



Aaron Joseph Matalon

MR. CHANCELLOR: when the Christmas term began at Jamaica College in 1933, the Headmaster found it necessary to send home a boy of thirteen because his school fees had not been paid. His father's small business had fallen victim to the combined effects of the Great Depression and two hurricanes. After a few weeks at home, the lad, realising that the £5.00 for the school fees would be a long time in coming, went up to King Street from his home in Rae Town, and got himself a job as a sales clerk at the stationery store of Justin McCarthy. So began a now fabled career of initiative and success in the world of business, which fulfils our honorary graduand's own dictum that life is a matter of making opportunity out of obstacle. Fifty-three years later, but only a few hundred yards from the scene of his early setback, I present to you, Mr. Chancellor, that lad, now grown into a man of substance in every sense of the term: Aaron Joseph Matalon.

He was born on 30th October 1919, to Joseph Matalon, merchant, and his wife, who bore the auspicious name Florizel. They had eleven children. When we consider the success of the clan Matalon, we are forced to conclude that there are circumstances in which it is not necessarily true that "two is better than too many". It has been said that at school "the Matalon boys were noted for only two things: their combativeness and their quantity." However, we may now surmise that those attributes have served them well.

From the eight shillings a week, soon raised to fifteen, which he earned initially, after contributing to the family purse, Aaron Matalon saved one shilling a week, until he had enough to enable him to enrol in evening classes in commercial subjects at the Kingston Technical School. He was not only seizing opportunity, but creating it as well.

By 1936 his father was able to make a new start in business, and soon we find the lad on the country roads for Matalon & Co., at sixteen perhaps the youngest travelling salesman in Jamaica. But first, his father made sure that the boy learned all the processes of the business, from the correct way to sweep the floor, to how to dust and pack the shelves, then how to make bales, and only after that how to do the billing. The boy was scandalised at first, but came to realise the wisdom of his father's methods, to realise that what his father was teaching him was "the dignity of work and the importance of instruction."

On Joseph Matalon's death in 1944, Aaron became Manager of the business. Soon, however, a new challenge arose, when his brothers who had been on war service overseas began to return home. What would they do? Jobs were hard to come by. Their father's bequest was negligible, when we consider how many had to share it. In Aaron's words, "What we inherited was what we learned at home, what we saw at home." So, pooling what little resources they had, and being fortunate to get a modest bank loan, they founded Commodity Service Co., with Aaron, whose managerial talent had by now been proven, as Chairman. As he put it, they realised that they "had to do something that required a minimum of capital and a maximum of effort."

That relish for work has been a major factor in Aaron's success. The brothers' business prospered, and theirs is one of the great success stories of the contemporary Caribbean. They soon founded Industrial Commercial Development Ltd., which quickly grew into a giant conglomerate. In 1975 Aaron became President and Chief Executive Officer.

Aaron Matalon's career has been marked by a wide involvement in the economic and social development of his country. He actively promoted the expansion of the manufacturing industry, and served as President of the Jamaica Manufacturers' Association from 1953 to 1957, and again from 1960 to 1965. He has been President of the Jamaica Save-The-Children Fund and served from 1964 to 1973 as Chairman of Things Jamaican, the Government craft-development enterprise. From 1971 to 1975 he was a member of the re-organising committee of the Institute of Jamaica's West India Reference Library, and only recently he accepted the chairmanship of the newly formed Cultural Heritage Fund which has been set up to assist the Institute.

It is not unusual, Mr. Chancellor, for self-made men, especially self-made men of business, to look with suspicion at those who, by virtue of the privilege of formal education, assume managerial office without having risen through the ranks, so to speak. Aaron Matalon is an outstanding exception to this generalisation. For one who has succeeded so well despite the fact that his own formal education had such an untimely end, he is remarkably persuaded of the importance of education, and, being a man of action, he has put his persuasion into practice. The Institute of Management and Production, his brain-child, which began as an adjunct of the ICD Group, has become the foremost training institution of its kind in Jamaica and perhaps in the Caribbean, training managers for the business community in general.

Through this Institute there has been fostered an enlightened scheme of collaboration with the University, whereby on-the-job training results in a degree in management. What is more, the fact that a Management Studies degree is offered at Mona at all, a programme which has proven to be one of the most needful developments undertaken by the University, is owing to Aaron Matalon more than to any other individual. It was not one of his easier achievements. He had to learn by experience how conservative and tradition-bound, as you know Mr. Chancellor, university professors and administrators can be.

Nor was his contribution to this development only by way of ideas and persuasion. He was also Chairman of the Fund-raising Committee which was of substantial assistance in the establishment of the programme. He served for ten years as Chairman of the Advisory Committee for the programme. During that time he was also Chairman of the University's Placement Board, which identifies and seeks to foster job opportunities for graduates. And even now, in a retirement which is more nominal than real, he is busily working on a project to raise funds in the United States to assist Jamaican students at this university and at other tertiary institutions throughout the Caribbean.

Clearly, in Aaron Matalon our university has a very special friend. By his foresight, good sense and forbearance, he has laid a foundation on which others of like mind should find it easy to build.

Mr. Chancellor, there is a story that, as long ago as the late fifties, a schoolboy was asked the question which all children are asked: "What would you like to be when you grow up?" Without any hesitation, the boy replied that what he would like to be was a Matalon brother. The tale may be apocryphal; the achievement which it recognises is not. Mr. Chancellor, I invite you, by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of this university, to recognise the achievement of Aaron Joseph Matalon, by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

November 15, 1986