



Sir John Stanley Mordecai

Mr. Chancellor, I present to you Sir John Stanley MORDECAI, of the Imperial Order of Knights Bachelor, Commander of the Most Noble Order of St. Michael and St. George, Master of Science of Syracuse University in the United States of America.

Until lately a familiar daily figure in our University community, we turn in surprise to see him gone, though to those in Mona he is only down the road, and a welcome member of our Common Room. This University cannot, however, relinquish its claim upon him, so we hasten to give him formal place amongst the most honoured of his peers.

Universities exist to discover genius, to nurture it and to promote it. And genius, that "infinite capacity for taking pains", takes many forms – the searing brilliance of the literary luminary, the conquistadorial challenge of the Nobel physicist, delving to the roots of matter, the detective instinct of the bibliophile biologist. In Sir John there is acknowledged an infinite capacity for reconciling diverse opinions and practices, a meticulous attention to detail, the far-ahead vision of the idealist informing the patient accumulation of facts and figures that provide rational bases for immediate action and forward planning, the tempered enthusiasms that restrain the foolhardy and fore-arm the wise. His has always been the leadership that inspires confidence and trust, never arrogant, as willing to accept responsibility as responsibly to supply others with the information, the advice and the machinery to exercise political power.

In the roots of all of us there is historical continuity. No one would accuse Sir John of following false gods, yet that is precisely the meaning of the word "Mordecai", a follower of one of the chief gods, Marduk, of ancient Babylon – a name honoured later in the Book of Esther, and not uncommon to this day in South Wales. Babylon is not popular today in our lands, yet it was the genius of Nebuchadnezzar that he was an indefatigable builder, however wicked in our eyes were the purposes to which his buildings were put. And Sir John too has been an assiduous builder, his monuments the pages of our history and thus imperishable.

The pages of a life are turned slowly, thumbed over again by those who seek to laud the great of our lands – those names written "in a book of gold" and John Mordecai therein, like Abou Ben Adhem, "as one that loves his fellow-men". For a quarter of a century, after leaving Wolmer's School, he served his fellows in the Civil Service, from 1920 as a Clerical Assistant in the Treasury. Proud in his friends, and catholic in his interests, he embraced football and cricket, horse-racing – of which he has been a life-long devotee – billiards, and music. A small group of school friends were with him amongst the founder members of the Y.M.C.A., and began the Y.M.C.A. Football Club which became Island Senior League champions within 5 years. The "Y" team brought together young men from all strata of society – secondary schoolboys, groundsmen, railway boilermen, a pilot, and even theological students – students who were, so to speak, not unfrocked, but pre-frocked, for they have risen to become Bishops. The young Mordecai was Secretary and then Captain of this team; played at the same time Senior Cup Cricket for Kensington; and was a budding virtuoso both in billiards, where he was a leading performer in the national English championships for a decade, and in music, where he played second violinist in the George Goode's Diocesan Festival Symphony Orchestra, the acme of musical expression in Jamaica in those post-First World War days. This love of music he has kept through all vicissitudes, though today he is a collector of records and tapes rather than a performer.

Never one to shirk responsibility, John Mordecai was chosen to head a section in the Treasury in 1934 for Finance and Development, and then the new Local Government sector to coordinate the financial practices of the Parish Councils, the Kingston Municipality and the Water Commission. By 1942 he was Finance Officer, and in 1944 as Assistant Treasurer he rendered valuable wartime service in organising a War Risk Insurance Scheme to protect against losses from enemy attack – German submarine packs hunted the Western Atlantic and the Caribbean seas. He was Financial Controller administering the United Kingdom grant for construction of the Mona Reservoir. He was, by reputation, more successful in plugging financial leaks than were the engineers, at first, in halting the leaks of water through the Mona gravel beds.

As the war ended, he was able to further a long-felt ambition, and studied at Syracuse University for the Master's Degree in Public Administration, gaining this in 1945, and distinguishing himself in his class. He returned home thereafter, and was chosen to use his experience in the administration of Local Government in the newly created post of Secretary. Then in 1949 his talents, as first Trade Administrator and Executive Secretary to the Trade Control Board, were instrumental in freeing business and trade from the irksome uncertainties and restrictions of the war period and returning them to a normal peace-time footing with responsible price controls.

Three decades of public service were now behind him, recognized by Her Majesty the Queen in the conferment upon him in 1955 of the Most Noble Order of St. Michael and St. George. This heralded, too, something of a change of direction, and a move to a wider sphere of influence. The 1947 Montego Bay Conference on Closer Association presaged the development of the Federation of the West Indies, and established a joint Regional Economic Committee. John Mordecai was appointed Executive Secretary of this Committee in 1952, with his base in Barbados. So sound were the bases of planning by this group that by 1957 the political leaders of the West Indies felt the time ripe to proceed to the long-awaited step of a political Federation, and the Executive Secretary and Sir Stephen Luke, Colonial Development and Welfare Comptroller, were assigned to make the preparations necessary for the Federation.

We focus our attention on politicians, chief actors in the drama of representative government, and forget that they often *are* but actors, necessary indeed to give voice to man's social instincts and egalitarian graces, but impotent without the basic staff work and support in planning of men of the calibre of John Mordecai. So it was that, at the great Inauguration of the Federation of the West Indies – the First Parliament opened in Trinidad in April 1958 – he was Federal Secretary, heading as distinguished a team in the Federal Civil Service as our islands have seen in their long and turbulent histories. The merit of his services was such that a Knighthood was conferred upon him in 1961, and he was appointed Deputy Governor-General of the Federation, a worthy Roland to the Oliver of Lord Hailes, the Governor-General.

History will write its judgements upon our Federation, and we stand perhaps too close to it to grasp fully the magnitude of its collapse in 1962. Sir John, with his intimate insights, his close association with events as they unfolded, his knowledge of and excellent rapport with people, his integrity and fairmindedness, and with his quite unique contact with the historical origins of the Federal experience, could begin the process of assessment. He spent the 2 years 1964-1966 at Princeton University upon a Fellowship, writing his definitive account "The West Indies – the Federal Negotiations". Published in 1968, it is a scholarly, lucid and dispassionate account of the years and events that led up to Federation, and of the moves and motives, the performance and problems of past and present leaders.

But the fifth decade of Sir John's professional life did not see him idle. Back in his own land of Jamaica, he led the Public Service Commission, then the Jamaica Industrial Development Corporation. His Report as Chairman of the Sugar Industry Enquiry Commission of 1966 constitutes a landmark in the investigations of prospects and practices, management and labour, markets and financial structure in that troubled industry, and is accepted as a blueprint for its rational development. We in the University were fortunate in acquiring his services to head our Development and Planning Unit for 5 crucial years, 1967-1972. His experience, his breadth of common sense, his knowledge of the territories which support the Regional University, have enabled us to garner detailed information from, and to give practical advice to all governments about their manpower needs and resources. This exercise in operations research has enabled us to formulate plans for a decade rather than a mere triennium and, more importantly still, has made

the business of forward planning a habit and an integral discipline. And now he has left us, and we yield him to his first love, of horse-racing: he is presently Chairman of the Racing Commission. We suppose too, he will fulfil this assignment with flying colours.

Mr. Chancellor, I request you, by the authority of the Senate and Council, to admit Sir John MORDECAI to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

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