Jamaica’s “Forgotten Prime Minister”

Donald Sangster

By Hartley Neita
Power is like fire—a good servant but a bad master, and the misuse of power is one of the greatest faults of any Government; indeed it is a crime against the people.

Donald Sangster

From an article in The Voice (July 27, 1957)
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Hartley Neita’s book should be required reading as we celebrate Jamaica’s 50th anniversary because it takes us back in an intimate way to the beginning, to that generation that crafted the new nation in 1962. The author himself was a witness to many of the momentous events which he describes. His book is easy to read, honest, entertaining and informative. Above all, it restores Donald Sangster to his rightful place in the pantheon of Jamaican leaders and provides the context for a better understanding of his life and his times.

The reader might be surprised to discover that while the quiet Sangster played second fiddle to the powerful Bustamante, he was in fact the real driver of Jamaica’s economic and social development long before his untimely death.

Calling Donald Sangster ‘The forgotten prime minister’ is somewhat ironic since he held that office for only seven weeks; the last three weeks spent in a coma in a Montreal hospital where he died. What this book elaborates and what we should celebrate is Sangster’s unstinting years of service to the nation starting with his election to the St Elizabeth Parochial Board when he was only 21, and lasting until his death in office at the age of 56.

Our failure, then, is not only to honour Sangster the prime minister but to honour Sangster the man who served his country so long and so well. The failure to mark the centenary of his birth on 26 October 2011 is symptomatic of an attitude over the years to ignore the existence of Donald Sangster so that he remains a vague name to younger generations.

Oblivion might be due to our short memories and our tendency to ignore the past and concentrate on the more ephemeral aspects of our heritage. But, his death was also marked by controversy and rumours that persist to this day. Neita does deal with this issue, setting forth the facts in the form of the medical details surrounding Sangster’s illness and final days. He fell ill shortly after being sworn
in as prime minister and while he was at work crafting a new budget in his capacity as finance minister.

Some of the oversight might also be due to the fact that Sangster’s tenure in politics coincided with the rise and leadership of the two giants that everyone knows about—Norman Washington Manley and William Alexander Bustamante—and that he served most of his time in the shadow of the latter who reigned as undisputed leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP).

Yet, as this book demonstrates, Sangster can also be seen as the pivot around which much of Jamaica’s growth in stature from colony to nation turned in the years immediately before and after Independence. He was always in Bustamante’s shadow yet Bustamante thrust him into the limelight. As a member of Bustamante’s inner circle, in office or out, he was a trusted JLP standard-bearer from 1949, first as first deputy leader, later deputy prime minister and then acting prime minister. He also held the important ministerial portfolio of finance in successive JLP governments from 1953. Internationally, he was recognised as a respected leader and negotiator, at a time when The Commonwealth was a meaningful concept. His skilful diplomacy and interventions won international respect for Jamaica.

His training as a lawyer and accountant, and his diplomatic skills, made him an active figure in the negotiations leading to the ill-fated West Indies Federation, and then in Jamaica’s negotiations with Whitehall to go it alone. As chairman of the committee that organised the Independence celebrations, he played a central role in the choices made in regard to Jamaica’s National Flag, Anthem and other National Symbols.

In 1967 Sangster led the JLP to an election victory, the first time that Bustamante—finally admitting incapacity—did not lead the campaign. The Gleaner’s commentary at the time throws into relief the crucial Bustamante-Sangster relationship:

Sir Alexander Bustamante is a great leader but—as everyone knows—he is temperamental. Obedience to him which has always been Mr Sangster’s dedication is no easy role. Yet between the sometimes tempestuous Busta and the frequently apologetic Donald, there was always a nexus of political and personal affinity which has proved stronger than all the other relationships among the vigorous contentions inside the Jamaica Labour Party.
Whereas Ministers of rash and radical mien with lively street corner vigour seemed to be more in harmony with the charismatic leadership of Sir Alexander, the quiet administrative thoroughness of Mr Sangster made him almost indispensable in transforming an emotional labour movement into a workable parliamentary party and government.

Sangster certainly seemed to have understood Bustamante better than most of his colleagues. Or, perhaps, he simply had a stronger sense of his own worth. The following observation by Hartley Neita tells us much about Sangster’s discipline and self-restraint under Bustamante: “He was in the position of the captain of an aircraft who was likely to have the controls wrenched out of his hands at any moment. Yet, he bore this paradoxical situation without complaint.”

Without being given further analysis of Sangster’s personality, we can only make certain assumptions, one of which could be that his privileged yet disciplined rural background provided him with the stability and self-assurance that enabled him to quietly ride the waves of political upheavals.

As Neita points out, Sangster was a wealthy young man, handsome, polished and bright, and had no need to enter public life. But serve he did, inspired perhaps by the example of his uncle, a member of the Legislative Council, for whom he campaigned at age 16 while still at Munro College. Or, perhaps, he had from the start the burning ambition of the country boy to make something of himself that would transcend the borders of his inheritance. That we do not know, because we are not made privy to his thoughts or inner life. What we have is Neita’s external presentation of Sangster as a well-rounded individual—a man who was Christian and abstemious in his habits yet nevertheless enjoyed life. He loved theatre, good food, dancing, sports and seems to have had a wide circle of friends. He comes across as compassionate and generous and involved himself in the life of his parish of birth—St Elizabeth and that of his later political representation—North East Clarendon.

