

Neville Dawes presents Caribbean novels

By V. S. Reid

The Leopard

(PART ONE)

"Literature," Ezra Pound said, "is news that STAYS news." The Presentations in this series of selected Caribbean creative writers will be of literature in the sense of work that came out with the éclat of a journalistic scoop and has continued to startle ever since. We shall be presenting the actual work of these writers, with only a minimum of commentary.

Vic Reid's *New Day* was published in 1949 and then we have a period of silence — from 1949 to 1958—which is a lengthy absence for a professional novelist.

The Leopard, published in 1958, breaks the silence. It is set in East Africa, in Kenya, and the story is seen through the consciousness of Nebu, a young Kikuyu, who breaks away from his Mau group to follow a white man's trail in the urgent and certain stalking of that white man's rifle.

Nebu finds his prey and in the instant before killing him with his panga, he recognises him as Bwana Gibson, his former master. That instant of surprise gives Bwana Gibson enough time to shoot Nebu in the side wounding him mortally.

Travelling with Bwana Gibson is a crippled half-caste boy aged ten who is, in fact, Nebu's son born from a single act of adultery with Gibson's wife, Edith. As atonement for having wronged Gibson, Nebu decides to lead the child out of the forest and place him on the safety of the white man's road. But the leopard (which Nebu had seen before he killed Gibson) appears again. Nebu fails to shoot it because the boy, protecting himself, had removed the bolt from Nebu's captured rifle.

So the leopard, led by the increasingly decaying scent of Nebu's wound, trails him slowly and relentlessly — the leopard who "avoids the strong and eats the wounded and the weak." In the end the leopard kills the half-caste and then is dramatically shot by a white lieutenant as it strikes at the dying but heroically — prepared Nebu.

That is the basic outline of the story of this short novel (159 pages in the Chatham Book-seller edition) but it is textured with flashbacks, with the queasy conversations between Nebu and his half-caste son and with the romanticised (some critics think over-romanticised) descriptions of African fauna and flora.

Nebu's act of adultery with his master's wife is key to the book's structure and Reid makes

careful preparation for the scene. He stresses Nebu's lithe strength and the young woman's athletic grace. On her first arrival at the Gibson farm Nebu, a strapping youth, was plucked from the field and planted in the house to scrub floors and move things. The woman had a firm on horseback and a great deal of fluency in her walk. She was a very young wife for the half his age.

One day Bwana Gibson had gone off on a trip into the bush. Edith had gone out horse-riding. Suddenly a tropical storm broke and Nebu, working in the house, was engulfed by the "long rains." Nebu danced to the thunderous drums of the rain, dancing alone in a ngoma that not the wisest master dancer among the Somali or the Masai or the Kikuyu could conceive.

Reid leads us into the fateful confrontation. Nebu danced nude, narrow-hipped, the strong calves and plow-widened shoulders like dark old wine catching what light there was about. The woman entered the room.

'She had ridden in through the rainstorm and her clothes were soaked and clung to her horse-woman's body so she was all long flat legs and shoulder hollows, and breasts proud as Babylon... brown hair flicked with water tumbled to her shoulders. The black, posed catlike on his sprung knees, was sculptured in hard, young manhood. With the tip of her tongue, the msabu touched the rainwater on her lips.'

And then, focussed later in his consciousness, Nebu remembers... the rough thrusts of the msabu's hips when she fought for him to fill her using the rich language of her body to talk away his fears. And the unfumble of her fingers opening the blouse to offer and offer. Planting, blooming and bursting while the rain lashed in at the window.

The writing is taught and controlled. We accept the "ordination" of the union. It is a single act but the results for Nebu are profound.

'He had never done it again with the msabu. But she had fixed a fierce tenderness in him and he would have fought lions with his hands for the white woman.'

Nebu had placed, with revealing fingers, a bowl of double zinnias at her place at the breakfast table and Bwana had noted the adoration of his hands. He remarked irritably; "You know, your Kikuyu boy fairly worships you, Edith. The way he hovers about you." And she replied quietly, "I know."

The unspoken relationship between Nebu and Edith Gibson, not only in Nebu's consciousness but also in Edith's calm acceptance of carrying the misbegotten, is the most startling relationship in the book.

