



George Lamming

MR. CHANCELLOR, it is an act of foolhardiness to which one is driven only by the dictates of duty to venture to make in the English language a presentation to you of George Lamming for the degree of Doctor of Letters. The position is made even more perilous by the fact that the honorary graduand will follow on this presentation to deliver the principal address. Did tradition not compel otherwise, the pleasure should have been ours to have heard Lamming presenting himself for, in his own words, when using his own trumpet, knowing all the keys, he can make a heaven of a noise which is a characteristic of his voice and an ingredient of West Indian behaviour.

Lamming was born in 1927 in Carrington Village, Barbados. He went to Roebuck Boys' School and from there won a scholarship to Combermere School. In the upper forms at Combermere he met as a teacher Frank Collymore, English master and editor of "Bim", to whom, as he puts it, he latched on himself and who was undoubtedly a decisive influence in the nurture of his talents. For quite early on Lamming knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to write books and not merely study them to acquire the formal education which for all black West Indians and particularly Barbadians provided the surest route to material prosperity and prestige.

Even today when the trail which Lamming and others have blazed is so much clearer, the daring of that decision still startles, because the whole purpose of the educational system was to inculcate conformity, to develop skills of memory and imitation and not to foster reliance on one's roots and the capacity to innovate. Frank Collymore's library provided a refuge from the schoolroom. The rigors of mathematics and the dullness of geography as taught could be avoided even at the risk of incurring the anger of the masters in those subjects while the imagination roamed through H.G. Wells' *Outline of History* and the fascinating mysteries of *The Science of Life* from Collymore's extensive library.

Perhaps the reality of the situation, perhaps the unconscious conditioning of the education process itself, which in so many ways he had successfully resisted, convinced Lamming that it was not possible to be a writer while living in the West Indies. The path of exile led first to Trinidad. Mittleholzer was already there working away at his novels and winning Lamming's admiration for doing what in middle class circles may never have been done before — staying home to do the housework and to write while his wife went to the office to earn a wage. This represented a level of commitment to creative writing to which Lamming could respond.

The few years spent in Trinidad were not completely wasted. There was congenial company — Cecil Herbert, Clifford Sealey and others of a group known as The Reader's and Writer's Guild which met monthly to hear works submitted and read by members, followed by critical discussion which oftener than not would end up over drinks at a night club in down-town Port-of-Spain.

In 1950 Lamming set out for England, seeking that outlet he could not find at home. He was at that time writing poetry; his concern was for words, almost as objects in themselves, and rhythm, with meaning conveyed by the subtle structuring of images. There had been publications in "Bim" and readings on the BBC programme "Voices of the Caribbean". It was the beginning of an odyssey of success. Landing in England unknown in 1950 he was soon to gain a reputation there as one of the most accomplished writers in the English tongue.

His first book of fiction, "*In the Castle of My Skin*", published in 1953, immediately became a classic. The poet had turned novelist and in so doing had created new perspectives in the use of prose. Language was fashioned to convey a sense of movement, to suggest a sense of touch and excite a sense of taste. Objects of every day life and ordinary village folk are presented with a poetic vision which enables us to appreciate them in a new light. There is a description in that novel of the Bajan staple "cuckoo" which illustrates this aptly:

"On the plate the cuckoo looked like a fruit that had been pulped from the skin and left untouched Whether or not you liked cuckoo it was something you could look at and feel a quiet satisfaction from. The colours were sharp in contrast. Yellow and pink and the green of sliced ochres. When you cut it the steam flew up so that the colours became indistinct. The steam rose like a white cloud over everything and you waited till it passed and the colours of the cuckoo came out again".

Exile had, if anything, sharpened the recollection of the delight of a simple meal at home and this has been etched and immortalised, as has been Carrington Village itself, lifted into a symbol yet retaining all its warmth and human connection.

This early novel has been well matched by its successors. All are marked by originality of structure and glittering gems of his poetic prose are there to be mined — "*The Emigrants*" in 1954, "*Of Age and Innocence*" in 1958, "*Season of Adventure*" in 1960, "*Water with Berries*" in 1971 and "*Natives of my Person*" in 1972 — the last being perhaps the most innovatory in its conception and design.

Although in exile, Lamming has from time to time come back home. In 1966 he added sparkle to the Independence festivities by mounting for the Barbados Workers Union a programme which celebrated as well the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Union. The following year he was writer in residence at our Mona Campus. In 1974 he directed the activities which marked the opening of the Labour College in St. Philip.

Significant awards have come his way, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship to the United States in 1955-6, the Somerset Maugham award for Literature in 1958 and a Canada Council Fellowship in 1962. He has been much in demand in the United States as a lecturer, critic and promoter of what can be described as black literature.

Lamming has done much to bring the West Indies to the attention of the world. But as he says himself, the West Indian writer, like any other writer, would like to function in his own country, to be accorded the simple recognition of any other professional worker and to be supported through that recognition by readers native to that country.

MR. CHANCELLOR the conferment upon Lamming of the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, will be a contribution towards that need for local recognition of a distinguished son whose mastery of language has already earned him abundant acclaim throughout the English speaking world.

6th February, 1980