In this book he is portrayed as untouched by scandal—a golden boy from birth, which makes the story of his end and the death-watch that accompanied his weeks of coma unbearably sad. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth while on his deathbed, so he
never enjoyed that honour and it is hard, even now, to think of him as ‘Sir Donald’.

Sangster was never one to blow his own trumpet, and in Hartley Neita he acquired a biographer as subtle as he was. Neita occupied the sensitive position of press officer or press secretary to five heads of government – Norman Manley, Bustamante, Sangster, Shearer, and Michael Manley—which means that he was privy to state secrets and witnessed some of the most intimate moments in our modern political history. The fact that both parties put such trust in him speaks of his ability and trustworthiness. He died in 2008, having completed a first draft of this book; the task of editing it and seeing it to fruition has been ably carried out by his daughter, Michelle Neita.

But even though he was writing this biography in the age of disclosure, the age of Facebook, Twitter and whistleblowing, Hartley Neita still maintained the posture of discreet public servant, setting forth the facts about Donald Sangster’s public career but treating his private life with frustrating restraint. Frustrating because we do want to know. The most compelling parts of this book are the few times that the author gives us a glimpse of that world of which he was such an intimate part.

One such moment comes when he captures Sangster at the crowning moment of his career, when he returns to Vale Royal following his appointment as prime minister (which caught everyone by surprise; the account in this book serves as a good demonstration of the way Sangster outmaneuvered his rivals). This is how Neita evokes the aloneness of the most powerful man in Jamaica:

Sangster walked from the car through the kitchen and dining room to the living room of the house. He greeted the household staff as he passed them. They did not know as yet, that he was now the prime minister. He sat with his press secretary and spent about 30 minutes discussing the schedule of appointments which had been set up...

and changes he intended to make in the Cabinet:

...With a parting, “See you tomorrow,” Sangster walked slowly and carefully up the stairs of his residence to his bedroom, reading the Instrument of Office he had received from the governor-general 40 minutes or so ago. No wife, no mother,
no father, no sister, no brother to hug with joy and share this time of glory and congratulate him. The press secretary called the household staff together in the dining room and told them of Sangster’s appointment. They applauded. He left them wondering who would move with the prime minister to Jamaica House, his new official residence....

Sangster did in fact have an extended family who supported him and several of his relatives have made a name for themselves in politics and other areas of public and cultural life. But apart from knowing that he had children, we know nothing of their mothers or his relationships with them and this book does not enlighten us. It certainly raises the question of how much we ought to know about the private lives of our leaders, dead or alive.

The value of this book lies in the way Neita has set out the life and times of one man in the context of a Jamaica transitioning from colony to nation and the major role he and others —now largely forgotten, too—played in it. Others such as Robert Lightbourne, Clem Tavares, Noel Nethersole, Wills Isaacs, or Rose Leon, to name a few who loomed large in the consciousness of Jamaicans of the Independence generation. A few of Sangster’s political contemporaries have been immortalised in books. Neita has also written a biography of Hugh Shearer and much has been written by and about Edward Seaga, Norman and Michael Manley as well as Bustamante. But how can we praise other nation builders of the past and yes, those who presently occupy office, so they, too, might be known by future generations?

This is a book not only about Sangster but about who we were some 50 years ago. Neita’s personal knowledge enables him to choose the events, personalities and anecdotes to highlight. Taking us back to those moments of, say, the actual Independence celebrations, is to remind us of what now seems almost a state of innocence.

And what of our hopes and dreams then? Sangster’s first post-Independence budget was heavily in favour of agriculture and the focus was on the development of rural Jamaica. There was incentive legislation for industrial expansion; factories were being built. The stated emphasis was on local production and reduced dependence on imports. Which will lead every Jamaican to ask, what happened?

This is a political biography. But, it is also an instructive book
about leadership, progress and a small island state taking control of its own destiny. The Sangster that emerges from these pages is a man who was a conciliator and a peacemaker, showing ‘gumption and guts’ but also manners and respect for others. A man whose public conduct might well be worthy of emulation by present and future politicians, and whose life, as presented here, might inspire us to regain our faith in the possibilities of politics.

—Olive Senior, Author, 
*The Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*
Hartley Neita’s death, on December 12, 2008, left a void in the hearts of his family and friends. Indeed, it left a void in the minds of all who knew that they could call on him for his seemingly endless memory and unique ability to tell insightful stories, true stories, of the Jamaica he knew and loved so well.

So anticipated were these stories that the immediate and recurring lamentation after his death was, his other books in the pipeline would never be completed. Whether to counter or to quell these regrets, one friend remarked, “But Hartley was always mid-stream. No matter when his time came he would have left something unfinished.”

Of all my father’s projects, the biography of Sir Donald Sangster was the most complete. With a leap of faith and in an effort to fill the void, I took the decision to edit the manuscript and to get it published. An easy three-month project, I thought! After all, I had already helped him edit the first draft in 2006. My brother Gary delivered the files, and it was with mixed emotions that I read Hartley’s assignment, “Michelle Neita—Editor”. Digging deeper, it became clear that this was his second draft and that more time was needed. Thus began a labour of love that was to last some 18 months.

It was clear that Daddy had been working on improving the manuscript. It was now important to ensure that the research notes were accurately placed. In all, every effort was made to remain faithful to the facts, and to his style of communicating.

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