History, heritage and memory in modern Jamaica

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Abstract
Jamaica is a land of old immigrants. Few modern Jamaicans can trace ancestral connections to the peoples who inhabited the island before the arrival of Columbus in 1494, and few can identify foreparents in the period of Spanish rule that lasted to 1655. Similarly, although the new peoples who have come to Jamaica over the last 200 years, — mostly Indians and Chinese— had a significant cultural impact, their numbers have been relatively modest.

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History, Heritage and Memory in Modern Jamaica


Jamaica is a land of old immigrants. Few modern Jamaicans can trace ancestral connections to the peoples who inhabited the island before the arrival of Columbus in 1494, and few can identify foreparents in the period of Spanish rule that lasted to 1655. Similarly, although the new peoples who have come to Jamaica over the last 200 years, mostly Indians and Chinese—had a significant cultural impact, their numbers have been relatively modest. The ancestors of most modern Jamaicans came to the island between 1670, when sugar took root, and 1808, when the British abolished the Atlantic slave trade. They came from Africa, carried away to captivity to satisfy the insatiable demands for labour generated by the ‘sugar revolution’ that made the island an economically important element of the British imperial enterprise. This great period of inspreading, concentrated into little more than a century, 1670–1808, occurred hand in hand with the system of exploitation that was slavery and sugar. Other ancestors came from the British Isles, most of them oppressors of the enslaved, single men who drifted in and out. Few of the Africans who arrived by 1808 ever left the island and their children were born there.

For most of its history Jamaica was a place in which few who were not born there chose to live. White people typically saw themselves as sojourners, hoping to leave the island before scythed by sickness, with the long term objective of extracting fortunes that would enable them to live as absentee proprietors. Eventually, Jamaica became a place that even free ‘born-yah’ people often chose to leave. The twentieth century saw a great outspreading of Jamaicans and Jamaican culture. Yet the island is a place painted by tourism as a kind of paradise, and it is a place about which expatriate Jamaicans are persistently passionate and determinedly nationalistic. The relative antiquity of the migration means that Jamaicans can think of themselves as effectively indigenous. Yet the notion of belonging is constantly contested by the history of alienation and the memory of slavery. The call of Africa, from Marcus Garvey to contemporary Rastafarianism, has been strong but systematically naturalised. In practice, most of the many modern economic and political emigrants from Jamaica have moved...
to the North Atlantic world rather than to Africa. Wherever they went, many carried with them an intense nostalgia and a commitment to the dynamic maintenance of expressive culture, demonstrated broadly in the generational transmission of ways of talking and living, as well as music and literature.

What does this history have to do with the heritage of Jamaica and its old-immigrant culture? Caribbean scholars often find their analytical focus in the process of creolisation, as a means of explaining the creation of a world born in the island yet mothered and fathered by other peoples from other lands. In the eighteenth century, the idea of the creole was applied to all kinds of beings and things, from creole humans to creole cattle and creole architecture. In the twenty-first century, however, neither ‘creole’ nor ‘creolisation’ are part of everyday discourse, and it is probably fair to say that ‘creole’ has largely been displaced and replaced by ‘Jamaica’ and ‘Jamaican’ as the terms best indicating the local and unique. However considered, there is no doubting the conceptual richness, the playfulness and the underlying humour of modern Jamaican cultural life and language, and the physical representation of its components.

Language is the necessary starting point of any attempt to comprehend the totality of Jamaican culture, just as it is the core of creolisation. Here the benchmark remains the Dictionary of Jamaican English compiled by Frederic Cassidy and Robert Le Page, first published 1967 and in a second edition in 1980. Cassidy had earlier, in 1961, provided an interpretation in Jamaica Talk. This book was organised topically but had the twin objectives of seeking to distinguish the true Jamaicanisms from its borrowings and establishing the origins of the various linguistic elements. Significantly, Cassidy worried about the definition of Jamaicanisms, not the creole or the process of creolisation. These works of Cassidy and Le Page provided the basic materials for all later efforts to investigate Jamaican culture and heritage.

Three years after the appearance of the second edition of the Dictionary of Jamaican English, Olive Senior published the A–Z of Jamaican Heritage. Best known for her fiction and poetry, Senior had already established herself as a writer of histories, bringing together her interest in the oral and the written, memory and document. Indeed the introduction to the A–Z noted that, as well as her role as editor of the wonderful periodical Jamaica Journal, she had completed a book manuscript on Jamaican emigration to Panama. In its content and structure the A–Z established a new standard. My own copy was soon battered and dog-eared from frequent use. A second edition appeared in 1987, though the changes were few. Senior’s work was quickly emulated by the companion A–Z of Barbadian Heritage (1990).

