Martin, Tony
Reseña de "The Black Experience in the Twentieth Century: An Autobiography and Meditation" de Abrahams Peter
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39233214

Peter Abrahams has written a long and engaging “auto-biography and meditation.” He was born in 1919 and finished the book at eighty having lived, as he tells us, longer than he had expected to. He was born the son of an Ethiopian father in then racist South Africa. He was a member of what the South Africans officially defined as the “coloured” or mixed community. Abrahams escaped the poverty and racial segregation of his childhood by working his way on a ship to England, where he settled in 1940. His life from that point on was one of unceasing interest, as he accomplished great things and interacted with a large cast of historical figures in politics and literature.

He worked with the great Pan-Africanist George Padmore, originally of Trinidad but by the 1930s firmly established in London. Padmore had once been the highest ranking African in the Communist Third International but by 1940 had left communism to become arguably the most important Pan-Africanist activist in the world. Abrahams helped edit the publications of Padmore’s International African Service Bureau (though he does not mention this) and was one of the group who helped Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana stage the epochal Fifth Pan-African Conference in Manchester, England in 1945. In England he also became a writer of international prominence and the author of such best sellers as Mine Boy and Tell Freedom.

In the mid-1950s, at a time when Jamaicans were emigrating to England in large numbers, Abrahams journeyed in the opposite direction. He had fallen in love with Jamaica and made it his home. In Jamaica he became a distinguished journalist, working at various times with both pioneer major radio stations, editing Public Opinion, the quasi-official organ of the Peoples National Party, and in other capacities.

Some of the most beautiful writing of the book comes at the
very beginning. Here Abrahams, with an economy of language not always seen thereafter and with the descriptive ability of the accomplished novelist, describes his early existence in South Africa. It was a world where fathers (and often mothers) were away working for the white people, where people struggled to make ends meet and where adults died young.

Abrahams’ first community in England were left-wingers and he met Padmore through them. He worked for the Communist Party's *Daily Worker* until they dismissed him for not having a party card. He lectured to workingmen’s organizations and he worked with the Pan-African movement. His involvement in these circles brought him in contact with such luminaries as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Kwame Nkrumah, both members of London’s Pan-African circle and both future leaders of their African countries.

Once his reputation as a prominent writer became established, Abrahams attracted to his home a who’s who of aspiring colonial writers resident in England. John Hearne, Vidia Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Jan Carew and Edgar Mittelholzer were among the London based Caribbean writers who visited his home in 1953. The success of his *Tell Freedom* in 1954 led to a book tour of the United States, where he became very friendly with Langston Hughes.

While living in Paris in the late 1940s he met African American expatriates Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Wright introduced him to philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Abrahams moved his family to Jamaica in the mid-1950s. “All my life up to now had been spent in fighting against racism…and economic exploitation,” he explained. “Now, at last, Jamaica gave me the opportunity to work positively for change….It was emotionally emancipating” (p. 186). He had previously met Jamaican patriarch Norman Manley in England and the two men became good friends.

In Chapter 2 of the book Abrahams discusses W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, to both of whom he returns throughout the book. DuBois, African America’s great scholar-activist and integrationist, and Garvey, the Jamaican-born builder of the most
powerful Pan-African movement in African America and the world, were fierce adversaries in their lifetimes. But Abrahams likes them both. He likes the quotation attributed to DuBois that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” though he disagrees with DuBois’ equally famous lament concerning his dual consciousness as an American and an African American. In Garvey Abrahams sees the triumph of the self-directed African descendant—“Garvey had none of the ‘two-ness’ which tortured DuBois,” he observes (p. 11). He speculates that something in Garvey’s Jamaican background may have provided him with the strength to rise above his contemporaries.

Thereafter the book oscillates between the minutiae of Abrahams’ family life, at times almost a kind of narrative scrap book, the recording of his professional life and his musings on the twentieth century. At times his references to historically important personalities and events are very frustrating. He interacted with so many important people and was present at so many important events that the narrative sometimes cries out for information and insights beyond what can easily be accessed in secondary sources. What was his role at the 1945 Pan-African Conference? Does he have any detailed recollections of it? What did he and Jan Carew and John Hearne and Vidia Naipaul talk about? Did they meet regularly? Did they critique one another’s work? He says he met DuBois in the 1940s (probably in Manchester) but nothing more is forthcoming about the meeting.

