

Garvey's World Vision

This year is the centenary of the birth of Marcus Garvey, the black leader whose significance in the history of the struggle for freedom, both in the African continent and in the diaspora, would be difficult to over-estimate. To quote CLR James, 'for me Garvey was the beginning ... Garvey was the first man to make black people aware of themselves as an international force ... he basically made blacks part of world history ... where Pan-Africa develops, it will turn to Garvey to find its place in the world'.

Marcus Garvey was born on August 17, 1887, in rural peasant Jamaica. In 1909, he left Jamaica for the first time to visit Costa Rica. He worked as a timekeeper on a banana plantation, and for the first time saw the plight of black workers.

In 1914, he returned to Jamaica to form The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

Garvey's plans for the economic improvement of black people began to materialise, too. In 1919, the UNIA established both the Negro Factories Corporation and the Black Star Shipping Line.

The combination of colonial pressure and mismanagement soon heralded the collapse of the Black Star Line in 1922. This was a strange paradox, because, by 1922, it was estimated that Garvey had a following of 11 million people. There were branches of the UNIA in countries as diverse as Wales, South Africa and Australia.

The following year, Garvey was charged with using the mail to defraud, when a UNIA member sent out old leaflets advertising Black Star Line stock for sale. In 1925, he was sentenced to five years in a US jail, in what is now recognised to have been a fixed trial.

After protests, he was deported to Jamaica in 1927. In

1929 he launched the People's Political Party. The platform of this party, very largely, was the basis on which the self-government movement was launched eight years later. And it was this movement that eventually won independence for Jamaica in 1962. Some of his detractors suggest that he was himself trapped in the white world's agenda. But Garvey never made any secret of his view that the ancient civilisations of Africa in the Nile Valley were the source of energy for all humanity. The whites therefore had no monopoly on social organisation, intellectual ordering of experience, cultural products of the imagination, or the administration of power.

Garvey spent his life challenging one of the basic canons of western thought - that one set of people is incapable of advancing humanity without the civilising assistance of another. To challenge this involves finding ways for black people to repossess themselves.

Garveyism is about the individual and national struggle against failure. At the beginning of the 20th century Garvey was aware that black people were the captives of failure, oppression and self-denial. He gave them a vision of success encapsulated in the idea that they were connected to a long and vital history and that slavery was a mere interruption. He knew then that in order for black people to survive and have dignity, they needed a continental base like all the other great nations. Garvey then began his campaign to liberate occupied Africa in order to build a power base that would make black people strong throughout the world.

As black youth in the Caribbean, America, England, Brazil, Australia and elsewhere find themselves on the fringes of their world, excluded by racism and poverty, a fresh grappling with Garvey's ideas and his vision will show that failure is not endemic to the race and that success is within reach.

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