TOMORROW: Violence and Cultural Confrontation.

Caribbean novels — by Neville Dawes

The Leopard

By V. S. Reid

PART TWO

**(Part 1 was published
yesterday)**

We will now look at, in turn, the violence, the cultural confrontation, the relationship between Nebu and his half-caste son and Reid's evocation of African fauna and flora.

Several acts of violence are either presented dramatically or reported. There is the massacre of the Lomas family where Nebu silences "a black servant with a thrust of his spear." Then there is the horrifying screaming of the European policeman, a castration expert, suffering unspeakable tortures before being killed by the Wakamba women. Then Bwana Gibson batters to death "the flower face of his msabu" because she has given birth to a half-caste child. There is Gibson's own death from Nebu's panga and the leopard's almost casual slaying of the half-caste boy. Finally, we have the white lieutenant's shooting of the leopard and his own death in the climax of the story.

In his final scene, the lieutenant is about to shoot the already dying but armed Nebu:

'He raised the gun and considered firing into the black just to make sure, then he recalled that they both seemed to have been travelling together. This must have been one of the loyal bucks, perhaps had saved the child from a massacre. He dropped his arm and walked forward. He stood out hard against the light from the door, a lean-waisted, wide-shouldered tawny bull leopard. And Nebu charted the curvature of his chest through the khaki bush jacket and marked where the breast-bone swelled above the heart and the certainty that he had the target well laid flowed sweetly through him. Great One, the African sang in his head, give us long knives. It was morning in his arms and shoulders.'

The background was a war but it would be wrong to regard it as racial in any simplistic sense. At bottom it was economic and the urgent necessity that Nebu had to make the white man beautiful with death is the necessity to repossess the vast areas of the finest farming land in Kenya. After talk has failed, the only recourse is naked force.

This understanding of Mau Mau terror does not become a theme in the book and Reid can be faulted for not making the point specifically.

Reid, however, succeeds in displaying two aspects of what I might call the confrontation of cultural superstructures.

Nebu is bitterly sardonic about the white man's claim to be the lord of the land.

"All the pink ones are fools", the black said to himself as he sped on his mission. "They come in and laugh at our god and say to us Beat no more drums to your god, already he is deaf.... They are as few as a handful of pebbles, yet they say to us who number as the sands of Kilindini: Stay in your pocket of a Reserve except we need you to plant our coffee....

Great One, give us long knives!

The second confrontation is demonstrated in a kind of compassion that is curiously mixed into Nebu's contempt for, even hatred of, Bwana Gibson's way of dying. A man, thinks the African, should "go away with the poetry of ease on his tongue, not writhing and shrieking." He had no grace. "Bwana Gibson had turned, ugly going away."

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Gibson's death is excruciating. With the panga buried in his chest, he says softly to Nebu, "Look - look at me black swine....Dying like a white man. Do you-see-me-begging?"

But neither would I, Nebu thought.... Why cannot the white man understand? The white man has no understanding! cried the African angrily in his head, and swiftly stooped and wrenched out the blade. It ended for Gibson in a rain of pain that made his ruined body jump for the knife.'

This is not going "like a sapling...down in the quiet goodbye of leaves whispering; going down on a boon of wind that took it gently to earth." It is the white man's sad ignorance, as Nebu conceives it, not to understand that nature is finally what man must become.

The relationship between Nebu and the half-caste is dominated by Nebu's certainty that in atonement for the wrong he did to Gibson he must not slay the boy but must lead him to the safety of the white man's road.

This sardonic, spoilt boy, fearful of Nebu's will, steals and hides the rifle bolt with the result that Nebu, totally ignorant of the mechanism of a gun, fails to shoot the leopard and attributes his failure to the decree of Ngai, the All-

Seeing of the Kikuyu who had taught "that the man who did wrong would not go unpunished, except he paid in the material most loved, flesh of his cattle or his woman."

The boy is psychologically, treacherously, twisted. He is moved to ecstasy by watching the thrill of pain in others. He baits Nebu constantly in Kikuyu and his language is objectionable - "filthy Kikuyu", "nigger", but Nebu, dying gradually of his wound, persists in the necessary act of atonement.

In the end, in this mishapen boy, there is the moment of compassion in which he tries to give back to Nebu the bolt that will make the gun speak.