There are times, however, when he does enrich the record with recollections that could probably have come from no one else. He tells of Kenyatta’s upset with his criticism of female circumcision in Kenya. He contrasts his visit to Kenya in 1952, when Kenyatta turned out a VIP delegation to welcome him, to his 1965 visit when the streets had to be cleared before Kenyatta, now independence leader, could drive along them. He has an interesting observation on his visit to post-independence Ghana when Nkrumah, it seemed to him, had begun to lose his grip on the popularity of the people. Historians will find interesting his
recollections of his first meeting with Norman Manley in London in the early 1950s. Manley struck him as very hungry for information on the Pan-African world to supplement his Eurocentric journalistic sources. Abrahams lent him Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya*, which Manley read in two days. Abrahams also extracted from Manley a *mea culpa* for his role in prosecuting legal cases against Marcus Garvey in Jamaica.

Abrahams bemoans his lack of detailed knowledge on George Padmore’s background and regrets that Padmore never spoke of his Moscow years. Nor does he himself provide enough information into aspects of his own relationship with Padmore. He does, however, furnish a fascinating glimpse into Padmore’s work habits. Padmore typed his dispatches twice on an old typewriter capable of making six carbon copies each time. He sent these copies around the world to be reprinted in small publications. By such humble means did Padmore become one of the most influential Pan-Africanists of his day.

Abrahams’ accounts of personal interaction with James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, two of the major Pan-African writers of the twentieth century, also yield up historically important tidbits. In a remarkably frank conversation in Paris, Baldwin openly admitted attacking Richard Wright because white America only allowed one prominent Black writer at a time and he wanted to displace Wright in that role. The fact that Wright had been a generous mentor to the younger Baldwin counted for nothing. “If you are black and want to get to the top,” Baldwin explained, “you have to work to displace whoever [is] now at the top,” even “if it is your brother...” (p. 84). Baldwin cited Langston Hughes as a writer who had been used and discarded by white folks. Baldwin didn’t want to suffer the same fate and saw playing the white man’s game as the way to survive at the top.

Abrahams “meditated” on this question of the position of the Black writer in a world of white publishers. He praised Langston Hughes for his courage in writing for Black people “without having to earn the approval of white publishers or white readers” (p.
Yet he insisted, perhaps contradictorily, that the Black writer should be “just a writer who happens to be black” (p. 62).

Abrahams also provides an entertaining aside on “the withdrawn and reclusive Derek Walcott” the Nobel laureate-to-be who worked under him at *Public Opinion*. Abrahams intervened often with publisher O.T. Fairclough to save Walcott from being fired. Walcott “rarely wrote, but when he did he always produced something special” (p. 195).

Abrahams’ memoirs really come to life in his treatment of his Jamaican adopted home. His friendship with the Manleys and decades of involvement in the highest echelons of Jamaican journalism have provided him with insights, often based on personal interaction with important people, that would be hard to match elsewhere. He discusses the contrasting impact of Peoples National Party and Jamaica Labour Party governments. He has illuminating insights into the style of governance of Alexander Bustamante, Edward Seaga, and Norman and Michael Manley, among others. He analyzes the delicate interplay between government and media and the contrasting approaches of the two parties towards the question of media freedom.

The question of race also runs throughout the book. Despite his seeming preference for Garvey the nationalist over DuBois the integrationist he inclines to the side of assimilation and integration over Garvey’s “race first”. His early status as a “coloured” South African, his marriages to two white Englishwomen, his association with Padmore at a time when Padmore considered Garvey “racist”, his experience of racism at the hands of white communists in London and Paris, and his intellectual admiration for Garvey have left him with unresolved contradictions in his racial world view. He says that you cannot categorize close acquaintances by color, race or class (p. 70). He annoys his hosts in Harlem by advocating assimilation (p. 153). He is against Garvey style “race first” for people of any race (p. 157). He scores Jamaicans for placing themselves in “the frontline of [racial] self-contempt” (p. 244) in their reluctance to accept a Black prime minister. He
cannot imagine a white Edward Seaga becoming prime minister of a non-racist South Africa or anywhere else but Jamaica (pp. 292-293). He misunderstands the complexities of African-Indian relations in Trinidad and Guyana but sees racially mixed African-Indian women as the most beautiful in the world (pp. 337-339). He cannot see why Jews have received reparations for World War II but South Africans have to settle for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with no material benefits to the victims (p. 398). He defends his marriage to his wife of many decades (and the subject of many moving passages of matrimonial affection), as a consequence of accident rather than racial preference (p. 217).

The absence of an index in so important a book is a major irritant, though not the fault of the author. Dates are in short supply. There are a few factual errors (e.g., on Garvey’s electoral performance in Jamaica), but these can be forgiven in a memoir spanning such a vast period.

All in all this is a welcome and very important book. It is of special importance to students of the Pan-African movement and of recent Jamaican history.

Tony Martin
Wellesley College
amartin@wellesley.edu


In the days following George Bush’s second inaugural address, commentators made frequent mention of the President’s liberal use of the term “freedom.” Eminent Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson was among them, observing that,