

B/N Seage, Edward
On the way home:

A tribute to Eddie

Rex Nettleford

Contributor

E DWARD PHILLIP George Seaga, former MP, former Prime Minister of Jamaica and until recently Leader of the Opposition, has now demitted office and, in his own words to Parliament, has lit his candle, sung his sankey and is about to go back home. That home is undoubtedly his Jamaica – the wider one which afforded him ideal form and purpose for all his adult life – and not Tivoli Gardens, the West Kingston enclave in which he has indeed been master of all he surveyed for over four decades.

A room in that wider home is the University of the West Indies (UWI), where he will get the opportunity as he deservedly does, to research, reflect on, and disseminate through his writings and active discourse the lived reality of his long years in public life as well as of earlier times when he investigated the cultural expres-

sions of the people from below not only in their religious rituals but also their musical expressions and their philosophy and way of life – all of which prepared him for the political life he led in subsequent years.



NETTLEFORD

GOOD FOR THE FUTURE

It is the job of a university to capture all bodies of knowledge that can serve future generations and Edward Seaga's journey back home will facilitate the process of collection, storage and retrieval which defines, determines and delineates the world of learning. His journey and sojourn in this new 'non-political' (read non-partisan non-tribal) world augurs nothing but good for the future. It would be irresponsible for a university to lose or wilfully ignore such possibilities.

As I have had reason to say back in 1999, Edward Philip George Seaga, like so many people of substance, has almost from day one of his 40-year political career attracted controversy. And, like many a public activist, he is not short of "reliable

Please see **TRIBUTE, G11**

TRIBUTE

Continued from G1

enemies with whom he can pick regular newsworthy fights.” The operative word here is ‘newsworthy’ rather than ‘fights’. For it is the news media which have helped to invest the feistiness and fighting spirit of Edward George with insensitive and even demonic proportions.

I myself have known another dimension of this public figure who once insisted he was not into ‘popularity’ but whose public life has contributed in no small or insignificant way to genuinely popular concerns beginning with his ‘have-and-have-not speech’ in the old Legislative Council and echoed in Parliament only this past week.

SEAGA AND CULTURE

On my return in 1959 to UCWI as a Resident Tutor in the Department of Extra Mural Studies, I came upon, via the telephone, a young Harvard graduate named Edward Seaga, who I learnt had decided not to continue his studies in medicine at the fledgling UCWI. He, however, turned out to be one of the most willing and effective part-time lecturers for the Extra Mural Department. His topic was ‘Pocomania’ (Pukumina), the form of worship through which many from the mass of the Jamaican population lived and had their being. Other than a handful of scholars like Edward Seaga, few invested it with the seriousness it clearly deserved. The university, with a Philip Sherlock as a founding father and social anthropology lecturer M.G. Smith as a caring student of the people from below, had to take the topic and related ones seriously.

Mr. Seaga could be called upon at very short notice to travel and lecture within rural Jamaica and fill in, in cases of emergency; and his enthusiasm in being a part of this new experience of Adult Education was clearly the fuel that made him a reliable member of the small Extra Mural staff that was dedicated to education for those persons who were unable to be part of the formal University programme.

I was not surprised, then, that on his election to office, he brought to his portfolio a sharpened sense of the importance of Jamaican culture rooted in the creative output of the people from below. He spotted the power of the creative talent of sculptor and painter (also a pocomania shepherd) Mallica Reynolds, better known as ‘Kapo’; and to his lasting credit he saved for Jamaica that invaluable collection of Kapo’s works then owned by Larry Wirth of Stony Hill when it was up for sale to foreign purchasers. The collection remains today in all its majesty in the National Gallery as part of the nation’s patrimony.

He also recognised the tremendous potential which lay in the newly emerging music industry, where voices like Prince Buster and Desmond Dekker through his many contacts with the music industry in North America, put ska and subsequently reggae on the map by opening up important doors and providing the necessary exposure which catapulted Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and others like them into instant and, in some cases, lasting fame. He shares, then, with Chris Blackwell, Clement Coxson-Dodd, Ken Khouri and Duke Reid an iconic role in the development of the Jamaican popular music/recording industry which he reminded Parliament in his farewell speech has brought Jamaica worldwide fame.

into the School of Music and still later into the African-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, remains memorable for its clarity and the farsightedness of the objectives he stated in addition to his own grasp of the process of developing ‘classic’ artistic expressions drawing on the creativity of the Jamaican folk as a source of energy.

INSTITUTION BUILDER

His greatest accomplishment, however, may well be his success as an institution-builder. He understood the importance of organisation, and he recognised that nothing could have any lasting value if there was no structure within which it could be planted, and allowed to flourish. The Jamaica Festival Commission (later JCDC) and the National Trust are examples of that vision. His own West Indies Records Ltd (later Dynamic Sounds), albeit privately entrepreneurial, was also part of that vision.

He recognised the importance of a new nation having heroes with which the people could identify. It was through his efforts that the body of Marcus Mosiah Garvey was returned to Jamaica, and reinterred in a place of honour in National Heroes Park. He, of course, saw the psychic importance of a National Heroes Park, and was party to the orchestration and establishment of the Order of National Hero, which honour was conferred on both Norman Manley and Sir Alexander Bustamante and, before them, on Marcus Garvey.

He understood the sense of history which this move could mean to a nation that had existed in the shadow of British Heroes for all of three centuries; and he was opportunely and strategically placed, as Minister of Development and Culture, at the time the National Anthem was written, and dramatic works like ‘Ballad for

a Rebellion’ commissioned. This particular work dramatised the Morant Bay Rebellion making it come alive to a people who knew little of the historical facts. An entire generation of young Jamaicans, schooled in the ‘60s, grew up with a pride in the achievements of people who looked like them, and who had contributed to the birthing of a new nation.

Contrary to a view commonly held, such efforts were consciously undertaken by Mr. Seaga with a genuine respect for the inheritance of that sense of place and purpose bequeathed to his generation by the one that went before carrying the names of leaders like Norman Manley, Alexander Bustamante and Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

If the energy of youth which a young Edward Seaga had in abundance seemed at times to ‘dis’ the wisdom of age in much that he did, it may well have been because of the impatience that the young rightly and characteristically have in pushing history forward. But his own understanding of the limits to all this was clearly demonstrated in his passionate appeal for tolerance and patience to young Black Power activists at the end of his budget speech in the late sixties.

Engagement with the field of culture teaches such wisdom and I have always preferred to appeal to that sense and sensibility of Edward Seaga which has certainly served the teething years of this still groping nation well, and which is likely to number him among the truly significant contributors to the growth and development of a Jamaica which he, like all others of us, still like to call ‘home’.

■ *Professor Rex Nettleford is Vice Chancellor Emeritus, University of the West Indies.*

PERSONAL CONTACTS

Personal contacts between us were further reinforced at the time of the formation of the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) of Jamaica which he encouraged, gave official blessing, and facilitated field-observations into pocomania and zion revivalism by the entire company. He even showed the dancers a step or two which those early dancers with wicked wit christened the ‘Seaga steps’. Those steps were indeed done in a distinctively Seagite and memorable fashion.

But more importantly, he brought to Jamaican dance-theatre tremendous understanding; and along with Edna Manley, Louise Bennett, Martha Graham and Robert Verity became a founding patron of the now internationally acclaimed Jamaican dance-theatre ensemble. He also gave to Olive Lewin and the Jamaican Folk Singers, not only similar patronage, but also his substantial collection of deep-roots music which he had collected in his formal investigation into Jamaican cults. His vision for the Folk Music Research Unit, later incorporated

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA