

Janet White Lady and the Communist Pope

FOR SOME of my generation the last few weeks have been spent watching with astonishment and held breaths the unexpected final act of a superb drama, Shakespeare, Marlow, that time when spectators were part of the play then retired to silence as genius created its ending.

Janet Jagan who for decades we had known as Cheddi's wife, companion, associated like Cheddi with sugar, rice, bauxite, workers and their strikes, like Cheddi part of Guyana's tragic battle first against the sugar interests of Bookers, then the paranoid fear of a declining British colonialism, the conflicts of the Cold War, the bitterness of the Burnham split, the sheer loneliness of an engineered defeat, this Janet Jagan a Caribbean legend we thought, was now not Guyanese. She, who had refused to be a White American, was now a White Lady. In that word she was stripped of past or of history, robbed even of a nationality, she was flung into the nameless prison of a race and of a sex. She was a White Lady.

As a race and as a gender she could not be citizen. It was a logic we, of my generation, knew well. We had fought this. Those, ten, 15 years older than we were, had fought it on the battle fields of Europe as citizens became Jews or Gypsies. We had seen it fought out in Algeria as the demand to be citizens and not Muslims wrote the first chapter of civil war, at another level we had fought it here in the long protracted battle to be not subjects but citizens. We had joined the Civil Rights struggle to be not a race but citizens with full civil rights, we had cheered at the victory over what we hoped was the last bastion of non-citizenship, apartheid South Africa. As immigrants in Britain we had fought for the primacy of citizenship above race. There, in Britain, we fought for the right of black people — Asians they were called, Africans, our own Caribbeans to be fully part of the British political and economic life. To be not races, but citizens. We were still fighting throughout what was becoming "fortress Europe" for the ending of any definition of a citizen which implied race.

Here, in our own backyard, race threatened to abolish citizenship and, not at the level of some former colonial oppressor, some arrogant expatriate manager knocking back whisky on a tropical verandah, but Janet Jagan.

Pass the news to Le Pen in France. Pass the news to the crazy Irish woman booed in Cork or in Clare, pass the news to the neo-fascists in Germany, Britain, Switzerland or Belgium. Disenfranchise your black men and your black women, send them back rightless.

Guyana — a certain Guyana — has shown you the lead. They want no white women.

The act isn't finished, not quite. Tragedy turns into comic opera. Those who for years had refused free elections, had permitted the House of Israel undisclosed reign, who were yet to explain Walter Rodney's murder or indeed the assassination of Farther Dark the Jesuit journalist, who had pursued Father Morrison, Editor of the *Catholic Chronicle*, were not affronted by some supposed "rigging" of elections.

Some of us had thought that the nature of this curious ideological specimen of a "co-operative" republic justified acrobatic elections. Now I am not totally damning Burnham. He had a good anti-colonial track record. Southern Africa is grateful to him for support when there was little. I remain convinced that history will prove him heads higher than either Hoyte or Hamilton Greene. But, come of it, not free and fair elections, eh. Those elections were framed, call a cat a cat, to keep Cheddi in particular and Indians in general (some exceptions) out of Burnham's power. It was the fear of Indians, carefully cultivated by interests outside of the Caribbean, and well watered by ambitions within the country — this last fully multi-racial — which



FROM
MARION
O'CALLAGHAN

kept Guyana divided, Burnham in power and skewed the pitch for idealistic Cheddi and Janet when they did win free and fair elections.

Now any knowledge of the Guyana scene and a cursory look at the demographic statistics and it took neither prophet, pundit or a Yesina to foretell the results of Guyana's recent elections. Janet would win. Janet won.

She needed no rigging to win. There may well have been some irregularities but nothing which could upset the final result. The international observers were satisfied. Why then this hue and cry? What could Hoyte hope for?

Tougher Than Cheddi

Did Janet Jagan decide on a private near-secret swearing in because she feared that a political vacuum would tempt a coup-d'état? Janet Jagan was after all no lady, white or black. She had to be tough to be Cheddi Jagan's wife. Tougher than Cheddi.

She was not vulnerable through the electoral ballot. She was vulnerable through Guyana's army and police. They were principally of African origin. They were Guyanese. She was a White Lady. They remained loyal and gave us all back a shred of respectability.