Senior has now thoroughly revised and greatly expanded the A–Z, transforming it into an Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage. This is a major event in Jamaican publishing, produced by a local press, Twin Guinep. The Encyclopedia comes on the heels of a new topically organised work, Martin and Pamela Mordecai’s Culture and Customs of Jamaica (2001). The island is now

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Senior’s Encyclopedia is more than three times as big as the A-Z of 1983, with
roughly 850 entries at almost two-thirds of a page on average. Some are
substantially longer, surveying large subjects in one place rather than scattering
connected material among more discrete entries. This approach has its advantages
and disadvantages. Anyone seeking a broad introduction to Art, Language,
Literature or Theatre in Jamaica, for example, can look under those headings.
Senior is very successful in providing a coherent account of these subjects. The
reader is offered a more integrated interpretation of a topic than can be achieved
by a series of short entries.
Under Literature, a topic that did not appear as an entry in the A-Z, Senior
traces the transition from the oral to the written and the emergence of ‘a distinct
Jamaican literature in English’, connecting this development with broader social
and political change. She introduces the reader to a large number of writers and
their work, from the eighteenth century to the present, placing them in the context
of expatriation, the economics of the publishing industry and the growth of
scholarly literary criticism. She finds the emergence of performance poets the
most striking development of the late twentieth century, linking back nicely
with the interface between the written and the oral. On the other hand, there is
no entry for Poetry and no direction to look for it under Literature. A reader
cannot look up Lorna Goodison or Claude McKay under their names, though
they appear in the Literature entry, with portraits. (Senior does say that the
Encyclopedia is not meant to be a Dictionary of National Biography, something
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would be to move towards even greater development and more expansive
treatment in these survey entries but then the Encyclopedia would begin to look
too much like the Mordecais’ topical Culture and Customs. The latter’s chapter
on Literature follows ‘the long journey of Jamaican literature to reintegrate its
imposed and indigenous traditions’ (132), essentially the central theme of Senior’s
search for the connections between the written and the oral.
Senior’s own position within the literary world of Jamaica might lead readers
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of readers, from the specialist to the most poorly equipped, and must build from
the very foundations in every subject area. As a work of synthesis, scope is equally constrained by the state of research and publication in a wide variety of areas. The scope of Senior’s work is defined by ‘heritage’ but this is itself a slippery term, subject to a variety of interpretations and expectations.

In the A–Z of 1983, Senior did not worry much about the meanings of heritage. She described her work as ‘a compendium of information about flora and fauna, people, places, historic events, cultural activities and beliefs’ (x). The principles of selection were primarily uniqueness and identification with Jamaica, superlatives, intrinsic interest (even if not unique to Jamaica), visibility, and historical and cultural significance. People, places and events jostled with plants, animals and ideas. The A–Z began with the Abeng, a cow horn blown by the Maroons to communicate when at war with the British in the eighteenth century and a continuing symbol of freedom, and ended with the Zemi, the spirit of the Arawak (now better known as Taino) and the artefact in which it resided.

In the Encyclopedia of 2003, Senior offers a much fuller and more reflective introduction to the scope of her task, beginning with the question ‘What do I mean by Heritage?’ (ix). Recognising the existence of a multiplicity of definitions, she gives her own view that ‘it is everything from the past (our inheritance) that shapes us and serves as pointers to who we are, both as individuals and a nation’. Every Jamaican knows a different package of these elements, she says, but their intersection has been vital in ‘the formulation of national identity’. Without using the term, Senior clearly recognises the process of creolisation, seeing the national heritage as ‘holistic’ and Jamaicans as ‘shaped by a unique set of circumstances that are intrinsic, even as we belong to distinctive racial or ethnic categories’. She distinguishes Jamaica from the ‘newly minted and fashionably “multicultural”’ communities by pointing to the long history of interaction that has been played out on the Jamaican stage and the ‘transforming genius of place’ that has enabled the remaking and naturalisation of culture. Four criteria are employed in deciding the entries: place, creative activity, history, and rituals and traditions. As to ‘history,’ Senior says that ‘Heritage is what we experience — our history, our heroes and heroic deeds, our charlatans and villains,’ and ‘what we achieve — in all fields of endeavour, over time’.

One reason why Senior offers this more extensively elaborated definition of the meanings of her work and the scope of ‘heritage’ is that over the two decades from 1983 to 2003 a great deal of attention has been given to the concept, both in the public and the scholarly arenas. Just two years after Senior’s A–Z there appeared David Lowenthal’s The Past is a Foreign Country, a book which quickly became one of the key texts in the critical study of heritage. Lowenthal did not cast his book in ‘heritage studies’ terms but saw it rather as a natural outgrowth of his developing scholarly interests, beginning in the 1940s with conservation in the natural world and moving on to attitudes to place and the built environment, and historic preservation. Lowenthal also became interested in the ‘celebration of ethnic and national roots’ and experience outside the United States led him...
to compare West Indian and Australian with North American orientations towards their pasts, as three New World realms where colonial and natural history had shaped distinctive ways of defining, vaunting, and rejecting various aspects of heritage (xviii). Students of the Caribbean will know Lowenthal best for his various works on the region’s geography and politics, beginning in the 1950s. The West Indies appeared only occasionally in The Past is a Foreign Country, but stimulus from Lowenthal’s Caribbean studies played a vital role in the development of his ideas.

These ideas and developments quickly spilled over into the Caribbean, leading to the emergence of more critical approaches to heritage, its meanings and practices. In 1993 the Department of History at the University of the West Indies, Mona, introduced a postgraduate degree in Heritage Studies, which continues as a popular option and attracts more students than traditional programmes in History. The success of Heritage Studies has to do with the public face of heritage, expressed in museums, theme parks and cultural tourism, as well as changing attitudes to the preservation and the authenticity of folk life. Heritage is connected with collective and individual memory, the exploitation of a wider range of sources than has been typical of History, and the potential for bringing the past to a wider audience in a wider range of formats. The academic study of these developments and institutions shares the ambivalence common to many explorations of popular culture, in which critical approaches are counterbalanced or destabilised by an underlying nostalgia and by a desire to control or direct the ways in which the past is represented in the contemporary world, the formal task of the historian.

In The Past is a Foreign Country, Lowenthal saw his task as analytical, pointing out the ways in which the past exists in the present yet is itself transformed by the present, with fundamental implications for the meaning of preservation. He concluded that a dynamic attitude was essential, a recognition that the past is ‘assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present’ (412). This is an argument rooted in the philosophy of history, a truism perhaps but vital to the notion of historical knowledge. The only past we can know is the past that is preserved in our present, and it is only from the traces of the past that exist in the present that we can attempt to reconstruct the past. Because the principles that determine the survival of those traces are controlled by a wide range of physical, social and political factors, the past can only be known in a residual and partial form. The argument applies to heritage as much as history, and it supplies a useful way of thinking about the principles of inclusion and exclusion that might be applied to any survey or analysis of ‘heritage’.

Events, institutions and artefacts of the past that exist as traces in the present (as potential evidence for the making of histories) do not necessarily enter the realm of heritage. It seems necessary to demonstrate an active and evident role in contemporary culture, rather than assuming that the known existence of things
in the past must inevitably have consequences for our present. On this assumption, there are several entries in Senior’s Encyclopedia that might struggle to qualify as heritage. For example, Senior includes separate entries on each of the twelve principal Zemis of the Tainos, from Baibrama to Opiyel Guobirán, though it is unlikely any of them are known outside a narrow band of specialist archaeologists and it seems impossible to demonstrate a link with any aspect of contemporary culture. Similarly, the Camel gets an entry but has not been seen in Jamaica for more than 200 years and has no place in folklore. The Apprenticeship has much the same difficulties, as heritage, and might better have been included under the general entry for Slavery. Another problematic entry is that on the Colonial Church Union. This pro-slavery extremist group directed its energies to wiping out the mission stations of dissenters, particularly in the parish of St. Ann, in the months following the rebellion of the enslaved in 1831–32. The group included some colourful individuals, such as Hamilton Brown, the founder of Brown’s Town, and the Rev. George W. Bridges, but their continuing place in contemporary heritage is tenuous. These entries verge towards the antiquarian and esoteric but are intrinsically interesting and saved by the connections made by cross-referencing to other entries. In order to understand contemporary Jamaica, it might be useful to know about the Colonial Church Union and the Apprenticeship but the camels and the zemis (with several other entries on the Tainos) are little help. They do aid in pointing to the might-have-beens of Jamaican history but heritage does not deal in counterfactuals.

The Encyclopedia is a treasure trove for all concerned with Jamaica and the culture of the Caribbean. Most often, a quick search will reveal the information hoped for and at the same time reveal a whole new set of questions and territories for exploration. Everyone will find something missing, perhaps, but it is a work in progress and a task never done. One omission does seem striking, the lack of general entries on the body and sexuality, though these clearly have a central role in the culture and have been studied, and indeed the inheritance contained in the body is the most basic of all concepts of heritage. The Mordecais seem similarly reluctant to enter this zone. The closest Senior comes is her entry on ‘colours’ but the discussion seems fixed in ‘the plantation era’ rather than connected with the people of the present. There are no entries for colour, race or ethnicity, for example, and the entry for Mongoose refers strictly to the animal without recognising its disparaging application to people. The rich variety of terms used by Jamaicans to classify grades of colour and the parts of the body, from foot-bottom to head-top, deserve a place in the Encyclopedia. As with all compilations, quibbles of this sort are inevitable. To expect the work to be truly comprehensive is to ask more of it than Senior would wish to claim.

How deep does the historical link need to be for something to qualify as ‘heritage’? Senior does include many of the more vital and exciting aspects of modern Jamaican culture but succeeds in demonstrating direct and substantial

...
connections to the past. For example, Dancehall emerged only in the 1980s as a
term encompassing a form of popular music and its subculture. Senior explains
that ‘dancehall’ defines ‘the music as well as the dances, dress, language and
behaviour of this sub-culture,’ ruled over by a deejay and centred on sexuality
(‘slackness’) and politics (‘culture’). The roots of this style are easily traced to
the 1960s, reggae and dub, and could without much difficulty be followed back
into the eighteenth century. Senior’s treatment of dancehall is up to date, though
missing the bashment and the browning. It goes without saying that these terms
are also missing from the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, and the need for a
revised edition of that vital tool is made all the more obvious by the richness of
Senior’s work. New editions of the *Encyclopedia* will also be eagerly awaited
but for the moment we give thanks for what she has done.

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