Ian Thomson


_The Dead Yard_ is the 2010 winner of the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize as well as the Dolman Travel Book of the Year. In spite of these accolades in Britain, the book had caused quite a stir in Jamaica. Thomson's damaging depiction of the island ired many. Indeed, as he writes in the preface to the U.S. edition, _The Dead Yard_ exposes a dark side of island life at odds with the 'paradise' island of travel brochures. It was not surprising then, that the promotional announcement for the book's first publication in _The Independent UK_ was entitled "Sun, Sand and Savagery: What Ever Happened to Jamaica, Paradise Island?" Controversial books sell. It really is that simple.

In the introduction, "A History of Paradise," Thomson sets out to explore the island and answer what turns out to be a rhetorical question from an elderly white Jamaican woman who not only asks him whether we really need another book on Jamaica, but most poignantly adds, "You visitors are always getting it wrong. Either it's golden beaches or it's guns, guns, guns. Is there nothing in between?" (p. 1).

In the following 26 chapters and 349 pages, Thomson proceeds to confirm that indeed (at least from his perspective) there certainly is no "in between." Part history, part travelogue, he "goes [as] native" as he can on his jaunts as a lanky white Englishman combing through the mountainous landscape and coasts to conduct interviews with a slew of subjects who let him into their homes as he seeks to comprehend Jamaica. The majority of them are contacts from friends and colleagues in England. Others include notable figures in Jamaica's business and art communities as well as public intellectuals. He writes that his subjects, often of a certain age, tend to be "afflicted with English politesse" (p. 212), which in some ways charms him. It is their nostalgic lament for the days of old that Thomson captures well. The underside of this social attachment to "Auntie England," however, also lies behind a disdain for the black masses who are reducible to modern-day savages in this country of "chaos and ruins."

The book is a nonending refrain of a Jamaica gone wrong in the aftermath of the "orderly transition" (p. 190) from colonialism to independence. The brutal legacy of colonialism and slavery is a point of focus for Thomson who remarks on the "dismal extent Jamaica has absorbed values from colonial Britain" (p. 45), referring to the country's antihomosexual laws and a legal system with courtrooms where the judge dons a scarlet robe, a crooked wig, and other remnants of the British past. This Jamaica is practically the Wild Wild
West—an entrenched, structurally unequal work that pits people against each other and where the gun rules. Indeed, one wonders whether living among the disadvantaged is at all possible there.

Thomson’s emphasis on violence is concomitant with his search for a paradise that exists only in his imagination and that of most of his subjects. This was punctuated when he did encounter a different perspective from singer Ernest Ranglin, who rejected the ideal “pastime paradise ... glorifying days long gone behind.” Thomson admitted his surprise and quickly dismissed it: “The Ranglin version of Jamaica allowed for greater hope than I had thought possible” (p. 254).

Life may be easy for those with wealth but most of them live in constant fear of losing their property and the indiscriminate violence. This is an illuminating aspect of the book as Thomson opens a jalousie onto the lives of white Jamaicans whose affairs remain obscure to those outside their circles. He recounts time spent in Port Antonio with Patrice Wynmore, Errol Flynn’s ex-wife who inherited his estate. She expressed her fears “as a wealthy white woman in a poor black country” (p. 198), especially during the Manley years. For Wynmore, “envy” is the defining characteristic of Jamaican identity, and it even crosses racial lines. We learn that Blanche Blackwell, who was Ian Fleming’s former lover and the mother of Chris Blackwell (founder of Island Records—the label that globalized reggae), shared “other Jamaicans’ ... complaint about ‘declining standards’” (p. 233). More specifically she said that “Independence was the worst thing that could have happened to Jamaicans—they were simply not ready for it.” (Mother and son run Goldeneye, Fleming’s retreat that inspired his 007 series.) Thomson’s visit to Itopia, the home of Sally Henzell and the late Perry Henzell, (writer-director-producer of The Harder They Come), is also revealing. He quotes Sally’s prediction about his book: “You know I’m dead squeamish about you turning your gaze on Jamaica, Ian. You’re going to unravel all kinds of murder and mayhem, aren’t you? Then you’re going to contrast it with poor old whitey here leading the life of Riley” (p. 261). He then proceeds to note Perry’s consumption of ganja, which inevitably made him high.

With regard to the black masses, Thomson has nothing to offer that one could not access in a music video. To paraphrase the title of his eighth chapter, The Dead Yard is “Maximum White,” as his views on blackness are not only encapsulated in time but are recycled archaic tropes of post-coloniality and race. This is true whether his subjects are gun-wielding musicians or disillusioned Rastas or benevolent whites who came to Jamaica as volunteers to save the unruly natives from themselves.

Not surprisingly, he writes that “Jamaican dancehall in the twentieth century seems to present black people to the world in terms the Ku Klux Klan would use:
illiterate, gold-chain wearing, sullen combative buffoons” (p. 44). No subversion here. Thus, it only follows that the “African consciousness” of Walter Rodney, for example, has evolved into an “unsophisticated ... obsession with respect” (p. 98). His white gaze is uncompromising. Modernity clearly left all of “these people” behind. His additional insights do come from somewhere. He provides real names and locations. Dare I say, his treatment of his “informants” certainly raises issues concerning journalism and ethics.

In the acknowledgements, which include an abbreviated who's-who list of residents whose names open doors to navigate the impenetrable classed terrain, Thomson informs his readers that “The Dead Yard is not ‘the’ truth, it’s only as I saw it” (p. xiii, my emphasis). Unfortunately, this disclaimer cannot undo his stereotype of the island as a place “stuck in colonial malaise” that “needs to banish its psychological dependency to the Mother Country” (p. 347). Moreover, the limits of Thomson's gaze confirm the high market value of dystopia. This award-winning book is in its second printing.

I am not convinced that reviews of popular books in academic journals are a worthy endeavor since their readership is hardly likely to read these critiques. In that sense, it is somewhat unfair to expect popular books to meet scholarly standards. The question then is whether a popular book can be read on its own merit and what value if any this would have for an academic audience. For Thomson's book, the answer would be: none. A more suitable subtitle would have been A Tale of a Long Gone Jamaica as Told by a White Englishman on a Quest in The Empire’s Last Black Frontier. Readers beware: The Dead Yard promises consistent doses of epistemic violence that could easily have been avoided.

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