



IAN MC DONALD

Mr Chancellor

It was Ian Mc Donald's magical improvisations (sitting sideways when Adams faced, and bolt upright when Artherton took strike; changing the angle of the transistor as Walsh came in, and switching either off or on at the approach of certain propitious or unpropitious moments) it was these esoteric rites beyond the boundary that brought the West Indies victory at Chandigarh in the Third Test against India in 1994.

If, today, we do not choose to honour him for his obeah practices, we certainly want to sing praises to a remarkably multi-talented being: the writer of passionate, intense and caring fictions in prose and verse and in the drama (Tramping Man, 1969); the lawn tennis champion who captained Cambridge University (in 1955) and the West Indies Davis Cup team (from 1953 into the 1960's); the brave and forthright columnist and commentator on culture, politics and society in the Starbroek News who found the more than ever necessary art to question the powers that be and escape unscathed ; the relentlessly up-to-date expert with over forty years experience in the tough field of regional and international sugar marketing; and above all, the civilised and highly evolved human being of whom Chaucer might have been writing:

*And though he was worthy he never proclaimed himself.
And in his conduct he was as correct as is a maid.
He never yet no villainy has said
In all his life unto [any man] no maner wight
He was a very perfect gentle knight*

Ian Mc Donald's encouragement to young writers, his remembering tributes to the dead like Roger Mais and A.J. Seymour, his unflagging attempts to provide texts of the work of writers like Martin Carter and A.J. Seymour lest they be lost to the future, and his heroic contributions to the revival of the historic literary magazine Kyk-Over-Al are all functions of a generous and responsible spirit that our University can never have too much of.

It is convenient to notice that by birth and ancestry, and by virtue of his choice of country of residence Ian McDonald belongs to several

islands. On his mother's side he is Trinidadian for generations. His father was born in St Kitts to Creole Antiguan parents. Ian McDonald himself emerged in St Augustine, Trinidad. In 1951 he left the island to attend University in the Mother Country. Since graduating in 1955, he has made his base in Guyana. He remains an island-hopper, a West Indian who is easy in all the islands.

Mr Chancellor, we are dealing with a person who combines in ample measure three of the unifying elements of West Indian life- sugar, sport, and literature. Ian McDonald did not need a work permit to take up employment in what was then British Guiana. He rose to Administrative Director of Bookers Sugar Estates; when Bookers was nationalised, he became Director of Marketing and Administration of the newly-constituted Guyana Sugar Corporation .

His long career and his expertise in sugar made him an automatic choice as Guyana and Caricom representative at international sugar conferences, and these rare qualifications have taken him to his present post of Chairman of Marketing of the Sugar Association of the Caribbean. A strange career for a man who holds a BA Degree in History from Cambridge University, but the connection between West Indian history and the history of sugar was not lost on sugar expert or poet.

Mr Chancellor, the career in sugar was not enough for a man with the sound colonial education Ian McDonald had had at Queen's Royal College (1942-1951). One of the great things about a sound colonial education was that it equipped you to reverse the intentions of a sound colonial education. Another great thing about a colonial education is that it was education, and it therefore encouraged you as it encouraged John Jacob Thomas and CLR James to strive for a fulfilment of all the natives in your person.

Trinidad and Guyana are the countries that give his writings their rich sense of person and place. *The Humming Bird Tree* (1969) which is set in Trinidad of the 1940's was made into a film by the BBC in 1992. It is a lush environmentalist's novel full of the sounds, sights, movements, colour and smells of the island. The huge river flows down from the great mountains through the immense forest and a continent of trees out to a sea that curls vast around the land. And the lyrical poems in *Essequibo* (1992), essay a natural history of the senses and a natural history of Guyana - its tribes, its myths and legends, its magic and its history, its man-diminishing glory .

