

RACHEL MANLEY

From *Drumblair:* *Memories of a Jamaican Childhood*¹

Extracts from Chapter 13: “Each Frustrate Ghost”

She [Edna Manley, sculptress] was working on a government commission. It was probably the most important challenge she had ever faced. At independence Jamaica had partially redefined itself by naming its own national heroes. One of them was the deacon Paul Bogle, from Stony Gut, a legendary figure who had killed the Custos with a machete in the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865. Now the government wanted statues of the heroes, and she’d been asked to do Bogle....

Pardi watched Mardi [Norman Manley and Edna, his wife, grandparents to the author, Rachel or Ray] crossing the lawn as she returned to the studio, and noticed how quickly she still moved. Above her tall frame, her head darted like a small bird. Age for her was merely another wild horse to break. He loved her for that....

He had watched his wife’s transplantations over the years the way he checked on the young grafts on his mountain farm.... She had done it again. The new studio was a more earthen place than the one at Drumblair, which had smelled of trees and wood

shavings. Every niche was sealed with a seam of clay, and its smell, damp and poignant as though from the secret folds of the ground's body, seeped up out of the cement....

Pardi was proud that she was recreating a moment of Jamaican history with the statue of Bogle. He knew this would one day stare down over the passing years from the steps of the Morant Bay courthouse. He was reminded again that the lens of the artist's eye in its considered blink could have more impact on events than all the daily machinations of planning and building. As a politician he found the thought humbling.

Many people disagreed with Bogle being a national hero, but Pardi approved of the choice. Marcus Garvey was obvious; he had spoken about the concerns of the black world, especially in America. George William Gordon, like Paul Bogle, had played a role in the Morant Bay rebellion, a bright, self-educated mulatto who had been able to represent the emancipated Jamaican workers to the officials in desperate times. But it was Bogle who had been the ferocious hand of outrage hitting out from the body of unrest. Although the rebellion had been officially quashed and Bogle executed for his role in the uprising, he had become a symbol of change in the island, for he expressed the will rather than the promise, the deed rather than the word.

Mardi was going to use fibreglass for the cast, a new substance which was said to be lighter and easier to use than plaster of Paris. She planned a monumental figure. It would be a hell of a job, and Pardi was planning to build a second studio for her, nearer the house, with a higher ceiling to accommodate the work.

“You’ll have to raise the roof,” he had suggested.

“I always do,” she had quipped....

When he entered the studio, Pardi stood for a while absorbing the progress of the clay figure before him, while Mardi dampened the rags over the small sink in the corner. She had done a good morning's work. She was always reluctant to leave the peace of her studio. She valued this small wooden haven even though its solitude and defiance were modest statements compared to her studio at Drumblair....

Things seemed to be falling into place. The house, though small, was manageable. Pardi was broke from his years of politics, but their debts had been paid by the sale of Drumblair. He had a much smaller salary from the government now²—even augmented by the fees from his legal briefs, it hardly covered the costs of his office and home. It was her steady flow of commissions that helped them pull through. And now this, a chance to do this vast statue of a national hero. She felt she had been validated by Jamaica....

In the centre of the room a muddy grey figure, still just bulk and outline, grew from the modelling stand. Already Pardi could sense the sturdy presence of Bogle. The original maquette Mardi had been working on was up at Nomdmi.³ It was a figure standing very straight in a great pause both elbows pressed to his sides, with his right forearm lifted to hold a machete flat against his torso, the blade pointing to the ground. That head was slightly inclined; he seemed to be looking down at what he had done.

Even in the rough this figure was different.

“This is new,” Pardi said. “Both arms are up.”

This figure was astride, its arms extended like wings at shoulder height and bent at the elbows; the hands met at the centre of the chest and clutched the handle of a machete whose blade pointed towards the ground. She had worked on this only a few hours this morning, modelling clay with her thumbs and wire-tipped tools.

“Well, yes. You see, I felt the other was maybe a bit too”—she seemed to both pull and press the edges of the form, the way one would straighten clothes on the shoulders of a small child—“too tentative, really. You see, when I was down at Stony Gut, where he was born, I met this old woman who knew Bogle’s son... she was fascinating. And I came away with one word she used... *bold*... she said Bogle was a *bold* man.”

And she turned to look at Pardi as she said “bold,” blowing the word out of her small mouth as though setting a bubble adrift.

“I like the symmetry,” he said. “It’s bold. The figure looks planted.”

“He can’t be apologetic, can he? He has to be so very sure. It’s one of those moments, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he said and got up to circle the model stand. She stepped back, giving him room.

