Godfrey Smith


Political biography has to walk a narrow path between hagiography on the one hand and partisan score-settling on the other. Doubly so when the subject remains as controversial nearly two decades after his death, as during his lifetime, which is the case with the late Jamaican prime minister Michael Manley. Godfrey Smith neatly navigates between those pitfalls with his thorough, well-researched, warts-and-all tale of Manley as both public and private figure. Nonetheless, he falls into a different trap by seeking to contrast Manley’s public virtue with his private matrimonial failings, not to mention those of his parents. We have, thus, a volume that oscillates between the public and the private in a manner that sometimes informs, and sometimes discomfits the reader.

Smith’s tale of Manley’s life, set within the larger context of his family’s place in modern Jamaican political history, swings between the opposing poles of Manley the public figure—as journalist, labor activist, politician, and political thinker—and Manley the playboy and philanderer. Readers suffer a sort of mental whiplash as they are swung between the heroic public Manley, battling for the rights of workers, attempting to transform Jamaica’s social and political life in the 1970s, and seeking to adapt to the post-Cold War world, and the amoral private Manley for whom the bonds of matrimony—his own and other people’s—appeared to have little meaning. A private Manley, we need to note, whose relationships with his children, frequently characterized by distance, were far from simple.

Public Manley was also a man of contrasts. Smith wants us to note a distinction between the democratic socialist Manley of the 1970s, and the pro-business, pro-American Manley of his last government (1989 to 1992), when relations with the George H.W. Bush administration in the United States were cordial. Although Smith reports on it in detail, he cannot help but noting that the initial meeting between Manley and the elder Bush lasted all of fifteen minutes. However, he is absolutely spot on in noting Manley’s deep commitment to democracy and egalitarianism. He is also very thorough with regard to Manley’s role in Jamaica’s labor history and its political life from the 1950s through the 1990s, including internal conflict within his own People’s National Party in the late 1970s.

At the felloe of the public and the private, there is Manley's friendship with Rex Nettleford, whom Smith describes as Manley’s “confidant and intellectual soulmate” (p. 296). This will read rather queerly to those who did not know either man fairly well. Nettleford, academic and choreographer, was one of
the people who encouraged Manley as both a politician and an intellectual. Manley, as a private individual, this biography makes clear, enjoyed music, dance, art, and literature. Enjoyed the time spent with artists and writers. But also enjoyed the time he spent with young West Indian political aspirants like Forbes Burnham and Errol Barrow when he was a student at the London School of Economics in the late 1940s. Manley’s conscious choice to study political economy and thought at the LSE, at the feet of Harold Laski, set him on a path, shared with such men as Burnham and Barrow, that would culminate in Caribbean political leadership. Smith reports this, just as he reports on the way that Michael Manley moved out of his father’s shadow (and how he was conscious of being in the shadow of a man, Norman Washington Manley, who was not only his father but the Father of his Country) to become a major political figure in his own right.

Manley’s own role as a father emerges from time to time in this book as we are exposed to his relationships with each of his five children, and the manner in which he strove to connect with them over the barriers of career and divorce. Not to mention the clash between their similarly anti-authoritarian personalities. Manley’s children collaborated actively with the biographer, and provided many of the book’s details, including acknowledgment of their own faults.

Smith was not well served by his proofreader. For example, writer and journalist John Hearne’s surname is spelled correctly on page 300, but given (twice) on the next page as “Herne.” There are quite a few such errors, annoying in a book of this significance. While Smith offers a lively, life-like Michael Manley, and his account is definitely worth reading, it is not a definitive biography, if such a thing is possible for such a protean man. Nonetheless, this is an important and most welcome addition to the body of work on Caribbean leaders.

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