

Should the Jamaican government do more to promote the legacy of Marcus Garvey?

14 August 2006 Deborah Gabriel

Plans for Marcus Garvey study centre still in process after 22 years

As the birth date of Marcus Mosiah Garvey approaches on August 17, the Jamaican government is under increasing pressure to do more to clear Garvey's name from the US criminal records and in general to help preserve his legacy.

Marcus Mosiah Garvey, born on August 17 1887 in St Ann's Bay in the Parish of St Ann on the island of Jamaica, rose to become one of the most influential black leaders in the world. As founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) he presided over the largest black global movement in history, which had a presence in over 40 countries and around 4 million members at the heights of its popularity.

Through his African-centred ideologies of black pride, economic independence and Africa for black Africans, Garvey's call for upliftment of people of African heritage not only resonated across the continent but throughout the Diaspora. But today some Jamaicans feel that Garvey is not being afforded the respect that he deserves as the country's first national hero with an almost unrivalled international status and recognition.

Devon Evans, a member of the St Ann's Bay Homecoming Committee, a local organising group that manages cultural development in the region, told Black Britain that he felt that Garvey was afforded greater respect abroad than he is in his own home country.

Pointing to the statue of Garvey located in Lawrence Park, he charged that Marcus Garvey should have his own park and is unhappy that the park in which the statue is situated is named after a former legislator **"who does not even have the international status of Garvey."**

Evans also lamented that Garvey's birthplace is not maintained properly and that on occasions tourists have taken to clearing rubbish away from the area in the direct vicinity of Garvey's statue, something which causes local residents **"to feel shame."**

According to Evans, this fact, coupled with the lack of street signs pointing to Garvey's birthplace is a missed tourism opportunity: **"In St. Ann's Bay you can do a whole Garvey tour,"** which could include the Methodist church which is over a century old that Garvey used to attend, and the printing press where he learnt his trade.

Evans told Black Britain that he found attempts to establish a Marcus Garvey Study Centre in St Ann's Bay over the past ten years **"frustrating."**

He suggested that the reason nothing had materialised was due to **"a lack of political will"** on the part of the successive PNP governments who did not embrace Garvey's political ideologies. According to Evans plans for the study centre was introduced under the government of Edward Seaga in 1984 but after he left power in 1989 the plans were effectively scrapped.

Last August the government announced plans for a far less elaborate reading and study room **"to preserve the heritage of Marcus Garvey"**, but it appears that private donations are likely to be the main source of funding.

Campaign to clear Garvey's name not led by Jamaican government

Evans praised the efforts of the international community, especially African Americans for their

long-term campaign to clear the name of Marcus Garvey who was convicted of mail fraud in 1925 and sent to Atlanta Federal Prison in 1925 for five years, suffering the humiliation of being deported to Jamaica in 1927 as **“an undesirable alien.”**

Explaining how Jamaicans view the status of a deportee, Evans told Black Britain: **“Even today deportees are looked upon as aliens in Jamaica. If a person is deported from England or anywhere overseas there is a stigma attached and that is partly the reason for the disrespect for Garvey.”**

He added: **“If you check the criminal records of the United States, Garvey is still a common criminal. We feel like we are Garvey’s incarnates. It makes us feel like criminals too.”**

Evans maintained that the campaign would yield more results: **“If there was the will of the government.”** The St Ann’s Bay Homecoming Committee recently wrote to Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller asking for her intervention in the matter. But the reply received on July 29 merely praised the efforts of campaigners and said that the Minister of Foreign Affairs would look at how best to approach the issue.

However, last week the government’s strategy became clear, when Senator Anthony Hylton, Jamaica’s Foreign Affairs Minister, delivering a keynote address at an Independence ball in Maryland USA, merely announced that the Jamaican government **“intends to join this worthy cause in the search for truth and justice,”** rather than to lead it.

Senator Hylton said that the Prime Minister, Portia Simpson-Miller **“asks that the entire Diaspora movement join the movement already taken up by the US Congress for a full pardon for Marcus Mosiah Garvey.”** It is not known whether the government of Jamaica has written directly to the US government asking that Garvey’s name be expunged from its criminal records, but this is unlikely.

Professor Rupert Lewis, Chair of **Friends of Liberty Hall** at the **African Caribbean Institute in Jamaica** wrote a paper back in 1987 which was published in the Jamaica Journal entitled: **Garvey’s Significance in Jamaica’s Historical Evolution**. In it he explained the reason why Garvey is embraced more on the international stage than he is in Jamaica, an explanation which still has relevance today.

Professor Lewis readily acknowledged that in 1930s Jamaica, even though middle class blacks were beneficiaries of Garvey’s work in the mass labour market, because they were largely tied to apprenticeships they dare not become involved in the political struggle for fear of biting the hand that fed them.

But as a wave of independence swept over Africa in the 1950s and 1960s with Pan African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Joseph Kenyatta acknowledging Garvey’s inspiration, soon Jamaica was quick to claim Garvey as one of their own. He also points out that Martin Luther King was aware of Garvey’s work and that Malcolm X’s father was a Garveyite.

He wrote: **“Thus the impetus for recognising and understanding ourselves through Garvey has come from outside.”**

African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica leading the way in preserving Garvey's legacies

Donna Mc Farlane, Director and Curator of **Liberty Hall** at the **African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica** (ACIJ) told Black Britain that ACIJ is less involved in the campaign to exonerate Marcus Garvey than the Washington-based Friends of Liberty Hall Group, but stressed: **“We 100 per cent**

support Congressman Charles Rangel in his [efforts].