In both works you can feel the sadness of the environmentalist lamenting, and the satire of the social commentator criticising the consequences of man's attempt at mastery for miles and miles around as in the poem 'A Trace of Sugar' of which there is only time to give a taste:

A narrowed eye which sees results
Observes this alone: energy and man's creation,
The forest cut, thrown back, and cleared,
River, sun, and the eternal wind
Harnessed in their wildness for wealth and power.
The absolute beauty of nature tamed and used

Accompanying all this as the trade mark of his temperament and his vision is a pervasive sense of mortality, of inevitable loss, and of death.

This came early. In a poem called 'College', our Honorary Graduannd praises the teacher at QRC who set him on the road to being a writer. But the greatest shaping influence seems to have come from the History teacher nicknamed Ghost who "made the dust of history glow". From Ghost he picked up not only an interest in history but two lessons that seem to have shaped his attitude to his society and to art.

The first lesson he learnt from Ghost is that perfection is worth striving for even though, like the lovingly and strictly achieved beauty of the teacher's writing on the blackboard, it will be expunged before the hour is out. So the essay on Brian Lara's greatness ends with this ironic reflection on time and season: "It will take enormous character and strength of will for Lara not to succumb to the nagging feeling from now on that the Gods somehow have let him down by crowning him to soon."

The second lesson from Ghost leads into the proactive world: we must be sceptical of the hallowed texts set for us by the coloniser, and we must make them live in our light:

*He read us the Periclean speech:
The Greeks were marvellously few
But down the darkened centuries
They gave light to all the world.
Our nation too was small
Yet to be noble was not beyond our reach*

Mr Chancellor, Ian McDonald's literary career seems to have picked up speed since his meeting with and marriage to Mary Callender. After a silence of nearly twenty-five years the poems and essays began to flow again. He even published a steamy short story in Penthouse Magazine. It must have been this new life that allowed him to create the miracles in Mercy Ward, a moving and sometimes painfully comic series of stories, portraits and lyrics about terminally ill people in a fictional hospital ward. But poems like 'Caged' and 'Candle-light' suggest that McDonald is as interested as ever in the condition of art and artists and in the soul of Guyana. Slowly but surely, Mercy Ward with its dying and indomitable people symbolises for the reader a country in pain.

I have spoken of Ian McDonald as a West Indian through and through. But he is a White West Indian, and I want to return to The Humming-Bird Tree in which he describes a relationship between a White West Indian boy Alan and two Indian children.

Mr Chancellor, literary criticism is a complex craft. You have to realise that the story of Alan's tangled relationship with Kaiser and Jaillin is being told by an older Alan who describes with embarrassing honesty the confusion and weakness of his twelve year old self. The novel does not hesitate to show the differences between a boy who has everything and one who is caught up in a perennial struggle for economic survival; and it is haunted by the loss of innocence, the frocks of summer torn, heredity of cruelty everywhere. Jaillin is some months younger than Alan but she tells him several years later that her love for him in those days was more adult than his for her: "Indian girl grow up early, you know. I was loving you like a big woman then. You know how nothing could happen. An' you was white, and I was a brown girl an' things in every way was different. Boy, I use to cry like a dam' stupid baby sometime."

Alan's father intervenes to end the connection between the children; to

expel Kaiser and Jaillin from garden and to arrest Alan's fall from taste and class. The callow Alan decides to become a White boy again: "I entered the white colonial world which from birth I had belonged to but from which I had walked away for a time."

At the end, he is about to leave for a foreign university ; Jaillin is a belly-dancer at a night-club, and Kaiser is clerk in a commercial establishment.

Mr Chancellor, Alan Holmes is not Ian McDonald. He is a weak and confused character created by the novelist to give expression to the devastating effects of the race and colour prejudice of a family and a group on the behaviour and consciousness of the young.

This unsparing removal of the tribal or ethnic veil is one of Ian McDonald's greatest contributions to our understanding of the pitfalls and the possibilities in our attempt to recognise and cherish our cross-culturality.

Mr Chancellor, I request you by the authority of Council and Senate to give pleasure to his many admirers and to the spirit of his late revered father and admit Ian McDonald, artist scholar businessman, gentleman and eminent West Indian, to the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa.