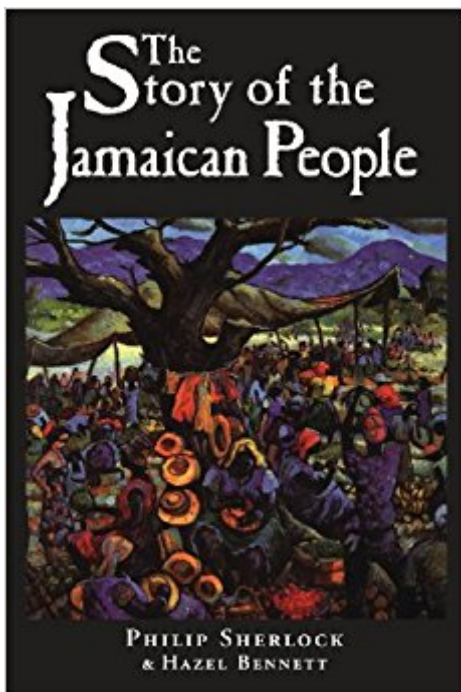


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# The Story Of The Jamaican People



## Synopsis

The Story of the Jamaican People is the first general history of Jamaica to be written in almost 40 years. It differs significantly from earlier "imperial" histories which have been written from the perspective of the coloniser and which have relegated Jamaicans to an inferior and passive role. In this book, the authors offer a new interpretation of Jamaica's history. The central theme is the long struggle of the African-Jamaican against subjugation, injustice, economic deprivation and the fight for full freedom. Sherlock and Bennett recount the epic resistance to slavery; from the acts of sabotage on the estates, the legendary exploits of Maroon heroes Cudjoe, Nanny and Tacky, to the final blow delivered by Sam Sharpe which ended slavery in Jamaica. An underlying theme throughout the book is the centrality of Africa, the original homeland of the African-Jamaican. The memory of Africa's ancient civilisations, its diverse tribes, languages, cultures and religions, sustained the African-Jamaican throughout slavery and remains a positive influence on modern-day Jamaican culture. Although the focus of the story is on African-Jamaican, the authors recognise the significant role played by other ethnic groups - East Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrians and Jews - in the development of modern Jamaica. The Story of the Jamaican People is told in a powerfully evocative and poetic style in which the images of creative writers and artists are blended with extensive quotations from anthropological, sociological and historical sources. The book is copiously illustrated and has an extensive bibliographical and reference section as well as a useful index.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Story of the Jamaican People The historiography of Jamaica has come a long way, from

Fernando Henrique's *Jamaica, Land of Wood and Water* (1964), in which blacks are categorized with the plantation stock, to Sherlock and Bennett's *The Story of the Jamaican People* (1998), in which they are treated as being among the founders of civilization. Unlike other histories of the island published since emancipation (see, for example, Black 1965; Hurwitz & Hurwitz 1971; Gardner 1971), *The Story of Jamaican People* is not in the typical genre of a colonial history; it is a history of a people. Yet the book presents a picture of Jamaica that is both bleak and bright. It is written to inspire Jamaicans, but it also condemns the horrible plantation regime upon which the nation, indeed the region, was founded. The modern history of the region began with an error of navigation and was nurtured on greed, cruelty, and cultural arrogance. For blacks the outcome was, in the words of George Lamming, "a fractured consciousness" (p. 294). Jamaica's history began in a portentous unequalness, symbolically and actually represented in Cristobal Colón and his band of conquistadores trading worthless curios with the native Tainos for their finely crafted implements. The journey through the centuries brought this small isle to envision itself as a nation "fitted by its record of cultural achievement to contribute significantly to the unity and happiness of our [global] shipmates" (p.411). Situated ambiguously as it has been at the center of modern history but on the peripheries of international relations of power, Jamaica is still navigating its way through the contradictions conceived in the Colón-Taino trade. The story pivots on the theme of the creation of a unified nation out of conflicting interests and understandings. Jamaica's flat lands permitted industrial-scale plantations, but the mountains have always embraced escapees. Control by a small number of absentee white plantation owners contributed to brutal neglect of the island, but the large numbers of black imported laborers facilitated generalized revolt. The maroons fought valiantly for their freedom, but later collaborated with planters against run-away slaves to maintain that freedom. Adjustment to servitude and post-plantation oppression has always kindled divisive violence in the very people known for their cooperative spirit and eternal warmth. For much of this history, Jamaica was, as the authors remark, not a nation but a name; no one called Jamaica home (p. 156). The contradictions germinated the dialectical seed of nationhood, however- a process of self-formation born in the tumultuous days of urban proletarian protest of the 1930's and coming of age in the nationalist decolonization struggles of the 1950's and 1960's. The very first line of the book's introduction establishes its tone: "In this book the authors tell the story of the Jamaican from an African-Jamaican, not a European, point of view: (p. xi). They then quickly go on to argue that "the Jamaican people have never accepted what was presented to them as the history of Jamaica. The Heroes of the British Empire are not their heroes. Their battlefields are in African-America, in Palmares...in Accompong" (p. xi). This sets the stage for grounding the story in Africa-"the