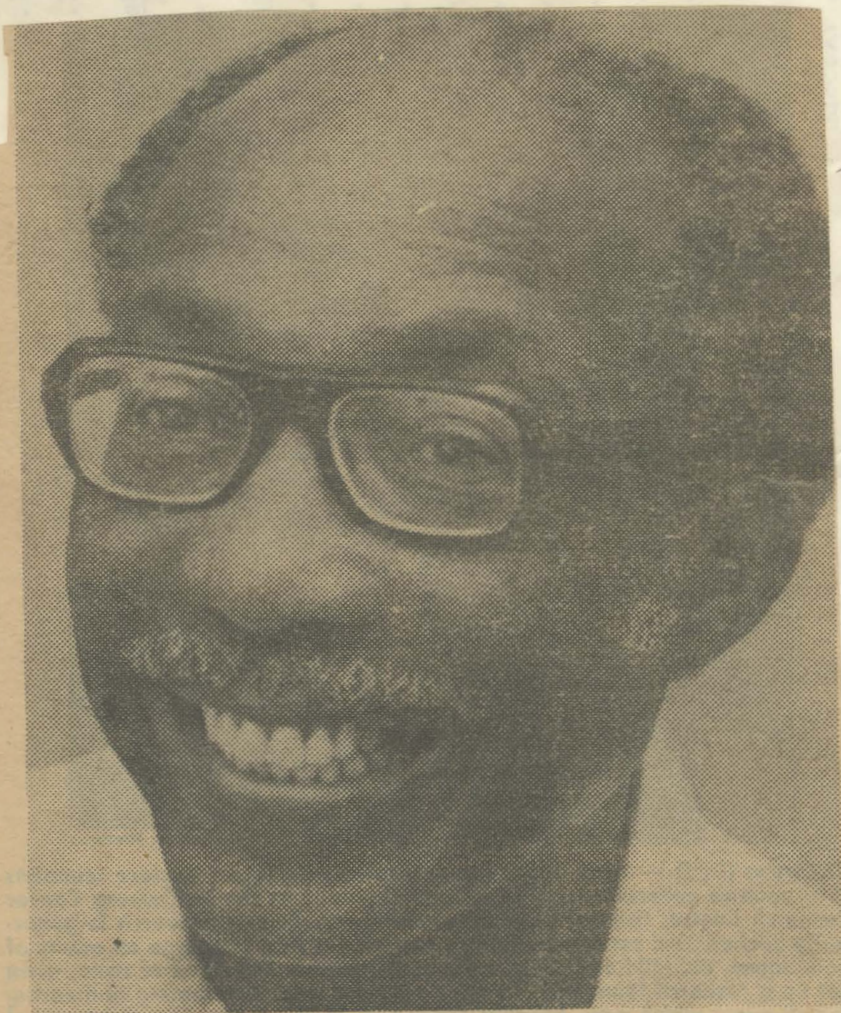
'The boy's eyes opened. The pain was gone and they were clear.

"My father is a warrior," he said, his head up. "Nebu, the warrior. I love him very much..."

"A great warrior," Nebu said gravely. "Alone, Nebu slew a bwana who carried a rifle. It is a greater feat than to kill an elephant."

There are respect and love in the unity of blood. But, more important, there is understanding in death.

TOMORROW: Read's view of Kenya



V. S. Reid

IN THIS FINAL SCENE, LIEUTENANT IS ABOUT TO SHOOT THE ALREADY DYING BUT ARMED NEBU: He raised the gun and considered firing into the black just to make sure, then he recalled that they both seemed to have been travelling together. This must have been one of the loyal bucks, perhaps had saved the child from a massacre. He dropped his arm and walked forward. He stood out hard against the light from the door, a lean-waisted, wide-shouldered tawny bull leopard. And Nebu charted the curvature of his chest through the khaki bush jacket and marked where the breast-bone swelled above the heart and the certainty that he had the target well laid flowed sweetly through him. GREAT ONE, the African sang in his head, GIVE US LONG KNIVES. It was morning in his arms and shoulders.'

Caribbean novels —

by Neville Dawes

The Leopard

By V. S. Reid

PART THREE

(The first two parts were published on Monday and yesterday.)

