

BOOK REVIEW

The Grooming of a Chancellor — By George Alleyne

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, famous American poet, wrote:

*Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time.*

Sir George Alleyne is without question a great alumnus of our university, whose gifts included not just language but several languages, classical scholarship, brilliance in scientific research and writing, clinical medicine, teaching, public health, international development and administration and oratory. His splendid autobiography sets out those footprints he will leave on the sands of time, well ahead of his departure from this world, in which he has made such a difference for so many people. Unlike the declaration of Jaques, in Shakespeare's play *As you Like it*, who divided man's life into seven ages, Sir George has already had seven fruitful ages with hopefully several more to come. As was said of the great scientist JBS Haldane, he has made contributions in each of these ages "that would satisfy half a dozen ordinary mortals".

Sir George is one of many important Barbadians of the twentieth century who were the sons of primary school teachers and rose to eminence, imbued from childhood with a sense of duty, responsibility, ethical and religious principals and ambition. Others include Sir Grantley Adams, founder of the Barbados Labour Party and Prime Minister of the West Indies Federation, and Sir Courtney Blackman, first governor of our Central Bank. Sir George's story began in the rural parish of St Philip in Barbados, on October the 7th 1932, in a village with the impressive name Lucas Street, in a humble house he described as of wattle and daub construction – a dramatic link with slave ancestors, who lived in such homes over some two hundred years. The story of his journey to become Director of the Pan American Health Organization

(PAHO), United Nations (UN) special Envoy for HIV/ AIDs and finally Chancellor of The University of the West Indies, is told with clarity and elegance, and just the right mix of facts and fun.

The setting and events of his early years are recounted with affection and nostalgia, sprinkled with memorable stories. For example, when his grandmother died at 76, her mother Grand Nan, who lived to the venerable age of 106, said: “I knew I would never raise that child. She was always sickly”.

At the age of 11, playing at boxing, he was struck in the left eye and went virtually blind. A delayed visit to the ophthalmologist resulted in a diagnosis of haemorrhage for which nothing could be done, resulting in a macular scar and only peripheral vision in that eye. One of his siblings joked many years later that he had done reasonably well in life with good vision in only one eye, and he might have done really well if he had good binocular vision ... In fact, he continued to box seriously at school, resulting in the nick-name Champ, which unfortunately he does not detail the exact origin of in his story!

Barbadians will enjoy his account of school days at Harrison College and all University of the West Indies alumni will revel in his account of the early days of the then University College of the West Indies. His decision, after winning the Barbados Scholarship in classics, to go to the fledgling University College caused serious local consternation as he was the first Barbados Scholar to make this choice. The main reason was his nascent West Indian nationalism. Ten years later I faced the same opposition, but I went for the same reason, and I dare say that decision was the key to the rest of both of our lives.

Chapter 2 is titled “Growing up in Jamaica and Becoming West Indian” and again it is an evocation of a period in our lives, in the development of Jamaica and of the University that resonates for all of us who were a part of this great institution in the first 20 years - the fifties and sixties. It was in that period that he met and married Sylvan, a nurse at the University Hospital. He summarised the secret of his success as three stages in life - needing a lover in the first stage when the hormones are raging, a friend in the second, mature stage of life, and a nurse in the autumn of his days; and his wife of almost 60 years has been all three.

Chapter 3 describes his internship and postgraduate years – internship with Professor Sir Harry Annamunthado and Professor Eric Cruickshank (who described Champ to me as by far the best and

brightest medical student he had ever encountered), the drama of medical care at the old General Hospital in Barbados, his fellowship in London and return to Jamaica.

Stage four (and Chapter 4) was again life changing, when he was invited by the Father of Modern Medical Research in the Caribbean, Professor John Waterlow, to join his team in the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit at Mona, Jamaica – now expanded with three research units at Mona and incorporating the George Alleyne Chronic Disease Research Centre in Barbados, and the whole Institute renamed The Caribbean Institute for Health Research. His research on metabolism in malnutrition was cutting edge, and it was in this phase of his research leadership that I was invited by him to undertake a research elective in his lab. He taught me to cannulate the aorta of rats and many other things, and I could write a book about our long days and nights in the lab. That was fifty years ago, almost to the day and month of writing this review, and it was life changing for me.

