

[IAN ON SUNDAY](#)

Extraordinary People – Cheddi Jagan



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By Ian McDonald

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It was exciting to play a small part in Cheddi Jagan's very big life.

When he died for everyone it was like a death in the family. Even those who opposed him all their lives felt the shock of a sort of bereavement. Not before was there ever, and not since will there ever be, such an overwhelming flow of publicly expressed mourning. On the day of Cheddi Jagan's funeral Georgetown, who never voted in a majority for him, came out to honour him. At Buxton they halted his cortege on its way to Berbice to pay due respect. Flying up to the obsequies, circling over the villages and sugar estates all around, I saw the streets and habitations all abandoned, deserted, ghostlike, all the men, women and children gone to Babu John. In the family of any nation there are quarrels but these are set aside when such a revered elder figure in the family dies.

I found myself more shaken by Dr. Jagan's death than I thought I would be. That morning at 3.00 a.m. my wife and I were wakened out of sleep to be told. We sat and held hands and talked of our memories of him and said a prayer. He was never anything other than civil and generous in his dealings with me though often what I wrote could not have at all pleased him and surely even at times greatly vexed him, especially when I wrote approvingly of Karl Popper's complete repudiation of Marxism in his great books *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*. He never bore me the slightest malice. While I was Director of Marketing in the sugar industry we quite often talked the business of sugar but it was our talks on other matters I remember best. He would ring me out of the blue to discuss something I had written or said on the radio or to ask for more information on a subject I had discussed. He sought knowledge voraciously. Sometimes he invited me to State House just to chat and we would sit and the conversation was very easy between us. One of those times I like to remember he wanted to talk about the great American Black Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and I gave him some poems from Hughes's *Weary Blues* which he liked very much. My

overwhelming feeling about Dr. Jagan was of a good man through and through, generous-hearted, deep-souled.

I have a particular memory of Dr. Jagan which I treasure. It was on no great state occasion, at no momentous political event, during no gathering of the eminent and the famous. He was at Rose Hall estate to give out house lot deeds to about fifty sugar workers. It was pouring with rain but he did not think of cancelling and they did not think of not attending. When it came to his turn to speak an aide handed him a speech, I suppose, but he gave a smile and did not take it. He then spoke from the heart to those few sugar workers and their families in the falling rain and I have never heard words so clear and powerful and suitable.

Not a long speech, no rolling periods. No ideology, but simple words spoken in a straight line to their heads and hearts. How their ancestors had suffered much in slavery and indenture. But now through years of struggle and sacrifice a different time had come, a better time, a prouder time. But they should know it was a time when they must bear responsibility, they must take care of what they had won, they must show they were worthy of the efforts of those who had gone before. Now they must look after their house lots and improve them, they must leave things better for their children. He trusted them. He had always trusted them. They must remember what he said.

It was not really a speech. They had gathered around him and he was telling them the truth. I swear they will never forget what he said. And somehow on that quite insignificant occasion I knew I had got a glimpse of genuine political genius and what this man meant to the mass of people who loved him very much.

Whirling around in my head is what remains after age has taken its toll of the vast amount of poetry I have read in my lifetime. Often lines surface and I cannot for the life of me recall from what poem they come or who authored them. When I heard President Jagan had died some lines came as if summoned but I could not remember their source. The summoned lines captured for me then and still do something of Dr. Jagan's fighting heart and the flame he lit for countless others. "He was one who in his life fought for life/Who wore at his heart the fire's centre."