homeland." But this grounding is less strictly historiographic than vaguely cosmological, what locals might call a "navel string" grounding. The titles of the first three chapters- "Honour the Ancestors," "On Claiming our Great Heritage," and "Africa, the Original Homeland"- are not only accurately descriptive of content, but intended to be evocative of a rebellion in historical consciousness. The authors tell us that this history begins with a tribute of loving respect for the Jamaican and West Indian people, and quote George Lamming on his desire to bring "this world of men and women from down below to a proper order of attention" (p.1). But lest the reader begin to think this work is blind to non-African Jamaica, they immediately move to recognize the coming of the Jews as early as the sixteenth century, and later the Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, and Syrians. And the three historical icons venerated for their inspiration in nation building are George Washington, Simón Bolívar, and Toussaint L'Ouverture. Chapter 4 begins the conceptual task of replacing The "colonial model" of Jamaican history and society with a "world perspective", and Chapter 5, less than eight pages, begins the empirical grounding of this world perspective with a consideration of the indigenous peoples of the region. The story then shifts to the coming of those entities, Spain and Britain, whose single-minded attention to gain would necessarily distort and obscure the story of those whose labor produced than gain. Ultimately, the heritage that is claimed is the heritage of slave rebellions, maroon wars, and postslavery struggles for freedom under leaders from Paul Bogle to Bob Marley. But it is also the heritage of "freedom and justice to be found in English history" and encoded in the Magna Carta. The story soon turns from attention to heritage, honor, and homeland to consideration of colonial creation. The authors self-consciously place their narrative firmly in a global perspective, wider than the colonial world which has so typically framed our historical thinking. Branding this the "long view of African and human history" (p. 33), they begin with the hunting and gathering peoples of the early period and move on to the settled centers of "civilization" such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China. The intent is to eschew what they appropriately see as the "fracturing influences of imperial Europe," and to endgender instead a sense of the essential unity of humanity. Buried in this schema is an all too simplified, even distorting, unilinear evolution. The heart of the book- Chapters 6 through 29- retells the story of conquest, settlement, the emergence of a profoundly divided society, the birth of nationalist consciousness in the late 1930's to 1940's, and the beginning of economic development thinking in the 1950's to 1960's. The final chapter, "Culture and Nationhood," pulls together a wide spectrum of events and individual accomplishments pertaining to art, politics, and performance, in order to underscore that nation-building is as much culture-building as institution-building. Above all, the story of nation-building is about how African Jamaicans rejected the plantation and post-plantation systems

and, at the same time, adjusted with ferocity, ingenuity, long suffering, and humor. To use a Jamaican saying, they are able to tek' bad somt'ing mek' laugh. Where the book soars is not in recounting the major wars and rebellions (about which much has already been written- for example, Hart 1985; Holt 1992), but in the telling of the human side of the struggle, the everyday creativity of the folk in overcoming adversity. Here the authors show deep knowledge and sensitive appreciation of local culture, drawing heavily, as no Jamaican historian before them has done, on popular expressive idioms. The technique brings to mind E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* - not so much for its grand theoretical intent and fine-grained ethnohistorical research, but with the same common-people-as-historical-agents effect. In that vein, the struggle of Jamaican plantation and post-plantation workers is put in the broader historical context of the development of the English working class in response to the demands of the Industrial Revolution. The book's significance lies less in the impressive synthesis it achieves than in the modality of its interpretation: the African-Jamaican perspective. Two discursive vehicles used to enable this perspective deserve critical comment: the emphasis on liberation of consciousness, and the wide use of local sociocultural material. The authors raise the question: "Why do Jamaicans avert their eyes from their history, when in all countries the teaching of history is an opportunity to build up a basic nationalism and patriotism in the mind of a child" (p. 8). They answer this question by presenting a history which seems intended less to provide academic historians with a paradigmatic shift- though it may serve that purpose- than to provide an intellectual balm yard, a rallying point for revitalizing national consciousness. It is, in a phrase, a transparently nationalist history. By contextualizing the Jamaican story as part of the "long view of African and Human history," we get a sense of Jamaicans not as mere survivors of European avarice and arrogance, but as mindful historical agents. Thus, we are treated to a humanist interweaving of ideas and activities from abolitionists William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp to black Baptist missionaries George Lisle and Moses Baker; from nineteenth-century Jamaican activist George William Cordon to ex-slave Paul Bogle; and from nativist religious leader Bedward to today's Rastafarian activists. Politics and religion are treated as unified. The effect of Voltaire's play, *Saul*, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, are viewed alongside the declaration of a local hymn, "Since Christ Has Made Us Free," in their synthesized effect on local and regional liberatory history. This book's inspiring and accessible telling of Jamaican history is a significant contribution to the emergent thinking that challenges the categories of thought and knowledge bequeathed under the twin yoke of greed and cultural arrogance. The real beneficiaries of this bold intellectual labor of love and respect for a people will be secondary and postsecondary students, who will find in it a history that speaks not just to their

intellect but to their spirit as well. -- Book Review --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sir Phillip Sherlock (d.2000) was an educator, historian, poet and storyteller. He was former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica and an author of some 15 books including A Short History of the West Indies with John Parry, which remains a classic text for undergraduate studies in Caribbean history. Dr Hazel Bennett is a former head of the Department of Library Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

Excellent book! The images are not very clear, but that is my only minor issue with the book.

great purchase

Very informative!!

Very informative.

I very much appreciate the thoughtful and deliberate way the text invites you into the human experience. There are plenty of histories that detail dates of events and leaders names. This work effectively draws the reader into the people's story in an engaging way.

It is the most detailed book on Colonialism, slavery, Spanish, English and others who helped make up the Jamaican culture. The research was well done by Sherlock and Bennett.

Worth every penny and more. I wish all my fellow Jamaican could get a copy, as well as well wishers of the islands.

Have just begun the book; it's already begun to open doors previously unknown to me.

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