts and making gestures of peace and reconciliation, often in the face of the political imperatives of the time.

And here I must digress to recall briefly an unforgettable evening dedicated to the memory of C.L.R. James which was held in this Centre just a few weeks ago. A relative of James reminded us that C.L.R. always believed that the people of immature societies spend their energies tearing one another down rather than directing them toward the positive act of building. In these diaries and in her life we find a shining example of maturity in action — Edna described it as “accepting people in faith and love”. For us, it might be regarded as an indication of the road we have yet to travel as a nation if we are to become a more sane and mature society. And one’s mind reaches further to one of her sculptures of the seventies — “The Ancestor”. What prescience, what truths are contained in that strange, enigmatic figure? Only the future will reveal the answer.

Violence

It is only in reading the diaries that we discover how difficult the late seventies and early eighties were for her. More and more her entries are a vehicle for self-communing about the difficulty of living in a world gone mad, about her reluctant acceptance of the frailty of age, the reality of approaching death.

Yet what she expressed in her work and in her public image were completely different.

And to a certain extent it is explained by the entry for March 25, 1974:

“Tonight, this night of March 25, with the Andante of Schubert’s A Major Sonata stealing out into the night, I swear all I have of passion, all I have of love, I will pour into a message of faith as I carve.”

Only once did her outrage at the violence that overtook Jamaica break through into her work, in the unbelievably powerful and haunting “Ghetto Mother” of 1981.

Perhaps what “Ghetto Mother” left us was a deeper understanding not only of her art but of art generally. The violence and fear contained in that dark, massive scream of terror and outrage are horrifying, just as the events that inspired it were horrifying. It is art as self-expression of a kind that grabs you by the throat and leaves you shaken and disturbed.

There is also the art that exists on a plane above mere self-expression where the artist becomes a medium for communication a state of being which has been attained only through great spiritual effort and struggle — and which has been the province only of the greatest artists.

When we read the Fourth Diary, it is important that we constantly keep in mind the serene works of those last years in which there is no pain and no suffering, only hope and faith.

At Christmas 1986, just six weeks before she died, she gave some of her friends a final Christmas gift — a colour photograph of “Birth”, the last painting she exhibited in the National Collection, — created, incredibly, when her sight was almost gone — to which she attached the message, “Let’s build a brave new world.”

At the last, the two paths had united into one. In her art she had distilled the essence of that long and glorious journey and her final legacy was a sublimation of all she had learned about love, and renewal and faith in the future.