“I see you have almost transformed the machete into a sword—as a symbol of the act. And the way he holds it... it’s more deliberate, more like a quest. I like that.”

“Bold. That’s what I want to capture. I was thinking, there are times when history cries out for a statement. Something irrevocable. Now Gordon, he was more a middle-class voice, wasn’t he? I mean, he spoke on behalf of the masses with a national voice. That’s what we are still trying to do. Even Garvey... he was a psychological force. His

was a great stone rolling, calling down other stones. But this... this was just one brave moment, the sudden slamming down of a fist or a foot, saying, *Enough! Stop!* This was not conscious, but it expressed the will of the people. The blood of a dam that burst....”

She stopped and, in the ensuing silence, shrugged as if she was resigned to the certainty of detractors.

“One can say the act is just a bloody murder. I daresay a lot of people will feel that way. People say he’s overrated; he was a simple hero. But the world is mostly made of the simplest people. The workers, the uneducated or the poor. And they have the hardest time finding their voice, expressing their feelings, but when they do there are an awful lot of them, and you’d better listen to what they have to say!”

“Deacons are not necessarily simple people,” Pardi said.

She looked sympathetically down at the figure and pressed some small bits of clay firmly but fondly onto its head. “He would have known that his life was over... he had done a terrible deed chopping up the Custos. But this was his great sacrifice to fight a terrible system.”

“The cross created by the arms aloft and the weapon perpendicular is reminiscent of the crucifixion,” Pardi said, sketching a small cross in the air before him.

“Yes. This is his sacrifice. But his head will be upright, looking at the future—both his demise and his hope for change. This is what I told Ray... I said, look dear, he is a fighter, not a martyr. In his face you will see confrontation and the sort of bloody determination that is at the heart of human outrage. No other cheek to turn... no happy heaven of resurrection... no fairy tale. This is a man whose moment of truth is today. He has staked everything....”

“Yes.” Pardi looked at the piece as though he could see the features there already. “You mean ‘God’s angels in the path to see.’ It’s no use seeing angels if you’re not prepared to wrestle with them.”

“That’s it! Not whether he’s done the deed or not done the deed. You’ve put it in a nutshell. He’s prepared to wrestle those angels.” She was lost in the hills of Stony Gut, fighting her way down treacherous winding paths towards a destiny in front of a country courthouse where the Custos of the parish would be slain.

And Pardi, letting himself be carried by the moment, fell into a half-forgotten recital of Browning:

And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,

De-dah, de-dah, de-dah, de-de-dah

You of the virtue (we issue join)

How strive you? De te, fibula!

“Or something like that,” he trailed off.

“Kid, that’s ‘The Statue and the Bust!’” She was full of their life together, suddenly one with journey and road. “That was little David. And here we have the mighty empire looming over poor Bogle, like Goliath in the figure of the Custos, with all his pomp and ceremony. And the other day I heard that in addition to Browning’s wife being a Jamaican, his great-great-grandfather was a shoemaker and tavernkeeper in Port Royal. How it all comes round full circle in this life!...”

¹ Rachel Manley, *Drumblair: Memories of a Jamaican Childhood* ([Canada: Vintage, 1996] Kingston, Ja. and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 288, 295-298, 304-307.

² The time is 1962. After the 1961 defeat of The People's National Party which Norman Washington Manley [1893-1969] had founded and led, in the referendum he called about Jamaica's participation in the West Indies Federation, which led to a life as opposition leader after many years as national premier, the author, his granddaughter, found it painful that at the full independence for Jamaica for which he had fought all his life, he was a marginal figure. Although this was a low point for him, he was, in time, to be made a national hero himself.

³ Nomdmi was the weekend house the Manleys built in the mountains, which they kept after the sale of their original Kingston house, Drumblair, and most of its land, though they retained a portion at the back on which they built a smaller house, Regardless, the site of these memories. There were moves to save Drumblair for the nation, as the scene of historic political and artistic moves towards independence, but Norman Manley saw no point:

“The National Trust has asked me not to destroy the house,” said the young entrepreneur who had purchased Drumblair. The doubt in his face was asking for either a thou-shalt-not commandment, or at least an absolution. “They want to save it as a historic building.”

“Save *what?*” asked Pardi. “Rubbish. There's nothing to save. Anyway, the house has termites. Just tear it down.”

Drumblair, 265.

Edna Manley: Paul Bogle – unscathed in front of the burned-out Morant Bay Courthouse

Photo: Ed. (October 2007)

