

# 'New Day' man — a trail blazer

INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA  
WEST INDIA REFERENCE UNIT

## ARTS PROFILE

By George Pantou

TO MOST readers today NEW DAY by V. S. (Victor Stafford) Reid is a history book and "Who would expect the average reader to open a history book for pleasure?" Not only is it history but it was published long ago, twenty-five years to be exact. There isn't time to read a book that old when there are so many best-sellers coming out, and in paper-back too."

You may try countering that with, "but it is about Jamaica and the road to independence." "Sure, that's an interesting subject but look man, independence is ancient history. It happened twelve years ago. I don't have to go back to that; I'm living in a free Jamaica and I can't remember any other condition."

The foregoing conversations are not entirely genuine but could well be true. And so Vic Reid's NEW DAY may not be as widely read as it ought to be (although it has run into four editions, the last by Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., in association with Heinemann Educational books in 1970).

### Publication

But for those who were reading, and buying books in 1949, the publication NEW DAY was an astonishing event, creating an excitement and an interest which has never been repeated with any local book since then.

It is true that H. G. DeLisser had had books published in England but that was between twenty and thirty years in the past and who among the small reading public remembered them? In any event DeLisser was someone remote, unknown other than through the printed word in the Daily Gleaner, in "Random Jottings" (in the same, and only paper) and in the annual Planter's Punch and also seen hobnobbing with the sugar barons.

The learned few had also heard of two Trinidadians, James and Mendes, who had attracted attention overseas and one or two had even heard of, if not read, a novel called Corentyne Thunder written by a man named Mittelholzer who came from British Guyana and had been published during the war, in 1941. But these writers were even more remote. There was not the interest in the Caribbean which is so common today and people did not think of

"West Indian" writing though, to be sure, some did ask, "if a small island like Trinidad or a place with a small population like British Guiana can produce writers, why not Jamaica?"

It was in that vacuum that NEW DAY appeared. As Louis James was to write long afterwards in *The Islands in Between* (O.U.P. 1968), "(New Day) belongs to literary history in the Caribbean" and "it was a pioneering claim that a West Indian island could have its own national history and culture." But to Jamaicans at that time it was far more than that. It was an excitement. It represented tangible proof that a local man, a young man almost a boy, could become a novelist even if he were a Jamaican. It had been written by a man whom you could and did, meet on the street. And it was about us, our land, our way of life. People overseas would actually read about that? Incredible.

In addition Vic Reid not only produced a tale which dealt with our history and the path through adult suffrage which was to lead to independence but had been sought out by an American publisher (Alfred Knopf). It was written in a language that was by no means Jamaican dialect, but conveyed the impression of being a language other than English and yet understandable by those who knew only Standard English. This apparent exoticism was part of its appeal. Although some reviewers in Britain complained of the difficulty of accepting the book because of its dialect, many American reviewers were delighted with the language — clear, singing style, which the author handles with musicianship and assurance." So said *Saturday Review* while the *New York Herald Tribune* called it "a liquid, lyrical thing of wondrous beauty."

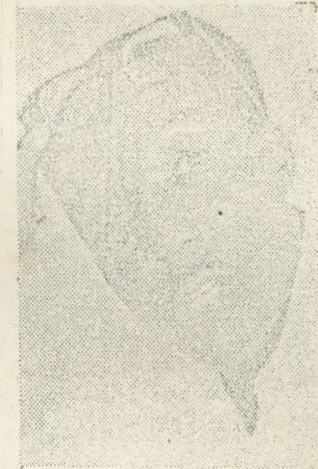
### Trail

So Vic Reid blazed a trail in the post-war world which was shortly afterwards to be followed by scores of Jamaicans and other West Indian writers. He had opened the flood-gates of the literature which was shortly to burst out from the Caribbean.

But it was a flood which did not carry Vic Reid along its surface. Needing to earn a living he had to eschew the novel with its slow financial returns and spent his writing talent on producing short stories and articles published both here and

abroad. It was as if he stood still at the sluice-gate which he had raised. It was nine years before another Reid novel appeared. But it was worth the long wait and readers discovered that the lyrical prose of NEW DAY had given way to writing that often rose to the heights of poetry.

The book was THE LEOPARD which had nothing whatever to do with Jamaica and while it



Vic Reid

was set in our motherland, Africa, it was for us on the wrong side of the continent. The locale was East Africa, not the West Africa of our ancestors. It was set in Kenya, an imaginary Kenya to be sure, one which Vic Reid did not know and had never visited but one in which he clearly showed a keen interest. It dealt with that clash between black and white, the Mau Mau uprising, out of which an independent Kenya was to rise and presented a father-son relationship which may have seemed improbable to some but which had a mystic quality that was enchanting.

Time, the weekly news magazine called it "an imaginative triumph" while the *Times Literary Supplement* said, "Many books have spoken for the whites in Africa. This one speaks eloquently for the blacks." Four editions have been issued, two of them in paperback and it has been translated into six languages.

Wilson Harris of Guyana and Louis James of Britain (who lectured at the UWI) both commented on the need for a third novel from Vic Reid before full judgement on him could be passed. But that novel has never appeared. At least not a novel like NEW DAY or THE LEOPARD. Reid turned to writing about Jamaican history for young people (school books are probably more financially profitable than novels even if they bring less fame). Certainly these Reid books have been widely used in schools in Jamaica and elsewhere, notably Trinidad and Tobago. A whole series of these has appeared "Sixty-five" (1968) which dealt with the same period as the start

of NEW DAY: THE YOUNG WARRIORS (Telling of the Maroons) which came out in 1963; THE MACHETE MARINES which appeared in 1968 and PETER (on Samuel 'daddy' Sharpe, famous in Jamaican history) in 1972. Next on the list is "THE JAMAICANS" which the Institute of Jamaica is bringing out and should be available by the spring of next year. It will deal with Juan de Solza, called by some a Jamaican patriot, by others, a traitor back in 1658. Says Mr. Neville Dawes, M.A. (Oxon), the Manager of the Institute: "We of the Institute think it is a great book."

### Pseudonym

As an aside it may be mentioned that, under a pseudonym, Vic Reid also produced a thriller but, as he chose to be anonymous, no doubt looking on it only as a potboiler, it may be unfair to give its title and the name of its pseudonymous author although his biographer should include it in his list of works, when and if the story of Vic Reid is written in detail.

Vic Reid's short stories—he has written many of them—have appeared locally, in Britain in the U.S.A. and in Canada. Some of them have been reprinted in anthologies such as *From the Green Antilles* (Souvenir Press 1966, and later in paperback), and *Caribbean Rhythms*, the paperback collection produced by Pocket Books through Washington Square Press which appeared early this year. He has also written for radio and television.

What of the man himself? Born in 1913 he has been a *Gleaner* reporter, worked for many local papers and later been editor of *Public Opinion*, *Spotlight* and *New Day* newsmagazines until he forsook journalism for the advertising world and then went into the printing business. Among the awards which he has received are a Guggenheim Fellowship (he was the first Jamaican to receive one) the Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica and a Canada Council Fellowship as well as an award from the Government of Mexico. He was appointed Chairman of the Jamaica National Trust Commission last year. At present he is working on a biography of Norman Manley. He is married and the father of four children and lives in the Rock Hill Mountains above Red Hills.