



Denis Joseph Ivan Williams

Mr. Chancellor,

I present Denis Joseph Ivan Williams, one of the Caribbean's most distinguished intellectuals, a man of an extraordinary range of talents; an artist first — he is a painter, sculptor and novelist — but also a scholar who has achieved international eminence in the fields of anthropology, archeology and art-history.

Our brief glimpse of his career begins in 1923 when he was born in Georgetown, Guyana. The son of John Williams, a merchant, he grew up in the conventional urban manner of a middle class British West Indian, earning his Cambridge Senior School Certificate in 1941. His accomplishments and natural ambitions at school had not placed him in the 'Scholarship' stream but by the end of his formal education he had developed keen interests in both writing and painting. The latter was his more immediate preoccupation, especially when he fell under the influence of Edward Burrowes, a Barbadian sign-painter who had become the principal pioneer in a movement to establish the visual arts in Guyana. Inspired and encouraged by Burrowes, his modest output attracted sufficient attention for him to secure a British Council Scholarship which took him in 1946 to the Camberwell School of Art in London. There he worked with sustained concentration and graduated in 1948. But this mere record of his success conceals the intensification of his artistic sensibilities while in London. Although trained in the classical European tradition, like most young artists he was captivated by revolutionary departures from this tradition which had been rejuvenated through the European discovery of the art of Japan, of pre-Columbian America and especially of West Africa. His work was seen and praised by the famous English Artist, Wyndham Lewis. So, returning home 'bursting with revolutionary fervour concerning the future of art (in Guyana)', he had firm ideas about being a pioneer nationalist painter and of securing remunerative employment as a teacher of Art. Within a short period he had completed a suite of paintings which he called 'The Plantation Series', two of which — 'Origins' and 'Burden and Release' were major works — brilliant, passionate works in the African idiom, using as his subjects the Guyanese Landscape and people. Much to his astonishment, they were met with instant rejection. A dilltentante public, betraying the craven Caribbean characteristics of lack of confidence in its own output, unless decorated with the European imprimatur . . . his Guyanese public was outraged. Within a year, frustrated and saddened, he returned with a nest of sorrows, to London. But his story was a sequel tinged with irony, for not long after, his masterpiece, 'Human World', painted in identical style, but this time enjoying the acclaim of art critics in Europe and the United States, was purchased from a London gallery from public subscription and returned to Guyana amidst much publicity, to form the basis of the National Collection of Fine Art.

In England, Williams lectured and tutored and continued to paint. Exhibitions of his work of this 'Human World' period were outstanding successes, but the time had come to strike out in new directions. His style changed abruptly, dramatically, as he abandoned painting the harsh, real world for a purer form of expression which sought to liberate rather than captivate the viewer, and to free the artist from subjective coercion or ideology. Out of these experiments came 'Painting in Six Related Rhythms 1954', a remarkable painting of vertical, horizontal and transverse lines, which capture balanced compartments of brilliant colour. In the words of his kindred spirit and countryman, Wilson Harris:

*It glows like a jewel among 200 odd paintings,
a witness of a technical and spiritual revolution
where tension is contained and balanced and the*

spirit of man is independent and free. . .

It was this work that won him an award in the Daily Express Exhibition of 1955.

Notwithstanding conventional success, uncertainty about his future and ambivalence towards his acceptance as a Colonial artist haunted him. Presently, like Odysseus he became a great voyager, a wandering scholar in pursuit of identity and ancestry, in Africa. Five years in the Sudan were followed by an equal time in Nigeria, as lecturer in an academic environment, first in the Khartoum School of Fine Arts, then at the School of African Studies, University of Ife and finally at the School of African Studies, University of Lagos. He studied African art and classical antiquity and developed a strong interest in archeology. His first important writing also began at this time.

Sudan, 'not quite desert, not Equatorial Black, nor Mediterranean White,' the setting of his best known novel 'Other Leopards', is itself the symbol of the dominant theme, that of the divided man caught between two worlds, the theme we recognise as New World, Caribbean, the torment of the Other Leopard, belonging neither to one world nor the other. Significantly, its conclusion sees the protagonist rejecting both aspects of his torment and reverting to a primordial state from which some form of rebirth could arise. With its brilliant verbal paintings of Africa and imaginative illustrations of its counterpoint theme, this book has received wide acclaim and by itself earned for him a place in a select critical sourcebook on Fifty Caribbean Writers. Described by Derek Walcott as the pivotal West Indian novel about race, it remains among the most important of those works which explore the essence of the Caribbean dilemma.

Williams' African experience greatly expanded and illuminated his visions, knowledge and understanding of the Old World ancestor but at the end of it he realised that Africa was indeed not home. Twenty years and more of exile, albeit with success and some fame, had tired his spirit and led to his conviction that he should return permanently to Guyana, not to the capital city, with its bustle and twentieth-century anxieties, but to the primordial hinterland of the interior, the Mazaruni district, where for six years, with his family, he would write and paint and research the tribal art of the Amerindian.

Eventually, with concern for the education of his children, he left this haven for Georgetown, marking the beginning of yet another phase of his extraordinary career. In 1974 he was appointed Director of Art in the Ministry of Education and a year later became the Founding Principal of the E.R. Burrowes School of Art. With these prosaic titles, he has continued the pioneering work of his mentor, Burrowes, in active dedication to the promotion and development of painting and the visual arts in Guyana. One of his most abiding accomplishments is his ability to combine the imaginative vision required of the creative artist with the meticulous discipline of the scientific method demanded of the archeologist and anthropologist.

Largely self-taught, he has worked tirelessly on unravelling some of the mysteries of the Amerindian through his work on the petroglyphs of the Rupununi, and out of this has come the award of the degree of Master of Arts. In further recognition of his eminence in this field he was in 1980 appointed Visiting Research Scholar in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. As Director of the Walter Roth Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, which he founded in 1977, he edits the scholarly journal Archeology and Anthropology, but the high quality of his scholarship as an archeologist is at its impressive best in his book, 'Icon and Image: A Study of Sacred and Secular forms of African Classical Art', which is a product of the many years he spent in Africa. In the words of his publisher:

It is a magisterial survey of African classical sculpture and metallurgy which both establishes an aesthetic relevant to the judgement of his whole field and makes an important contribution to the study of form and techniques.

For his outstanding contributions in art and anthropology, the Government of Guyana honoured him in 1973 with the Golden Arrow of Achievement.

When Williams returned from the wilderness it was with a tranquillity born of conquered unhappiness; he has taken the profit of his voyages of discovery and shared it with the people of Guyana. The magic of his brush has recorded the pain and disillusionment of the Caribbean man but has also shown us that the human spirit can free itself of this torment; in writing and literature he has laid bare the dilemma of this mongrel society, established the sources of its uniqueness and pointed the way to its ultimate flowering and fulfilment. Let Denis Williams have the last words:

Strive as we may we can never again become Indians or Africans or Chinese or Europeans; all are peoples of the New World, half

castes and mongrels despite whatever appearance might exist to the contrary . . .

. . . Beneath this sun which is all the colour of the world, walks the man who is all the races of the earth. His Hope is founded on marriage. His home the world.

Mr Chancellor by the authority of Senate and Council I request you to admit Denis Joseph Ivan Williams to the Degree of Doctor of Letters, Honoris Causa.