

A most interesting look at ourselves

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Mirror, Mirror:— Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica —
Rex M. Nettleford — Collins-Sangster — 256 pages, \$4.00.

A collection of four essays bounded by a preface and a postscript. "What an extraordinary book to be backed by Jamaica's publishing firm of Collins-Sangster (Jamaica) Ltd! Who will read it?" is the sort of comment which might be made. But that would miss the point. This is a most interesting look at Jamaicans and many of our stumblings as we try to find our identity (if indeed one can be found) and includes many a comment which is profound and thought-provoking. It is recommended for all Jamaicans and that 'all' does not mean only the usual book-reading public but the 'rude boy' and the Ras Tafari whose attitudes to life are seriously discussed, as indeed they should be.

Rex Nettleford, artistic director of the National Dance Theatre Company, director of the Trade Union Education Institute and acting director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the U.W.I. as well as frequent lecturer on historical topics in Jamaica (quite a combination this!) has invited Jamaicans to turn their minds critically on our society 'and better still to do so with a sense of adventure and originality. This book is a 'must' for discussion groups and should also be required reading for the 'establishment' which can, without thought, dismiss any influence on us which is not European and discount the Ras Tafari movement as nothing more than a millenarian cult (Nettleford's phrase).

Nettleford has for most part, except perhaps in the postscripts, let the facts speak for themselves, quoting various attitudes, from the press, including letters to the Editor of the Gleaner (numerous examples), comments from many writers (Jamaican as well as overseas) to bring out the points he makes, showing us what we ourselves think of ourselves on the matter of race (the white bias which still persists and the black power reaction to it), the need for Jamaicans to have an identity which they can feel is their own (and the great difficulty in so doing in our present society) and how the protest movements have developed.

The four essays deal with (a) National Identity and Attitudes to Race (b) African Redemption (the Ras Tafari movement) (c) Jamaican Black Power (with special reference to the now defunct Abeng and (d) how, like a musical composition, the melody of Europe combines with the rhythm of Africa in our society.

Nettleford has read widely and deeply on these subjects, and even quotes more than once from unpublished material, and looked at them with a critical eye (a contrast to most Jamaicans who react to them only emotionally) and in this book forces us to do the same. He also does so in language which is arresting, moving easily from the vernacular to the telling cultured phrase (which, of course, should be the prerogative of all Jamaicans). The New World descendants of African slaves is said to be: "black man, white man, brown man and all the 'in-betweens' rolled into one. He is Europe's melody and Africa's rhythm, at once the dissonance and the harmony of both."

If one can pick out a statement which sums up the whole it is "The predicament of the black Jamaican is still the problem of finding himself in Jamaican society without the disabilities of his racial-historical connections. If multi-racialism is to be taken seriously in the society, Jamaica must rid itself of this predicament."

On the critical side, there are some misprints. Lord Olivier appears as Lord Oliver (without the second 'i') — page 179 — Bustamante appears in the Notes (though not in the text) as Bustamente — page 287, Note 5 — a common mistake overseas — and Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber has an 'o' for an 'a' as Servon-Schreiber — page 288. Eric Williams is given full credit for the idea of a wider Federation than the Commonwealth Caribbean but this is an idea which others had publicly expressed long before; W. Adophe Roberts immediately comes to mind, for instance. The index does include subjects as well as proper names but, perhaps for reasons of space, does not seem to cover everything.

Do read this, examine it critically and think how we should meet the problems which it exposes to our view.

—C.L.