Chapter 5 describes stage five – his appointment and term as Professor of Medicine – the first UWI alumnus appointed to the post, joining another Barbados scholar in classics, the late Sir Kenneth Stuart, who held a personal chair. Many of us in the university and the Faculty of Medical Sciences in that turbulent political period in Jamaica would have enjoyed a much longer and more detailed account of those years. They occupied only a dozen pages packed with incidents, stories and remarkable achievements, including his model fund raising scheme to build a large modern building shared between the departments of Medicine and Obstetrics; and the story of a crowd of striking workers bursting in to the Clinical-Pathology conference to carry out a citizen's arrest of Dr Cecil McIver, who had breached their barricade at the main gates. Sir George was awarded the Sir Arthur Sims Commonwealth Travelling Professorship in 1977 and was hosted by my boss Sir Christopher Booth while I was working at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London. I have to say I was extremely proud to hear such a magnificent lecture “from my boss back home”.

Chapters 6 to 10 give a fascinating account of what he calls the International Odyssey – leaving Jamaica reluctantly to join the PAHO, being elected / appointed Director in 1995 and reappointed for a

second term in 1999. His and PAHO's many achievements under his tenure, including the eradication of polio from the region, are modestly chronicled, and his many brilliant speeches across the region – many in Spanish – are documented in two published volumes of speeches. He tells the story of the efforts to have him elected as Director of the World Health Organisation, and the political machinations that altered the course of events and resulted in his surprising defeat in the secret ballot of nations. While a disappointment perhaps, it clearly benefitted our region immensely and ultimately Sir George and his family.

Sir George returned to the University in many ways, eventually being appointed Chancellor in 2003 – a role that he took extremely seriously, and the title of his autobiography “The Grooming of a Chancellor” indicates the importance he attaches to this crowning point of his career. The challenges and opportunities in our very special Caribbean situation meant that a balance had to be struck in presiding over what is essentially the largest macro company in the Caribbean. He records that the Chancellor of an English University advised that the role was “to exert influence without interfering” – a bit of an oxymoron, and a role that Sir George has exercised with the delicacy and diplomacy of Benjamin Franklin himself. What is consistently clear is that the theme of West Indian nationalism has guided his life from student to Chancellor.

In his two terms totalling fourteen years, Sir George has shaken hands with some seventy-five thousand graduates. And his reputation as a brilliant raconteur was enhanced every year. It is illustrated in his brief story of the graduate who said to him “Chancellor, I shook your hand when I got my first degree. When I receive my master's degree tomorrow, may I hug you?” He demurred and said, “I would rather you did not, as I am concerned about what you will suggest when you receive your PhD”. These gems brighten and add spice to the many, many lessons to be learnt about medicine and medical research, higher education, public health, administration, our unique university, our West Indian-ness and our values in life. So who should read this book? Everyone in the Caribbean and the Americas at least, who is working in a medical field or interested in health and well-being and how to achieve it.

Sir George's background in the classics gives him deeply comfortable skills in the use of language. As Professor Eudine Barriteau, Principal and Pro Vice Chancellor at the Cave Hill Campus said at the book

launch there: “I welcome this opportunity to bask in the reflected glow of your collective literary achievements”. But over and above his many skills and accomplishments, it has been his underlying values of truth and justice which have informed his global public health role, seeking equity in health. Julio Frenk, President of the University of Miami, wrote a splendid foreword describing the book as “a judicious account of a fruitful life”. He concludes: “His (Sir George’s) basic lesson is particularly timely: the need to strive for what is true and what is just.” Amen.

Sir Henry Fraser
Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Clinical Pharmacology
The University of the West Indies
Cave Hill Campus, Bridgetown, Barbados