Senator Charles Rangel, a US Congressman has led other members of the Congressional Black Caucus in a campaign initiated by members of Garvey's family and the UNIA to obtain a pardon for Marcus Garvey from the US government.

ACIJ is itself busy preparing for the launch of the forthcoming **Marcus Mosiah Garvey Multi-Media Museum** due to be opened at Liberty Hall in Jamaica on August 27. Liberty Hall has been in existence since 1923 and the concrete structure itself was built by Marcus Garvey in 1933.

Mc Farlane told Black Britain that after Garvey's death Liberty Hall became derelict and changed ownership several times. But in 1987 it was purchased by the Jamaican government and made into a national monument. Friends of Liberty Hall's fund-raising campaign raised around J\$2.75 million for its restoration over a five-year period with the Jamaican government contributing J\$15 million.

But Mc Farlane said that when the restoration work was done the building was empty and had no furniture – so the fund-raising **“Started all over again.”** In 2003 on National Heroes Day in Jamaica, Liberty Hall was finally re-opened and returned to its former splendour. Since then, the ACIJ have been creating: **Liberty Hall: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey** as an educational and cultural institution. Mc Farlane told Black Britain that Liberty Hall's location in the middle of downtown Kingston makes it accessible to the Capital's inner city communities.

“What we have here is a multi-media computer centre where adults can come in and learn about computers and children can also come after school and learn computer technology,” Mc Farlane told Black Britain. Teachers also provide lessons in maths and English and give assistance with homework as well as running an after school programme. During computer training classes Garvey's own texts are used **“so that students are learning Garvey while they are learning about computers,”** Mc Farlane explained.

The Marcus Garvey Multi Media Museum will feature eight interactive touch screens **“Where at the touch of a screen for three and a half hours you can be inundated with Garvey and the UNIA,”** said Mc Farlane, adding that the museum will focus on Garvey's life, work and legacy.

Much of the equipment, such as the eight state of the art computers has been paid for by institutions and commercial organisations including UNESCO, the National Housing Trust and the National Commercial Bank of Jamaica. But Mc Farlane told Black Britain: **“I don't despair because I think we have done so much.”**

Why Garvey's teachings are so relevant today

ACIJ has joined forces with the Human Employment and Research Training (H.E.A.R.T) from whom they have just received funding to **“infuse the HEART curriculum with Garvey, as a first step to getting the teachings of Garvey into the educational curriculum.”**

Mc Farlane said: **“It's not that Garvey is not taught in the schools, because definitely he is. But he is taught in the same way that history is taught. But in terms of the philosophy of Garvey and the manner in which that philosophy is taught, that is definitely not done now.”** ACIJ hopes to have talks with the Ministry of Education about this in the future.

Mc Farlane is adamant that the teachings of Garvey are highly relevant in Jamaican society today, especially in terms of identity. She told Black Britain: **“The phenomenon of bleaching is**

extremely popular in Jamaica and this is among men and women. So this issue of who am I? What am I? Do I love myself and honour myself as a black person – these are all things that Marcus Garvey taught.”

ACIJ’s after school programme has around 122 students and Mc Farlane said that the problem of skin bleaching is so bad that the Institute has brought in doctors to take sessions on bleaching to warn of the damage it causes to the skin. She said: **“It’s not just that so many of our children are bleaching but their mothers and their fathers are bleaching. It is really widespread.”**

Mc Farlane told Black Britain that Marcus Garvey refused to carry advertisements in his newspapers for bleaching creams: **“So this is not a 'today' phenomenon, it was there from when we walked off the plantations.”** She said that it is also important for people to know their history: **“I don’t think our children know enough about their history and when I show them little film clips on Africa they are in shock.”**

Jamaican children are just as susceptible to the negative and stereotypical images of Africa that flood the mainstream media to be shocked at seeing real-life images of the prosperous towns and cities in many countries on the continent: **“They thought Africa was all jungle and poverty – they had no idea that Africa had cities,”** Mc Farlane told Black Britain.

She is resolute that slides showing contemporary Africa will be an integral part of the Marcus Garvey Multi Media Museum to dispel those myths. Black Britain raised the issue of identity in terms of many Jamaicans who resolutely deny their African heritage and are even hostile to the notion of being African.

Mc Farlane is clear that this self-denial is a legacy of enslavement that won’t go away. The colonial tactic of demonising Africa: **“Permeated the whole of the education system for the 400 years that we were enslaved and the 100 or so years after slavery that we were under colonial rule.”**

She ruefully admitted that when she asks children whether they are black or whether they are African very few hands go up but all hands go up when asked if they are brown or if they are Jamaican. The way Mc Farlane tackles this is by telling the children: **“When you call yourself a Jamaican you only give yourself four or five hundred years of history. But when you say that you are an African you claim millions and millions of years of history and you claim to be descendants of the first people who walked on this earth.”**

Mc Farlane said sadly people do not tell the children this and too often believe that they must look up to Europe and America **“As if we had never created great civilizations for ourselves. This is why Garvey is so key and this is why I have his words in the museum saying: ‘We created great civilizations and we can do it again.’”**

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