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FORGING A BLACK IDENTITY

The Rastafarians: sounds of cultural dissonance [revised and updated edition]. LEONARD E. BARRETT, SR. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. xviii + 302 pp. (Paper US\$ 11.95)

Rasta and resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney. HORACE CAMPBELL. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1987. xiii + 236 pp. (Cloth US\$ 32.95, Paper US\$ 10.95)

Garvey's children: the legacy of Marcus Garvey. TONY SEWELL. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1990. 128 pp. (Paper £ 17.95)

The central theme linking these three titles is the evolution of a black identity among English-speaking Caribbean peoples, in particular Jamaicans. Consequently all three authors cover the two most important historical phenomena in Caribbean black nationalism, namely Garveyism and Rastafari, one focusing on the former and the other two focusing on the latter.

Tony Sewell's *Legacy of Marcus Garvey* is a historical sketch of the power of Garvey's ideas, drawn on documentary as well as original research, including oral testimonies, and presented in a readable and informative style enhanced by well-produced black and white photographs.

The author quite skillfully uses the flashback technique to arouse the interest of his readers. So we follow him to St. Mary's Catholic cemetery in London, descend with him to the vault where Garvey's remains lay unburied for thirty years, and trace the events surrounding the death of "a sad, isolated and broken man" (p. 15). And from there back to the early days in the town of St. Ann's Bay in Jamaica at the turn of the century.

Sewell presents Garvey as a great man who was influenced by three other

great men – Booker T. Washington, Robert Love, and Edward Blyden. But the strength of the book lies in its treatment of those influenced by Garvey, including DuBois, Padmore, and C.L.R. James, three of the most influential architects of black nationalist and working class thought in the twentieth century, all of whom waged battle with Garvey, but in the end succumbed to the power of his ideas.

In Sewell's treatment of Garvey's legacy, the reader may detect a "great men" approach to history. The method he follows is one of uncovering the direct links from Garvey to outstanding leaders such as Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Martin Luther King, Kwame Ture, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Rastafari leaders and the constellation of Reggae stars led by Bob Marley – all of whom have played their role in forging a black identity. The problem, however, is that this is sometimes strained and unconvincing, as when, for example, he discusses the black power movement in the United States or Patrice Lumumba. The link with Garvey would have been made more easily had the approach also included Garvey's impact on popular consciousness.

By contrast Horace Campbell's *Rasta and resistance* views the legacy of Garvey as an essentially cultural phenomenon with deep links to the past and traditions passed on into the future. Rastafari is but the most modern manifestation of a resistance which prevailed during all of slavery, through emancipation and the Morant Bay peasant rebellion, into the twentieth century with Garvey and now Rasta. Campbell thus rejects the categorizations of the Rastafari as escapist or millenarian, arguing instead that the movement is properly understood only from the point of view of cultural resistance. For this, he acknowledges the influence of Cabral. In this respect, the subtitle is misleading. The resistance began in slavery and continues in the metropolises of the West.

The strength of *Rasta and resistance* lies in its original treatment of the Rastafari.

Rastafarians in Jamaica were in the process of creating a popular culture which was based on the spirit of resistance, combined with the good humour and spirit of joy which had become part of the disposition of black peoples of the world (p. 121).

Campbell traces their dreadlocks to the influence of the Mau-Mau warriors of Kenya (the first to adopt them), compares their ganja ritual practices to the cultural role played by the kola nut in West Africa, and surveys the internationalization of Rasta, including a discussion of Rastafari in the Eastern Caribbean. His first-hand account of Bob Marley in Zimbabwe conveys the excitement and amply demonstrates his more general point

that through reggae music the Rastafari were able to express their Afro-centric cultural values.

The author's Marxist orientation prompts him to treat the Rastafari as one manifestation of more general forms of idealism in Jamaican society, and to present "the dualism of positive and negative ideas" (p. 53) in the movement. For example, he seems to counterpose the development of Rastafari race consciousness to the "cohesiveness and organisation of the working class movement" (p. 87), implying that the former arose because the latter failed to materialize. Elsewhere he attacks "bourgeois sociologists and anthropologists" (pp. 5 and 25), erroneously charging the authors of the 1960 University Report with perpetrating the "number one untruth [...] that the 'Rasta was a violent cult' " (p. 92, footnote 46).

The theme of resistance also forms the starting point of Leonard Barrett's *Rastafarians: sounds of cultural dissonance*, which like Campbell's book finds it necessary to treat the reader to the maroon and rebel history of the Jamaicans. To the unfamiliar reader, this background provides a more straightforward and useful introduction. A pity, therefore, that greater care was not exercised against inaccuracies: the journey from Tower Street to Cross Roads is two or three miles, not ten (p. 8); rural housing is not the same as in Beckwith's time in the 1920s (p. 11); the literacy rate fifteen years ago was around sixty percent, not one-third (p. 27); Garvey's alleged statement about looking to Africa for the crowning of a Black King was not made on the eve of his departure for the United States in 1916 (p. 81), but, if at all, after his deportation; and the gold in the Rasta colors is the gold of the Ethiopian, not of the Jamaican national flag (p. 143).

The Rastafarians: sounds of cultural dissonance is the twice revised version of the author's 1968 monograph, which was based on his doctoral thesis. Its main value lies in the fact that Barrett has seen and presented the changes that have taken place over two very critical decades in the history of the Rastafari, changes that allow him to develop his central theme, namely that Rastafari is becoming routinized, as cultural dissonance "searches for a consonance in which to resolve itself" (p. 167). Examples of just such a resolution are the impact of the Rastafari on the arts, particularly sculpture and music, the political manipulation of Rastafari symbols, and the inroads which Barrett thought were being made by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In this respect, the present revision retains, though in more subdued tones, much of his earlier argument about millenarianism and messianism, based on Anthony Wallace's famous article on revitalization movements. The revised edition also suffers from a kind of time warp: an excessive reliance on the author's earlier source, namely Sam Brown. Barrett also seems unaware of the works of other scholars like Yawney,

Homiak, Philby, Owens, and Chevannes, though, in a discussion of the Rastafari overseas, he mentions Cashmore and Campbell.

One major controversial point advanced by Barrett in the wake of reactions following Selassie's death is the view that to the Rastafari movement "Ethiopianism meant more than Haile Selassie" (p. 254) and that its real center is the holy herb, ganja, under whose influence "the person of Haile Selassie is transformed into that supernatural reality or a cosmic significance befitting a racial redeemer" (p. 254). Most scholars will, I think, find this very strained. Not only is it unwarranted by his earlier discussion (pp. 128-36), but it would be the equivalent of arguing that the real center of Christianity is holy communion, not Jesus.

The theme of black identity which brings all three books together is reinforced by the pedigree with which they are associated. Rex Nettleford writes Sewell's Foreword and receives the dedication of Barrett, while Eusi Kwayana writes the Preface to Campbell's book. The role of these two Caribbean luminaries is an indication that these three books have a deeper intent than as academic historical or sociological disquisitions. They are themselves part of the striving towards and appropriation of that identity, to be used as educational tools. Their non-technical language makes them easy reading.

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