*West Indians boys are marchin'
Some are black
Some are white
Some are brown
Others light...*

Sing it, sing it, in praise of Guyana's army and police. Tell it, tell it, we do not dare forget it. The comic opera changes again. Now there is the real threat of a Bosnia, a Rwanda, a Lebanon. White Woman, Indian man or woman — wait for the rest. Our generation, and I hope that one, must know that too.

There is nothing more vicious than a race for itself. In a race war mercy disappears, civilisation is dynamited, humanity is the real holocaust to a God of race. We skirted near to that in Guyana. Very near it.

We escaped it — so far. Yes, we. In increasing numbers of whispers and sometimes recently in coveting, I have heard and seen some Indians compare their condition in Trinidad and Tobago under the PNM to their condition under the Burnham regime. Under both they were oppressed and more ferociously so than when the British brought them over as indentured labour.

I gave up arguing. This, a myth if there ever was one, had become part of the arsenal of our own political comic opera. The one virtue of Manning's statement — of which wild is the most charitable word — was that it shocked

some of us back to reality. Trinidad and Tobago had never been a Guyana. We still of course have the option to make it one. There are some Guyaneseque strains at work. There is a helluva lot of Guyanesque talk. And yes, I can tell you some Janets among us who too have been robbed of past and history because they refused to be the powerful expatriates we preferred white people to be. Don't think they haven't known that peculiar racism we keep for those who, having shared our struggle, are vulnerable. But this is a far cry from Trinidad and Tobago being Guyana — yet.

There is another option. With our neighbour's house threatened with fire we can begin seriously to wet our own roof. Farce can become tragedy, Gods in our own race image always demand sacrifices of gold first, blood later. That blood will also be our own.

The drama continues. The ski-ing youthful Pontiff of very recent memory is a faltering shuffled-footstep bent old man. The gaze has settled into a penetrating sadness where hope is already eternity. He has learned much, this Pope, Polish nationalist, Slav, European, anti-communist. He has won much, this Pope, and learned that there was losing in the winning. The triumphal Church of nostalgia for the Middle Ages was a Polish mirage. It was not that society which would be resurrected Phoenix like from the ashes of communism. It was drug gangs, beggars on the street selling their war decorations in order to eat, the tearing apart of Croat and Serb, Christian and Muslim, a democracy recently gained and already threatened. Yes, a certain freedom had been won. All that was expected was the extent of the rottenness. We have hardly here in Trinidad and Tobago noted the change in Vatican politics. We are still arguing over Finbar Ryan persuading ourselves that the morality of the Church is about those clerical sexual misdemeanours which titillate us. Nothing of the sort. Under our eyes a new morality is being forged not out of ashes, but out of the blood of the martyrs for justice we, in our generation, have known, or perhaps out of our dreams — those of my generation.

It is this Pope who has finally taken the Catholic ship away from the ports of Confessional States. It is the Vatican who is now the real champion of the secular state. This too was part of the Catholic-Jewish encounter: the freedom for Israeli Catholics to be non-Jews and citizens. It is this the Vatican's prudence in Iraq.

Christians there are still citizens. It is this the massive assistance of Irish Catholics to Muslims threatened in Bosnia and it is this the permission to open a mosque in Rome or the continuing co-operation not only in Catholic Goa or Kerala but throughout India, or the recent overtures to the Patriotic Church in China. Champion of Human Rights — yes, but Papa meant it.

Not as the easy faddish level many of us wished. Not even in any perfection. Papa is not perfect and he is full of blind spots. But at another level — that of the messianic promises of peace and of good news to the poor.

Who of our generation thought we would see this Pope in Fidel's Cuba? I laughed with the naughtiness of my age as Fidel, well scrubbed, out in his perennial guerrilla fatigues, dressed for church, became the erring son of Papa, scolded, rapped on the knuckles, hugged, defended, loved. The Polish nationalist had disappeared as black Cubans soldiers under a burning tropical sky offered their salute and the Vivas rang out to Caribbean swaying waists.

The rain had fallen, the Pope said.

The Heavens opened, the Prophets would say.

For perhaps a moment my generation felt it had not all been in vain. Guyana was a small episode, a skirmish, in a battle already won. Humanity had won it, some would say. Put it that way.

What was this about swords into ploughshares, neither Jew nor Gentile, peace and justice embracing? The curtain falls. Viva! For now.