

REVIEW

Vivid portrayals of Jamaica and Jamaicans

Title: *In Praise of Jamaica: Natural Wonders, Heroes and Achievements* by George Meikle.
George Meikle, 2011. 182 pages.
Reviewed by: Mary Hanna

With enthusiasm and heart-felt pride, George Meikle has assembled a cornucopia of historical facts about his native land and presented them in a wondrously glossy coffee table text for the enjoyment of all. His aim is to capture the essence of Jamaican culture and sense of place to celebrate 50 years of independence as a nation. In his Introduction, he says:

For its size, Jamaica is a high-profile country. This book celebrates the unique physical and cultural heritage of Jamaica, the various endowments of the country, and the achievements of its people. Stories of Jamaica need to be told in order to provide an insight into Jamaican people, to properly illustrate their passion for life, as well as the motivation and determination, which they have to succeed — and sometimes excel — at the highest level.

Meikle feels those stories must be told by Jamaicans.

His text is well organised in seven sections that are subdivided into chapters that address natural wonders as well as historical and recent achievements by Jamaicans. His content is a veritable who's who of movers and shakers with special attention to our heroes Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley along with Louise Bennett, Rex Nettleford and Bob Marley. The photographic illustrations are of high quality: they are vivid portrayals of Jamaica's beauty and are intended, I believe, to bring comfort to Jamaicans of the Diaspora who are longing for home. There is some repetition of material covered — for instance, Rachel Manley appears in several places — but this is not a detriment to the overall concept of the text. Meikle has done an excellent job of framing the achievements of Jamaicans in varying contexts. He writes: "As Louise 'Miss Lou' Bennett-Coverley, Jamaica's cultural icon, said: 'What a country, what a people! Lawd!'"

One of my favourite chapters addresses "Jamaica's Internationally Famous Food Products". Here, Meikle lists internationally recognised brands like Blue Mountain Coffee, Appleton Estate Rums, and Red Stripe Beer. He also lists natural produce (ginger, all-spice pimento), Scotch Bonnet peppers... and under traditional dishes you will find jerk, ackee and salt fish, smoked marlin and Jamaican Easter bun. Among the gorgeous photographs of Jamaican fruits he offers a list of connoisseurs of Jamaican food — Joy Spence, Norma Shirley, and Enid Donaldson, among others. The strength of his chapters are their immediacy and rapid pace; the weakness is the too brief listing style that makes the content more superficial than it need be and somewhat chaotic when put all together. However, this is not a major drawback and the text reads well and is always vivid.

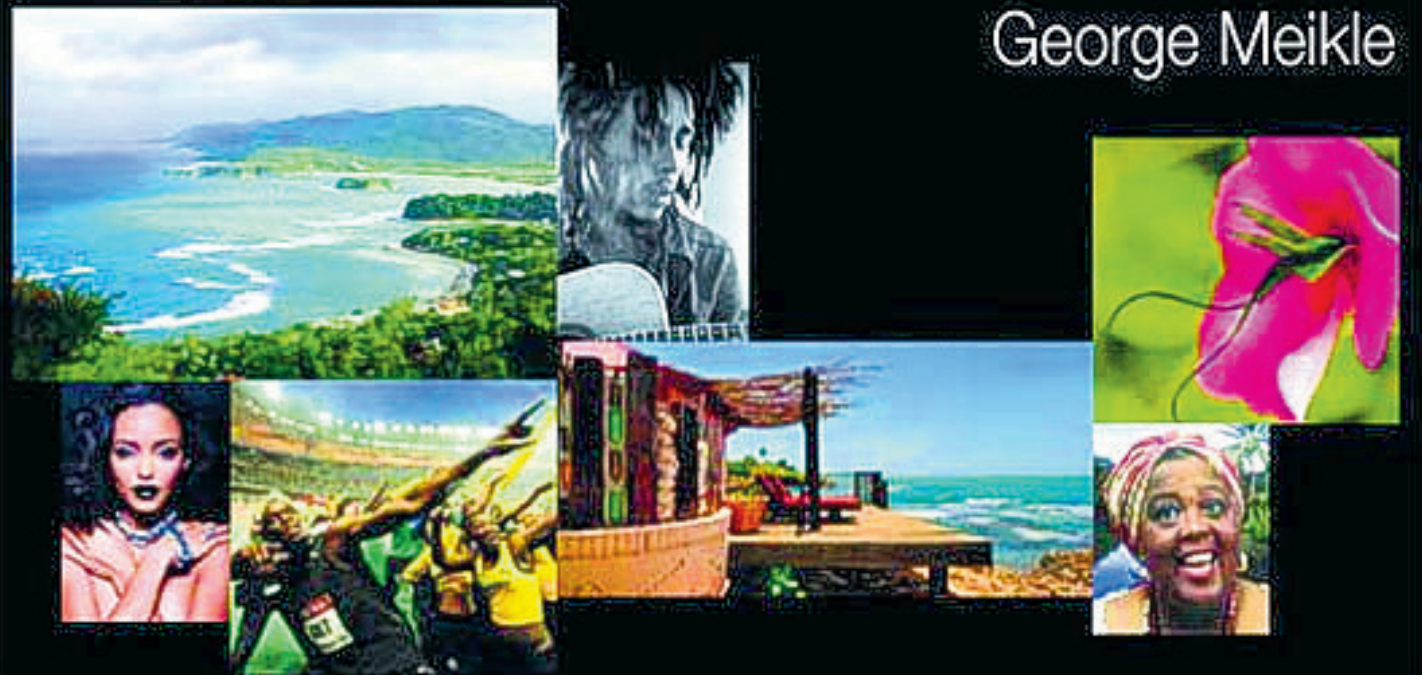
Section III, "Achievements of Jamaicans", is the longest entry. It covers pre-20th Century Heroes and Modern Jamaican Heroes in Music and Culture. Here Meikle offers a listing of

