



The University of the West Indies

Franklin W. Knight

Chancellor, there is, and I say this with some trepidation, a little tradition that is to be discerned in the rich and textured life of Franklin W. Knight. I refer here not to his long and brilliant career as historian and scholar, but to an earlier phase, evident in that now familiar passage from Calabar High School and on to Chancellor Hall at the University College of the West Indies. I say 'with some trepidation' as, myself hailing from a different school, the phrase 'little tradition' might be misinterpreted. I use it not in the sense of 'belittling', but to suggest that it needs to be excavated, bushed out and recognized as an obscured but critical pathway of empowerment that many have traveled, from the cloistered dormitories on Red Hills Road to the stark tropical modernist blocks north east of the Ring Road.

Franklin W. Knight was born in Manchester, Jamaica in 1942. One of eight children, he enjoyed an exceptional childhood, moving with his family from place to place in rural Jamaica, following the demands of his father's job with the forestry department. Perhaps, Chancellor, it was this mobility and the restless energy it may have engendered that led to his almost peripatetic career as a productive, inquisitive and insightful scholar. And then, perhaps not. The road of life is rarely straight and our errant Knight, while at Calabar, seemed more drawn to Spanish and English. As editor of the school magazine, the 'Green and Black Review' his mentor was John Hearne who introduced him to the burgeoning body of West Indian literature.

Once at UCWI, however, the thought of a major in English or Spanish soon faded. Under the influence of the new, brilliant cohort of West Indian scholars, including Roy Augier who remains his friend to this day and Elsa Goveia, he cleaved to the history honours programme and has never looked back. With his first degree in hand, Knight completed his masters and doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, taught at SUNY Stonybrook for five years then moved south to Baltimore and Johns Hopkins University, where he has been resident since 1973 and the Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Professor of History since 1991.

Chancellor, numbers, any senior academic will tell you, mean little. In the following breath, however, they inevitably demand, 'How many books and articles has he published?' Let us then, succumbing to Hollywood argot 'cut to the chase'. Knight has authored, edited and co-edited some ten books, including the prize winning *Slave Society in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century* and the oft-adopted *The Caribbean: The*

Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism. He has contributed some ninety articles and chapters to learned journals and books, delivered over one hundred and ninety papers and lectures and written some one hundred and fifty reviews. Yet, herein lays the weakness in the numbers game, for this says little about Knight's unique contribution to his discipline or, more broadly, the academy. Franklin Knight is special in that he is among a tiny handful of English speaking Caribbean scholars whose work has not only crossed the chasm that divides the region's language groups, but has gone further to become a leading expert on the other bank, that of Hispanic Caribbean and American studies. Thus, Knight is not just a Jamaican-born scholar with an interest in Cuba, but among the leading scholars of Cuban history anywhere. He is not just a Caribbean scholar writing in English, but a multi-lingual intellectual, moving freely between Anglophone and Latin worlds.

And yet, with all of this cosmopolitan embrace, Franklin Knight from Manchester and Calabar, Madison and Johns Hopkins, remains rooted to the Caribbean and the Jamaican pathways that helped determine his formation. I end with a quote from the Knight himself: "More emphasis should be placed on the fundamental significance of the Caribbean to the history of the wider world. The wider American history cannot be understood without the inclusion of the important Caribbean dimension, and no wider world history can be appreciated without the crucial role of the Caribbean in the construction of the modern world."

Chancellor, I ask you to recognise the merits of our own scholar and invite you on behalf of the Council and Senate of this University, to confer on him the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Mona Campus
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