Throughout THE LEOPARD Reid attempts to evoke the Kenyan landscape and the philosophy of Kikuyu life focussed in Nebu's consciousness.

For example, the Kikuyu land "of immense folds and rolling parks", the game and the long rains are evoked richly:

In March, or sometimes in April, the long rains come, impregnating the earth with frightening fecundity and the ancient wounds spread their lips again and new shoots spring from them.

Reid goes on, more questionably, to describe Kenya as a land rich in hate, a land of feud,

'But none of the white men and few of the black understand it, or cope with it. Nor do any of the noble beasts, the lion or the rhino or the bull buffalo. Only the leopard understands it, for he avoids the strong and eats the wounded and the weak.'

What, one might ask, does "understanding the land" mean? The leopard clearly has a horrible fascination for Reid but we cannot then go on to say (as one critic does) that "the leopard symbolises the settler" in Kenya. A good novel does not work with that kind of self-indulgence. Over all there is Reid's insistence that in the end, after the first phase of the economic struggle is ended, black and white have no meaning in a land where Nebu, speaking in Kikuyu, "hunched down with old truths like a prophet" says, 'That is the way of the Great One. We stand before him without our skins. None is black or white either. It is a mystery.'

This is difficult to grasp but a warning is contained there — that there must be an ordained and ultimate unity between the races. To ignore this kind of specific statement and to describe The Leopard as

"intensely anti-white" as Louis James does is highly irresponsible in so famous a critic.

Reid's use of concrete and unadorned similes must be noted. "Real as an aching cavity"; snug as a good wife on a cold night"; Nebu breathed "as calm as Sunday"; Edith Gibson's breasts are "proud as Babylon"; "Slumber had collected Nebu into the blanket, tight as a sausage"; an island of bamboos is as aloof as cats; the leopard's mouth is "like a badly mended purse".

One must notice the essentially Western posture in these similes. They do not arise naturally to Nebu. Indeed very early in the book, Reid, with a more elaborate simile, firmly establishes author and reader as Westerners who must be induced to walk carefully in the African world.

In this pivotal simile Nebu had the trail firmly written in his head "as precisely as you or I would obtain a schedule from a railway timetable."

In other similes we are dealing with Christianity, as in "roofed in foliage as green as Eden; "Hinged valleys so vast you could lose the world's sins in them"; "as a mamba coiled in a Communion Cup."

The effect of these images is to bring the story within the author's own grasp by confronting this vital landscape with the concrete language of the West Indian, that is Western, peasant or worker.

The Leopard moves with such speed (it is interlocked in timing and plot) and with such force that it might be regarded as a single explosion taking place over a hundred and fifty-nine pages. And yet it is most carefully constructed.

Finally we must watch Reid at work with Nebu and the leopard. It is Nebu's second failure to kill the leopard.

'The leopard came out in the afternoon. It came out of a clump of husky chestnuts, off a low limb, and it was cold and wet and murderous. Save for the quick scabble of the claws on the slippery wood, it left the limb without a sound; and when Nebu saw it the hindlegs were already hooking inward for sinking into the boy's shoulders. It was an alien flicker in the corner of Nebu's eyes but his jungle senses instantly smote into action. He was quicker than the cat, with the upward lunge of the spear. But the flying brute curved magnificently in the air, striking at the iron as it passed. Nebu felt the earthquake in his shoulder, in his arm, as the point raked savagely, helplessly, along the turning, cheating, hard-skinned coat...'

Later,



V. S. Reid

'He could have plunged the spear into it, put the leopard groped in the ground and found footing, hurdled itself backward and was gone with two bounds into the bush. Nebu waited until the crash of its going was lost in the clearing ... The boy was very still, very wide-eyed now, staring to where the leopard had vanished. The pain leaped into the African's side and he felt it go down into his legs, moving liquidly. Filling him with a great warm hurt. Majesty, agonized.'

This is fine writing, with clarity and passion, but it is slightly askew, in places, because of Reid's romanticism.

But it is much more than fine writing. It is a superb imaginative triumph. For Reid, when he was writing *The Leopard*, had never actually seen a leopard, or the African bush or a half-caste bwana. And particularly, he had never seen a Nebu.

NEXT WEEK MONDAY: George Lamming's *Season of Adventure*