In Praise of JAMAICA

Natural Wonders Heroes and Achievements



George Meikle



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF JAMAICA'S INDEPENDENCE 1962-2012

Jamaican Achievements also addresses Athletics and Sports. Here, Meikle is in his element. He says: Jamaica is the first and only country ever to have all 100m sprint titles for all ages and at all major levels in males at once. The gold medal in the World Youth Olympics (Odeen Skeene), the World Youth Championships (Odail Todd), the World Junior Championships (Dexter Lee), the Commonwealth Games (Lerone Clarke), the World Championships (Usain Bolt) and the Olympics (Usain Bolt).

Jamaica's famous music styles (mento, ska, rock steady, reggae, DJ music, and dancehall) and pays tribute to the music makers from Harry Belafonte to Hedley Jones. There are some wonderful photographs of the artists, ending with this tongue-in-cheek comment: "Jamaican music has been all pervasive throughout the world — in Europe, Africa, the Far East, Latin America, and North America. What makes the music? When some say "the rhythm of the people", they are not far off!"

Jamaican Achievements also addresses Athletics and Sports. Here, Meikle is in his element. He says:

Jamaica is the first and only country ever to have all 100m sprint titles for all ages and at all major levels in males at once. The gold medal

in the World Youth Olympics (Odeen Skeene), the World Youth Championships (Odail Todd), the World Junior Championships (Dexter Lee), the Commonwealth Games (Lerone Clarke), the World Championships (Usain Bolt) and the Olympics (Usain Bolt).

Jamaican track stars make a long list and are followed by entries for Boxing, Martial Arts, Cricket, Winter Sports, Football, Netball, Horse Racing, Table Tennis and Tennis. The photographs are presented with skill and pride. Meikle gives us a lot to praise and be thankful for.

Meikle's chapter on Literary Achievers is long and yet not exhaustive, for Dennis Scott is missing from the text. Under Top International

Education Achievers he lists Professor Rex Nettleford and Dr Orlando Patterson along with Dr Norman Girvan, Dr Stuart Hall and many others. It is a pleasure to look through this text and browse slowly to savour the entries. Meikle's intention is to show how great the explosion of first-class cultural and otherwise achievement has been accomplished in the short time since Independence. He also wants to centre the culture in African-Jamaican offerings and to show how remarkable these achievements are given our agonistic history. This objective determines his slant, and tempers some of his comments. For example, under "Jamaican Art and Sculpture" he writes of Judy Ann MacMillan's painting that it is "Eurocentric", but nevertheless he praises her landscapes and portraits (though he misspells her name).

Meikle's text has been carefully and thoughtfully put together to illuminate the positives in his home country. He has done a fine job of offering Jamaican fare that is definitive, as was his objective. His textual composition is modern and of high quality and his text is worth owning.

George Meikle is a graduate of the University of Toronto with degrees in Psychology and Business Administration. He returned to Jamaica where it took a few years to refocus on what it meant to be a Jamaican. This experience is part of what prompted him to construct this exciting text. What is unique about Jamaica and why? Who are our heroes? *In Praise of Jamaica* provides some answers.